A Song of Crows

Summary

Warchief Hux has just buried his trusted Crow, and, if the Gods still favour him, a new one will find their way to his lands. Hux may be young, but he is a good leader for his people. He is ready for the commitment, the responsibility, the changes that come with a new child of the Gods at his command. The clan needs it, needs it spiritual leader if they are ever to claim ownership of all the lands from here to the Core Kingdoms. Raised a warrior, he is more than ready to paint the world red in honor of his gods. He may, however, not be entirely ready for what he will feel the first time he meets the haunted and tormented eyes of the young Crow called Kylo Ren.

Notes

Hux is a warchief, ruling over a very large territory. He's gained a reputation for being as ruthless and invincible as his hair is red, and he certainly lives up to the expectations. The Crows are a form of priest, or a spiritual leader to their people, and function as both
advisor, mentor, bodyguard and confidante of the Warchiefs. Taken from their families at a young age, they are trained to be the perfect tools in the hands of their masters. Their lives are essentially those of servitude, and they are generally held in the deepest reverence by their people, and to have a powerful Crow serving under their Warchief is considered a blessing by the gods.
(Ages for the main characters in the fic is: Hux, 34. Phasma, 31. Kylo, 26.)

The magic used here will be of the bloody, gory, old fashioned ritual and sacrifice kind of thing. There will be explicit and detailed descriptions of violence and sex, and probably other, dark subjects as well, so please - if you are sensitive to these things, this fic might not be right for you. I will update the tags as necessary.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The flames from the funeral pyre rose steadily towards the night sky, the moon hanging blood red and swollen behind a thin layer of dirty looking clouds. There was a large crowd gathered around, a few hundred people at the very least, sobbing and singing the ancient funeral hymns to the best of their ability. The pyre itself was built in the centre of a large field, on the south side of a giant obelisk with an intricate pattern of symbols and writings carved into its black surface. Between the obelisk and the pyre stood a man, tall and lean, with shoulder length hair the same colour as the flames licking at flesh and wood and, eyes as green as the filed in summer, dressed head to toe in black – making his fair skin seem positively luminous against the darker background. He had a short beard, the same firey shade as his hair, and he wore a simple gold circlet around his head, but on him it seemed more regal and dignified than all the jewellery and precious metals ever would on an emperor in the centre regions. There was little use for luxury in these parts, not that this man needed it. He emanated such an aura of authority and calm control that no one would ever mistake him for anything other than the ruler of this land, the warchief. Standing slightly of to his left side was a woman, almost taller than him, with pale blonde hair and eyes a piercing blue that seemed to see through anything. She had the stance of a true warrior, and she was indeed. No man or woman in this land would draw their weapon at her if they had any say in the matter. He was Braith Hux, son of Brendol, and before his thirtieth naming day, he’d conquered five territories that his father had been struggling to even invade for two decades. Her name was Phasma, daughter of Isolde, and she was his cousin and commander of his high guard.

The body on the pyre had belonged to the Crow, the man who had been the warchief’s advisor, mentor, and spiritual guide since he was born. The Crows were strange creatures, wearing midnight all their lives, trained in the giving and taking of life and death, wielding the power to bend the world and the minds of others to their will, and bearing within them a bloodlust to rival armies. The Crows were sacred, and once they were sworn to the service of their chieftain, they remained so for life. It was the warchief who wielded the powers of the Crow, who was responsible for their actions, for their safety and well-being. This duty between warchief and Crow was considered more sacred than marriage and blood. A Crow was a child of the old Gods, and the warchief who laid his hand on his Crow in anger was a warchief soon to be dead. This Crow, Tarkin, had been Hux’ grandfather’s Crow before, then his father’s, and he had been Hux’ Crow for nearly seven years before his long life finally caught up with him. At the ripe age of ninety-seven, Tarkin was more than happy to go back to the Halls of the Ancestors. A new Crow would find their way here. These things were laws of nature. Never would a good warchief find himself without a Crow for too long; as long as the Gods favoured him, Hux would not have to see his nest empty of sweeping black robes, and the castle towers void of the fluttering of hundreds of midnight wings for more than a few weeks. It would be a few anxious weeks, regardless. A land without a Crow had only half a leadership, and half a leadership was a weak leadership. Even Hux and Phasma’s bloody reputations might not be enough to keep the opportunists at bay.

The pyre slowly burned itself out, and when the sunlight began to touch the horizon enormous flock of black birds of all kinds that had been occupying every single tree around the field gave a unison caw, and then they rose high in the air, and scattered in a thousand directions. The singing stopped. Tarkin’s soul had found its way home. He was no more. Hux nodded at Phasma and made his way around the pile of smoking ashes, and the crowd parted for him as he walked away from the field and back towards his castle. The silence was almost loud in the air as his people, his clan, began to follow. There would be no more words until after sleep. They would not risk Tarkin’s rest by speaking of him before the sun was high in the sky again. A selected few remained behind to gently gather the old man’s bones and place them in the sacred Cave by the sea, together with the bones of all the Crows before him. Then the ashes would be gathered to use as fertilization for the
Hux put the circlet down on a small table next to his bed, before washing his face clean of any signs of ashes or tears. Crying had its time, and that time had passed now. Shedding his funeral clothes, the warchief tried to keep his mind as blank as he could, not wanting to face the thought of a new Crow in this castle just yet. Tarkin had told him stories, when he was a little one, about the Crows and the powers they had. Tarkin himself hadn’t been very strong with the Force, as he had called it. He could do what he was expected to, of course, but he was of no more than average talent in that regard. It had always struck Hux as odd how he seemed so accepting, even grateful for this. Just before his official rite of passage into manhood, Hux had finally asked him about it. Tarkin had smiled, and told him about the Force, and about the Knights. The Knights of Ren, he had called them – had whispered the name as if he wasn’t allowed to say it out loud. They were the sons and daughters of Death herself, born with a power that made Tarkin’s seem like an ant’s in comparison. Hux had protested, said that Tarkin’s power was truly impressive and that he was so much stronger than the other Crows Hux had seen. Surely he was just jesting. Pain had flashed across Tarkin’s features before smiling at the young lad. No, he had said. The Knights of Ren were not men or women, they were half gods, demons, creatures devoted to and devoured by the very Force that gave them life. One of them could slaughter the Hux clan’s entire army in a day if they so wished. They could not be made to heel, could not be controlled like Tarkin could. A warchief who was given the responsibility for a Knight would have to find a wholly different way of gaining his Crow’s trust and allegiance than a mere bonding ceremony. They were chaos, destruction – Hux had to understand that – but they were also plagued by their power, slaves under forces larger than the will of any warchief. The Knights were equal parts blessing and curse to any clan they made their home within. He should pray for an average one. For someone like Tarkin, with a sharp mind and gentle words – displaying the Force only when the need was dire. A Knight could be either his path to conquering the world, or to a swift and bloody death. It would be impossible to know beforehand, it always was with the Knights. They warped the fabric of the world around them. Since then, Hux had been plagued, too. Plagued by dreams of black clad figures watching him from the shadows, towering over him in his sleep. Of daggers in the night, of poison in his blood, of gods and monsters. But Hux knew they were just dreams. He was a warchief. Only Crows dreamt the future. Only Crows could know what the Gods wanted. For now, Hux could only wait.
Son of no one

Chapter Notes

First of all, thank all of you who commented on the prologue for your encouraging words! It gave me courage enough to throw myself back into the madness that is multichapter AU’s.

I don't have a beta, so any and all mistakes are my own. Feel free to point them out to me, but please be kind. English is not my first language, and as I said, I'm a spoonie. Sometimes words go missing between brain and hand.

I hope you will enjoy this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Tarkin of clan Hux has gone to rest”. The old raven’s voice echoed through the dank gloom of the Hall of Visions. It sounded like brittle books and hidden daggers, and it could rise to volumes loud enough to silence the thunder. But for now it spoke with an oily kind of gentleness, like a stern grandparent to an unruly but beloved child. “Your time has come, little hatchling. To the south you must go, and swear yourself to the warchief whose hair is blood and mind a sword. He shows great promise, and he is loyal to the Gods. None more worthy of wielding your powers. Leave at once.”

Rising from his kneeling position, Kylo Ren nodded and turned around.

“One more thing, my little one,” the voice added. Ren stilled, head bowed, waiting. “Remember that no one is to see your face before your warchief has welcomed you into his nest. Wear the mask. Kill anyone who dares gaze upon a Knight of Ren without due permission.”

Ren bowed slightly in acknowledgement, before leaving the Hall behind him – possibly forever. Crows were meant to fly far and wide, and the winds were calling for his wings to spread. An hour later, the lone figure walked out the main gates of the citadel, his black robes drawn tight around him to protect against the never ending cold of the north. His only company on this journey was his horse – coat as black as its master’s, and temper twice as foul – and a raven. The bird was not black, instead it had a coat a yellowish white, its eyes a curious pinkish red, which stood out against the rest. But it was a large bird, impressively so, and one look at the talons currently burying themselves in Ren’s left shoulder should be enough to warn anyone against trying to make it do anything it did not wish to do. Ren’s luggage was modest; a few spare robes, some books, a few cases of herbs and seeds, some potions, ink and pens, and the customary ceremonial daggers and sickle. He also carried a sword. It was a simple design, showing clear signs of having been well put to use – serving as a reminder that Crows served the Goddess of war to the same degree as they served all others. Anything else the Crow would need, his new lord and master would provide. It was the way of things. Just as it was that the journey to a new home would always be carried out fasting. Every morning and evening would be given to meditations, rituals, and sacrifice, to seek visions and knowledge about the future ahead so that the Crow would not take up residence in his new nest unprepared.

In the distance behind him, Ren could hear the massive gates close. For a moment, his vision tinted red, the smell of blood and the sound of angry screams echoed through his mind, nearly bringing him to his knees. It was not a vision, but a memory. He had been a wee slip of a lad, fifteen winters
old, when he had taken leave of the Doves, the servants of the God of Mornings, the blood of innocents colouring his grey robes a deep scarlet. It had clung to his skin for weeks afterwards, even after the Crows found him and took him in – they had been waiting for him, they’d said. The great old Raven himself had waited for him to come home to them. The great old Raven called Snoke. Ren could only ever reply that he knew. He knew they’d find him. He knew Snoke waited for him. He knew these things, and had always done so. Ren was not a Dove. Ren was a Crow from the moment of his birth. He was not a good man. Crows didn’t need to be. They needed to hear the Gods, and Ren did. Too well, sometimes. There was a past connected to the body he inhabited, yes, but the person of that past was as dead as those younglings. Bringing himself out of the memory, Ren focused on the horizon. Now was not the time to dwell on the past. He felt the pull in his heart of a clan in need of guidance, a warchief in need of council, a world in need of order, a flock of birds waiting for his call. The Gods had chosen him, and so he obeyed. The House of Night gradually disappeared from the horizon behind him. He was no longer a hatchling, under the guidance of those older than him, with his hands tied down by traditions of mentorship and obedience. He was a Crow, and he had finally taken flight.

~*~

Hux had known that there would likely be harsh winds to endure in the weeks to follow Tarkin’s death, but that it would reach this level of absurdity was simply infuriating. Five weeks now, had his old Crow been at the Hall of the Ancestors. For four of them, Hux had been shedding blood, sleeping in his armour, and keeping a steely grip on the morale of his subjects. Apparently, three neighbouring clans had all come together against their common enemy: clan Hux. They had been driven to retreat now, but Hux wanted to make a point by mounting their heads on spikes in front of his main gates – a warning to others what would happen if you attacked a clan bowing to the Gods of the First Order. The old religion was alive and well, and the Gods favoured them. Hux would see to it that no one would go untold about the power of the old ways.

At the moment, he was back at his castle, pouring over maps and charts, and debating with Phasma and his officers about whether or not it would be worth attempting to invade three clan territories at once. They did have enough people to set the plan in motion, short term. The question was how the long term planning should be handled. Was there enough reward in it to risk breaking the army in three without a Crow there to ensure their safety? Could they do it? Should they? It had never been done before. There had always been a Crow at Skye Castle. There had always been Tarkin’s sharp eyes and keen instincts, and now… It was like staring out at the open sea, trying to guess the depth of it. Campaigns like this could go on for months, if not years, and though it was still early summer now the winters were merciless in their cold and heavy snowfall. Hux had not become first among the warchiefs of the northern regions by being an impulsive fool, and he had no intent to start now. Planning was always key. Planning and calculating was how they won. Battle always followed its own logic, but the long run… *that* came down to which warchief had made the best plan.

There was something in the air, though. Like a ripple, a whisper; a feeling of something approaching, of changes in the winds. It made the hair on Hux’ body stand, made him uneasy and fighting back the urge to constantly look over his shoulder. It felt ominous, it felt powerful, it felt like the Gods were coming down from their halls to mingle with the mortals. He could tell that others felt it, too. Phasma was uncharacteristically twitchy, her blue eyes darting to any slightest little sound or movement, and Mitaka – poor, unfortunate Mitaka the Scribe – looked like he was about to burst into tears at any moment. The guards held their weapons tightly, and the little ones seemed to have abandoned the courtyard to go play in safer places. Yes, something was definitely coming. Or, *someone*.

Midnight found the warchief alone at a desk in his private room. A large cup of heated wine was placed next to a thick scroll of parchment, tightly rolled together, and sealed with a simple lump of
wax. The old man had given it to Hux a few days before his death, asking that he studied it carefully before the arrival of the new Crow. It had seemed strange at the time, and Hux had put it aside for later. Then, after the funeral time had been in short supply. But now, he supposed, it was indeed the right time. Hux had grown up with Tarkin. As had his father, and neither his grandfather nor the old Crow had never spoken about just how it felt to have a new Crow enter one’s land, or what to do when one did. Tarkin had left directions in the scroll about the bonding ceremony, the public rituals as well as the rituals meant only for the warchief and the Crow. When Hux had asked why it was necessary, since he had already gone through it with Tarkin, and thus knew the procedure – the old man had smiled and patted him on the head as if he was a little one again. It was not the same, he had said. Hux had come to power in a land that already listened to Tarkin. Their bonding was symbolic, a mere formality, seeing as they were both already loyal to the clan and the land itself – they were already a unity. A new Crow was a new era, a whole new world. That unity must come about in strict accordance with the ancient laws of chieftains and Crows, and Hux knew nothing about that yet.

As he read through the surprisingly large number of instructions and rules, Hux was struck by the level of intimacy of it all. Some of these rituals… Was this the sort of things Crows actually did? He started to understand why his grandfather and Tarkin never spoke about the bonding rituals. He also started to understand why Tarkin had taken his grandfather’s death so harshly – leaving the clan for some weeks to go back up north, leaving a temporary Crow in charge. This was meant to form a bond closer than marriage. Hux could readily admit that marriage was not something he could claim much knowledge of. Two wives had he been bonded to, one died in childbirth, the other fell in battle. Neither marriage had lasted longer than two winters. This was a harsh land, and his people had always known that Death takes whom she wishes, when she wishes, and no mortal wield power enough to stop her. Hux still had his children, both of them as healthy as could be, and knew better than to scoff at such a blessing. It was a problem for a later day which one would be his successor; his son Caélin, or his daughter Mara. At nine years of age, both of them were too small to be of any help in the present situation. If anything they were a liability, and so they had been sent off to the coast while their father focused on the on-going war. No, Hux didn’t know much about the art of marriage, but he decided that it might be a good thing under present circumstances. He didn’t even know if the new Crow would be a man or a woman, and so it was a waste of time trying to come up with a strategy for handling the new child of the Gods.

Putting the scroll to the side, a movement caught his eye, and he turned to see what it was. Perched on the window ledge was a bird. It was a raven, Hux realized after a moment. A white raven. He had never seen such a thing in his life, and before he knew it he was carefully approaching the creature. It peered at him with its strange, rose coloured eyes, not seeming the slightest bit intimidated by the red-haired man. If anything, Hux realized to his utter dismay, it looked rather pleased with itself. Then it leapt into the air, yanked a tuft of hair right off of Hux’ head, and flew off to instead perch itself on the parapet over the main gate. It fixed the warchief with a smug sort of stare, and then hopped a bit to each side, flying back up towards his window and then back down, settling on the parapet again.

“You steal my hair, and now you want me to follow you,” he scoffed. The raven seemed to have heard him, and gave an awkward little bow. “Stay there. I shall be there shortly.”

This was certainly not like any scenario Tarkin had written about, but a raven seeking him out… it simply could not be anything other than a message. His Crow had finally arrived, and it was time to bring him into the nest so that some order may be restored to this land. Nothing to be done, he supposed, other than to follow it. Strapping a sword to his waist and pulling a thick woollen cloak over his shoulders, he left his room and headed down towards the gates.

To his surprise, the raven did not fly towards the field, but instead made its way towards the grove. Hux had never been there before, though he knew very well where it was located. The grove was
sacred, too. You had to be given permission to enter the small clearing in the middle of it; only the Crow could come and go as they pleased. It was a frightening place, even for a grown man and experienced warrior like Hux. The trees were old, crooked, dark. Many lives had ended hanging from these trees. Many Crows had sat here for days on end, chasing visions and fighting battles mere mortals could never understand. There was a strange moss growing over heavy trunks and skeleton-like branches, looking like the torn wrappings of the long since dead. The ground was covered in fallen leaves and thick undergrowth, dampening all sounds until the silence became almost too much. But the most eerie part was the feeling of being watched. It was as if the trees had minds and eyes of their own, watching him as he made his way down a barely visible trail. A caw was heard, then another, and another, until the trees seemed to have come alive for all the noise and movement within their thick crowns. The white raven was heading for a source of light in the middle of what had to be the clearing, no longer appearing to care whether or not Hux followed. He supposed it made sense; if he tried turning back now, he would probably find himself lost. The only way was forward, towards that flickering light. He stopped at the edge of the trees, careful not to take a step onto the sacred ground without permission. The rest of the land may be his, but this clearing belonged to the midnight clad ones. He was an intruder here, and he would not shame himself by acting out of his place. In the middle of the clearing, just in front of the large stone slab that was the old altar, a small fire burned. The white raven sat on top of the altar, tilting its head to the side as it observed him. Hux hardly noticed it anymore, despite how glaringly it stood out against the darkness. He had his gaze fixed at the hooded figure standing by the fire with their back towards Hux. They were of an impressive build, the warchief noticed. Tall, broad over the shoulders and chest, arms that looked more suited to holding the weight of a sword than books and potions, and a posture of someone who would not hesitate to commit the most brutal acts of violence. Was this a Crow or a berserker?

“Do you intend to stare at me all night, warchief?” the figure asked and turned their head, revealing not a face but a mask. “Or will you join me by the fire and welcome me into your nest?” Their voice was deep, dispassionate, but pleasing to the ear despite the distortion caused by the mask.

“I do not make a habit of stepping on sacred ground without permission, Crow,” he said, remaining in place. “If the Gods demand you give me their permission, then I will obey them.”

The Crow tilted their head a little, like a curious beast, before giving a curt nod.

“The Gods welcome you in their home, warchief Hux,” they said. “For tonight this ground is yours.”

Hux finally stepped into the clearing, noticing that the air felt different here, warmer, and not just because of the fire. There was peace here, a sanctuary. Standing across from the Crow, Hux them a more thorough inspection, and was immediately annoyed by the mask. Tarkin never wore a mask, except for his own protection during the occasional epidemics, but those masks looked nothing like this one. It seemed, in fact, to be a helmet, not a mask at all. Hux wanted it gone. The figure in front of him gave a sigh.

“I cannot take it off until you have declared me your Crow,” they said. “It is forbidden by our laws.”

“How did you know my thoughts?” Hux questioned, slightly shocked. “Do Crows read minds, too?”

“Sometimes,” the other admitted. “But there is no need with you, warchief. You think very... loudly.”

Hux was quite offended by this new information. So the Crows could simply pluck people’s
thoughts out of their heads. It wasn’t a mere story meant to scare little ones into behaving, it was a real power given to these creatures. How bothersome. The Crow scoffed.

“Well?”

Straightening himself up to his full height, Hux looked the Crow right in what he assumed to be their eyes, making sure to emanate as regal an aura as he could.

“I Braith, son of Brendol, warchief of clan Hux, ruler of the lands around our feet, and son of the First Order, hereby declare that my nest is empty, my skies void of the sound of wings, and my ears in dire need of the songs of Crows. Speak your name, Crow, and state your purpose.”

The Knight wasted no time in giving the traditional reply, his voice level and relaxed as he spoke the ancient phrases.

“I, Kylo Ren of the House of Night, son of no one, master of the Knights of Ren, have seen an empty nest, a sky void of the sound of wings, and ears in dire need of the songs of Crows. I come to pledge my life to the warchief with hair like blood, and a mind like a sword. I seek to belong to my master, and to be wielded as he sees fit.”

Hux had flinched at the words ‘Knights of Ren’, remembering Tarkin’s warnings from his youth. A Knight. The Gods had sent him a Knight. A blessing and a curse, life and death, healing and pain, all pressed together into one black clad body. Managing to tear himself out of his shocked stare, he took a deep breath, motioning for the Crow to kneel in front of him, and placed a hand on his helmet-covered head.

“Before the Gods of this grove, I declare you the Crow of Skye Castle. May your wings never break under my care, may your sword never lack a target, and may the Gods bless you with many years in our halls.”

The Crow, Ren, stood back up, reaching for the straps keeping his helmet in place. Hux had prepared himself for many things; ugliness, disfigurement, a trick. But he had not prepared himself for what he did find when Ren pulled off the mask, and set it down on the altar next to him. He was so young. Dark hair, almost as black as his robes, falling in large, thick waves and curls around an angular, sharp face. He had a large nose, fuller lips than many women Hux had seen, and a starry sky of birthmarks dotting his skin. But it was his eyes that did Hux in: dark as the bottomless pools of the Naboo region, and so hurt. So terribly haunted and old in such a young face that it made Hux’ heart tighten. He was the single most beautiful thing Hux had ever seen. His Crow. His Knight.

His.

He would see the world burn to ashes before he let anyone hurt his Crow. He would tear anyone apart who dared threaten him. Kylo Ren belonged to him now. Hux always took care of his belongings.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Hux has children. Will they be a part of the story? Don't know yet. He probably comes off a bit... uninterested in the children, but there is a reason for that. In our world, the whole marriage based on love and parents loving and caring for their
children is a fairly recent development. During the middle ages and all the way up until around the seventeenth century both marriage and parenthood was about social and financial security more than anything else. A lot of children died in infancy or early childhood, it was simply the way it was. Parents generally only gave their firstborns any kind of parental attention whereas the rest were usually given off to wet nurses. I am going with that same thing here. Hux is proud of his children - having a set of twins that survives both birth and infancy is quite the achievement - but the task of raising them is someone else's. It is not expected of him to spend more time with them than what is necessary during festivals and travels. He cares for them, of course, but until they're adults he doesn't really have any use for them.

Kylo Ren has a white raven, because he's special like that. It has a name, and so does the horse, but I haven't quite figured them out yet. Suggestions are welcome^^ As you probably noticed, Ren is a bit more.. eh, calm, than usual, and that's on purpose. I'm trying to angle him a bit more towards the "having practiced strict discipline and meditation his whole life"-bit, than "Refuses to listen and snarls at everyone"-bit. Because he is a grown man, he is the leader of what is essentially the elite group among the crows, and he has so much raw power crawling around inside him that is he didn't have any self control he'd spontaneously combust. But fret not! There will be sass, and there will be snark, and there will be Ren throwing epic fits of rage. Because of course there will. It's Kylo Ren.

Also, yes, I decided to go with the "Ren killed all the younglings"-trope, even though it's never stated in the movie that he did. I haven't read the books, so I consider the movies canon, in case you're wondering. But that bit fits where I want to go with this story, so I putting it in here.

Like I said in the previous chapter, if you have any questions about stuff in the fic, don't hesitate to poke me, and I'll try to answer them to the best of my ability.

Until next time, may the Force be with you.^^

EDIT: Some formatting bits got eaten during upload, but it should be fixed now.
A Crow at Skye Castle

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hux lead the way back up the steep road to the castle, Ren following him without hesitation, having gathered his few belongings and coaxed a monster of a horse out from the shadows behind the altar with a gentleness that both surprised an impressed the warchief. Apparently, the animal had been sleeping and was very displeased about being woken up again, which it demonstrated by attempting to bite Ren’s left ear off. Ren simply stared it into submission, and smiled when the beast grunted at him. It was almost as if… as if Ren could understand what the horse said. The horse’s name was Askr, the Crow had said, and Hux would do best to keep his distance. He did not trust humans, and would not hesitate to kick or bite anyone who wasn’t Ren. The warchief remarked that he actually seemed quite happy to bite Ren, too, to which the Crow had given a crooked kind of smile. The raven, which had for some reason decided to perch itself on Hux’s shoulder while they walked, was called Eira, and she was terribly fond of the colour red – which was probably the reason for her apparent affection for the warchief.

Of all the scenarios Hux had pictured, leading his Crow back from the sacred grove in the middle of the night, with a white raven and a giant, ugly horse in tow had not been one. Neither of them spoke during the walk. Hux was still trying to make sense of the way his entire reality had changed shape during the relatively short time they had spent in each other’s company. It seemed the Knights did indeed warp the fabrics of the world around them, and Hux needed to organize his thoughts before they went through the formal bonding ceremonies. Ren would probably need some time, too. He looked tired, worn. He looked like he had been using his last strength to hold himself together long enough not to embarrass himself in front of his new master, but was now rapidly losing that strength. Well, Tark- no, Ren’s rooms were located in the tower of the warchief’s private wing of the castle, and they had been cleared of the old man’s personal belongings weeks ago, so Ren would not have to worry about anything other than making it up the stairs. He’d find his Crow some food as soon as they got inside, and then he would see to it that he could rest undisturbed by the other inhabitants of the castle. Never let it be said that Braith Hux neglected a gift from the Gods. Never let it be said that a Crow would be uncared for in this nest.

As they approached the gates, Hux could see that they were open, and that a large amount of people was restlessly moving about on the centre courtyard – torches lit, and weapons gleaming. Phasma’s proud figure appeared, and she seemed to have spotted him, for she wasted no time in approaching him – walking across the bridge with a grim face.

“Hux, what manner of demons got into your head to make you leave the castle, during bloody war, with no one to escort you? Are you mad?”

Hux would have gutted anyone else who spoke to him in such a way, but Phasma had never cared much about the title he bore. After all, they had grown up together, and through the years he had come to greatly appreciate her bluntness. It kept his head clear and his mind focused.

“When the Gods call, I obey, Phasma,” he said, gesturing towards Ren who stood a few steps behind him, looking somewhat intimidated by the growing crowd pouring out through the gates and filling the entire bridge. He was obviously not used to people, this one. “The Gods favour us still,” he said to his gathered clansmen. “Skye Castle is no longer without a Crow, and since you are all up, you may start preparing the feast for tomorrow. I believe this calls for a celebration.”

The cheers that erupted following his statement were positively deafening as they echoed over the
gorge separating the castle from the surrounding lands. A Crow. A new child of the Gods had finally been sent here to bring balance back into the lands. The information seemed to spread like seeds to the winds, and all over the castle people were waking up and coming to witness this moment. Everyone seemed to want to come as close to the Crow as possible, to touch his robes, his face, to hold his hands. This did apparently not sit very well with Ren, who seemed mostly to want to fade into Askr’s fur. He had his hood drawn up, obscuring most of his face, but Hux didn’t need to see it to understand that this could erupt completely very soon if he did not stop it. So stop it he did.

“Clansmen!” he called, irritation clear in his voice. “What manner of childish behaviour is this? You do not touch a Crow without his permission, and I cannot recall having heard him give it.” He stared them down, making them back away by the sheer force of his glare. “Your Crow has travelled many weeks to come here, with little sleep and even less food. Can you not see that he needs rest? There will be time for greetings come morning, and I expect you all to behave appropriately – or there will be consequences.”

His people seemed to melt away like mists under the summer sun, allowing the warchief and Crow plenty of room to walk past them into the courtyard. A stable-boy took the Askr’s reins from Ren before he had time to warn him about the horse’s personality, and some of Hux’s warriors made quick work of taking the chests and bags hanging from the saddle and scurrying towards the east wing. Ren hated it when people touched his belongings, but now would not be a good time to protest. There were proper ways to handle these things, and putting pain onto his master’s warriors over his few possessions before he had even nested was not one of them.

Hux motioned for him to follow, and so he did – glad to escape the crowded place. He wasn’t used to being around so much people. The House of Night, although capable of housing a lesser army, was rarely inhabited by more than a hundred or so people at the time, and they were for the most part training or studying the ways of the Force. It was always dark and quiet, peaceful in its own way. The Crows who had not been sent to serve a master usually wandered far and wide, in small groups of one or two masters and no more than three hatchlings under their wings. It was not a very social life, and so Ren found himself feeling somewhat overwhelmed. It was embarrassing. He knew clan Hux was one of the largest of the northern regions, but he had not realized how many of them actually lived in one place. A part of him wished he’d stayed in the grove instead of making a fool out of himself by behaving like a skittish hatchling at their first sacrifice.

He had to admit to himself, though, that Skye Castle was an impressive sight to behold – nestled high among the cliffs of Mount Starkiller, with only one road leading up to its main gates. The outer walls, pale enough in colour to be nearly white, had been built to fuse seamlessly with the naturals rocks overlooking a dauntingly high precipice. Briefly, Ren couldn’t help but wondering how long it would take for a man to hit the ground if he fell from one of the parapets. Long enough for the death to be considered anything but swift and merciful – that much was certain. He saw four massive towers, obviously intended primarily as housing – if the expensive glass windows and lack of parapets was anything to go by – and was pleased to realize the castle would have view of both the sunrise and sunset from nearly any window facing outwards toward the woods and plains. This would make his work much easier, since he would not have to go wandering, or, Gods forbid, make guesses to find the right light or the right angles he needed to know for certain ceremonies. There was an impressive number of smaller towers, nooks and crannies, scattered about on the roofs of the many buildings, and judging by the excited caws coming from everywhere in the sky above them, the birds approved of their new home. This was a good thing. A castle without proper nesting spaces for the Crow’s birds was not a castle in which a Crow would want to make their home. The birds were their everything, and history came with plenty of stories of Crows either leaving their masters or making brutal examples of them when they had failed to respect the importance of the birds with which the Crows shared their lives and souls. It carried the
death penalty, all over the North, to kill a bird belonging to a Crow, and the one to deal that death would always be the Crow themselves. It would not be a kind death. But Skye Castle had plenty of room, and Ren could hear the happiness in the caws as the birds explored their new nesting ground.

If the towers had looked massive from the outside, it was nothing compared to the inside. As Hux led him up a spiralling staircase, interrupted on each floor by doors leading into unknown rooms on landings with large sitting areas, furnished with bookshelves and working tables, Ren started to realize that everything in this tower were things you’d find in the working space of any self respecting Crow. The tower was his. All his. It was bigger than the entire barrack where he and the other Knights had previously made their home – bunks, workstations and all. At the top of the stairs was another landing – bigger this time, featuring what was quite obviously a waiting area: some benches and a table sat against the stone railing, a few furs spread out over the wooden surfaces of the benches to make sitting more comfortable, but not enough so that one would be tempted to linger. A massive door, in beautifully carved wood, sat directly across from the stairs, and the warchief approached it, waiting for Ren to come closer before he put his hand on the dark wood. The Crow noticed with some mild surprise that the warchief seemed nervous. Tilting his head a bit, he looked at his new master, who apparently realized that the other had seen through his calm façade.

“This entire tower is yours,” Hux said. “If you want to put a door in at the bottom of the stairs, you can. Tarkin had it removed when he was young – apparently he kept walking into it late at night.” He scratched his beard awkwardly. “And these here are your rooms. I… I haven’t been in here since Tarkin died, but I’ve been assured they’ve been properly cleaned out and made ready for you. I don’t know what the living accommodations are like where you’re from, but I hope this will suffice.”

With that, he opened the door – which opened outwards, Ren noted – and led the way into the rooms. Plural. Ren had never had a room to himself before, let alone more than one. Once he stepped inside, he could do little but just stand and look, like some village idiot. There was so much space in here, and the light! It may be past midnight now, but the light in here would be absolutely beautiful in the daytime. Eventually, he remembered how to move, and slowly made his way around his new nest. The room they had entered was obviously some sort of combined sitting and work area. Padded benches stood under the two windows, comfortable arm-chairs in front of the large fireplace, and a desk tucked away in a corner where the lighting conditions would be optimal for as many hours as possible. The floor was covered in thick carpets and more furs, and small tables and more shelves were put in strategic places. The chandelier hanging from the high ceiling was made from stag horns, he noticed, and the smaller ones scattered about the room from iron.

The room to the right seemed like a prayer answered: the only furniture in there were floor to ceiling bookshelves, work benches, and a few chairs. Long rods to hang herbs to dry from hung from chains from one end of the room to the other, and a large collection of empty jars, bottles and glass vessels stood ready to be used on the large table in the centre. This room, too, had a window. A rather large window. A small fireplace occupied a corner – close enough for when he needed it for something, but not so close that he’d run the risk of any accidents.

Walking back through the middle room, Ren had to pause for a moment before he could open the door to the room on the left hand side of the tower. He was frightfully tired and exhausted, and this was all so much for him to take in – he did not wish to somehow insult his new master by reacting inappropriately. Opening the door, he found himself stepping into a bedroom larger than his entire living and working space back at the House. Of course, he knew that this was most likely some sort of standard size room for people of a certain standing in the clan, and that the warchief probably had this much space for his clothes alone, but to Ren this was massive. Again, a window
on his right caught his attention immediately. The sun would hit this room in the morning, before moving through the other rooms over the course of the day. The next thing that caught his eye was the bed. It was the single biggest bed Ren had ever seen. He was fairly sure it could fit at least four people in it without feeling the least bit crowded. It had four posters, holding up heavy red drapes, and it stood in the centre of the room like it was the centre of the very universe. It looked incredibly comfortable, Ren realized with no small amount of alarm, and he had to steel himself in order to not simply walk over and collapse on top of it right in front of Hux. His personal belongings had been carefully deposited on the floor next to the bed and on some large chests standing by the walls. This room had soft rugs and furs all over the floor, too, and he felt warm inside when he noticed that the windows could all be opened – meaning he could let Eira come and go as she pleased for at least most of the year.

Hux had watched his young Crow inspect his rooms with a growing sense of pride. Tarkin never spoke much about the House of Night, saying it wasn’t his to speak of anymore, and so no one at Skye Castle really knew what living standards the Crows were used to, and the last thing clan Hux wished for was to insult their new Crow by giving him rooms below his standard. It would be a severe hit to their reputation, and it may be enough for the Crow to leave. They could always build bigger rooms, in fact, they were required to do so by the sacred laws – no matter the cost or inconvenience to other clansmen – but it would still mean that the Crow would have to live somewhere else in the meantime. To say Hux had been nervous about showing Ren the tower and rooms would have been a blatant understatement. But when he saw the emotions playing over the younger man’s face, he knew there had never been a reason to fret. Ren’s face was incredibly expressive, those dark eyes seemed to be revealing near every thought that went through his head, and what Hux saw filled him with both pride and something more… fierce. It was embarrassingly obvious that Ren had never had this type of luxury in his life. The way he stopped and just stared when he entered the sitting room, the reverent way he’d run his hands over the workbenches and window glass… Not to mention the look in his eyes now as he stared at his bed – it told Hux that his young Crow would need a little time to get used to the idea of actually owning something. It made also made him want to give him everything he’d ever want, so he would always know that Hux would take care of him, that he was treasured here – that he was no mere tool for the clan and their warchief.

“As I said, this tower is all yours now,” Hux said, a hint of a smile tugging at his mouth as the Crow tried to school his expression into something less shocked. “I’ll show you the cellar levels tomorrow. That’s where the baths are located. You’re sharing with me, which I hope you won’t mind, but no one else is allowed there. People here know better than to invade the privacy of the Crow, despite their behaviour earlier.”

Ren swallowed awkwardly, eyes fixed on the floor. This was too much. What was he supposed to do with all this space? How could all of this possibly be all his?

“I… This…” He swallowed again, trying to find something at least somewhat coherent to say. “I’m not really used to this,” he finally managed, hoping Hux would not pry further right now. “I just… Thank you.”

The warchief put a hand on his shoulder, and Ren was proud of himself for not flinching. It would be a difficult lesson, that. Re-learning that not every touch is a threat. He looked up, right into those sharp, green eyes, and noticed that Hux was almost as tall as he was. There was warmth in those eyes, he noticed. It was closely guarded, but it was there. This man obviously cared for his people, and Ren felt thankful for having ended up here.

“Don’t thank me,” Hux said. “We care for our Crows here at Skye Castle. You deserve everything you have been given, and everything you will be given in the years to come.” He looked out the
window, seeing a small sliver of light at the horizon. “But I know you must be exhausted now, having travelled so far only to be run over by our clan before you even got inside the walls. Rest now, and I shall come get you tomorrow so you may be given a proper tour of this place before every one and their cousin wants a moment of your time. I’ll bring breakfast.”

“T-thank you, my lord, but you really don’t-” Ren began, horrified by the thought of his warchief bringing him breakfast like some servant. Had he given such a bad impression?

Hux held up a hand, effectively shutting him up.

“I do it because I want to, my young Crow,” he said simply. “Showing you around is part of my duty, according to the laws and traditions, as I am sure you know.” He raised an eyebrow in question, and Ren gave a short nod. “But, I also hate having breakfast alone, and since my quarters are right next to your stairs it’s hardly a bother to walk a few extra steps. You might as well get used to it, Ren. We will be sharing most of our meals from hereon out. Now get some rest, my Crow. The Gods know you deserve it.”

With that, he turned and walked towards the door, closing it gently behind himself. Ren stood frozen in the same place until his Force-enhanced hearing picked up the sounds of the warchief’s feet heading down the stairs. Eira gave a small caw, from where she had perched herself on top of one of the bedposts.

“A strong one, our new leader, Ren” her voice sounded in his head. “A good nest, this. The flocks are happy.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Ren said as he began the slow process of ridding himself of the outer layers of his clothing. “When you wake up, you can tell them that they can go exploring if they want to.”

“Good. They’ve almost missed nesting season. The females don’t like that much. Won’t be many hatchlings this year.”

Ren sighed.

“I know,” he said, reaching up and scratching her gently under the chin, before he went on to remove his boots, and the outer robe. “But these things never happen when it’s ideal. They happen when they are meant to happen. At least now they’ll have a whole year to work on their nests before next season.”

“Aye. You need to speak to your Raven. Tell him you’ve nested with the red one.”

“I’ve nested, alright,” Ren said. “But not with the red one. That’s not how we say it. I’ve moved into the red one’s nest. There’s a difference in meaning there.”

“All sounds like nesting to me.”

“Eira!”

“Yes, O sensitive one?”

“Just… go to sleep. Please. I am far too tired to debate language with you and your filthy mind right now.”

He could hear Eira’s laughter in his head, and couldn’t help but smile as he crept under one of the blankets adorning the bed – not wanting to get five weeks worth of traveling filth in his bed, but far too tired to bother removing his tunic and trousers. He was asleep before his head hit the pillows.
Hux sunk down by his desk when he arrived back in his rooms – his head a maelstrom of thoughts and emotions, strange impulses and needs, most of which he had not been entirely prepared for. Tarkin had warned him in the scroll, indeed he had, about the first meeting usually being a rather overwhelming affair – but Hux had never thought it would feel quite like this. A few hours ago, he had been pondering the new Crow as a situation he needed to plan for, lay out the proper tactic for befriending him and establish his authority over the midnight clad one. He had been building plans and back up plans, in case they got off on a bad start, in case the Crow was the type to wander off on his own business rather than work alongside Hux. He had thought about every possible way some other clan might try to harm the Crow, or win him over. Hux had, essentially – and to his own, immense shame – treated the thought of a new Crow in his castle as both some manner of military campaign and possible threat against his clan and his leadership. Now though… Now Hux simply could not imagine any single direction his life could take that did not involve having Ren by his side for every waking moment of his days. The young Crow stirred things inside the warchief’s hardened soul; a fire, a need to keep and protect. Also, a surprisingly strong wish to see what that young face would look like mid-battle, blood-stained and sweaty, smiling in triumph at the corpses of his slain enemies. It took one to know one, and Hux knew a warrior when he saw one – midnight robes or not. When Ren walked out to battle with him…. Oh, it would be the stuff of songs and legends both. His Crow would paint the world red and black, and Hux would enjoy every second – he knew it.

He would have to study the scroll closer before he went to wake Ren up, to make sure there were no details he had missed regarding their first meal together. The Crow was not allowed red meat, that much he knew from having grown up with Tarkin. Or was it just pork? What else was it? Running a hand through his hair, Hux sighed. He was much too tired for this now. It was better to have a few hours of sleep, and then have a look at the details. He’d rather not accidentally make the Crow ill on the very first day.

“How handling a pregnant woman and two screaming little ones was easier than this,” he grumbled to himself. “At least they won’t feed your heart to the Goddess of death if you insult them.”

As soon as he’d said it, he felt shame. He never was a very pleasant man when he was tired, but sitting here complaining about the Crow’s dietary restrictions when he was lucky enough to even have a new Crow was a new low. From what he’d seen so far, it was more likely that Ren would apologize for being sick than grabbing his knives and making the clan leaderless. Mentally slapping himself for his disgraceful thoughts, Hux dragged himself into his own bedroom and got undressed. It wouldn’t do to be this testy during breakfast. This young Crow, so obviously feeling both lost and overwhelmed, needed Hux’ care. He needed to show the younger man that he could trust his warchief to always take care of him – otherwise they were never going to get through the bonding ceremonies. Ren had no reason to trust Hux with his body and soul if all he got back was snark and rudeness. This was indeed going to be a challenge. Hux had never been a very gentle and kind person. Ren was the only one – apart from his children when they were very little – to have brought that particular side of him out. But the Gods had given him a Knight of Ren, and he would be damned if he would let his own shortcomings ruin things for the clan. Once he’d stripped down, he crept under the heavy blankets and furs, forcing himself to relax enough to fall asleep. The Crow was here now. A Knight of Ren had sworn himself to the service of clan Hux.

Everything was going to be alright.

Chapter End Notes
Hiya! I'm back to the land of the living! First of all, this chapter didn't really want to cooperate with me, so I'm sorry if it came out a bit boring. But we got Ren/Hux interaction, and Ren being - in my not so humble opinion - quite adorable in all his awkwardness.

Ren is overwhelmed by his new home, because he's spent most his life sharing a space about the same size as his bed with two more Knights - the entire group + their belongings and pets shared a space just about the same size as his bedroom. He is not used to the whole "I have a room designed for hanging out with people"-thing yet. A Spartan life doesn't really begin to describe the life of the Knights.

Okay, so. Skye Castle. I'm going for some sort of Minas Tirith meets Helm's Deep type of thing. The castle is more of a complex of buildings and towers and things nestled against the mountainside. The gorge is deep. Like, seriously deep. Only official way in is over the bridge. The clan, of course, have a myriad of secret stairs, tunnels and passageways leading to safety should they need them, but it's kept very secret. The landscape surrounding it is mainly broad-leaved forests; oaks, birches, maples, and those kinds of trees. There are some pine forests as well, and, naturally, quite a few fields where they can grow stuff and herd livestock.

Ren's tower. Yup, he gets his own tower, because clan Hux takes Crows very seriously. The rooms on the floors below his are more or less Skye Castle's med bay. When people are wounded or sick, they stay in the tower where the Crow can keep an eye on them. For the decor, I'm borrowing loosely from around 12th-13th century Sweden (because that's where I'm from, and that's what I know), with the usual artistic liberties because sometimes I just can't make stuff work the way I want it to.

Hux' rooms are bigger than Ren's. We'll get to them eventually, I promise. But they are every bit as neat and organized as one would expect from him. Hux is not the kind of person who should ever try to function with less than eight hours worth of sleep in him. I imagine he's even more unpleasant when he's hungry. Phasma is the only one who dares to tell him to shut up, stop acting like a child, and go eat something.

And yeah, Ren talks to the animals. They can communicate through the Force, so most of their conversations take place inside their heads. But when they're alone, Ren does tend to talk out loud, because he doesn't like the silence very much. Eira and him are very close. She's convinced Ren should have been born a bird, and sort of considers him her hatchling. Askr doesn't like being woken up. Actually, Askr doesn't really like anything besides biting people and eating apples. And Ren. He does actually like Ren, but not when Ren does bothersome things, like waking him up, having him fitted for new shoes, making him walk places. He's a rather lazy animal.

I've kicked my Tumblr back into life, so now you can ask me stuff/yell at me there! (ficlet-machine.tumblr.com) Again, I have no clue how links and stuff works, so yeah... Sorry 'bout that.
Hux really wished he’d kept his mouth shut, instead of going off and thinking such idiotic things as ‘everything will be alright’. He should know better at his age than to put such a challenge out before the Gods. They had certainly heard him and decided that now was as good a time as any to put his faith to the test, if the veritable forest of spears and banners working their way towards the sacred field was anything to go by. He had only had Ren in his castle for three nights, far from enough time for the Crow to recover – and definitely too soon for them to formally bond – and already the Gods were testing their commitment to the clan and each other.

The situation did, however, seem to help Ren settle and overcome whatever insecurities he’d arrived carrying. Since the first sign of trouble, on the afternoon of his first day at Skye Castle, he’d done nothing but display an almost eerie amount of competence and focus. With Hux’ permission, he’d sent the birds out to scout, and when the reports started coming back he relayed them to the warchief and handed out orders and lists of things to be done as if he had been there and in charge his whole life. Kylo Ren in a position of command was an impressive, intimidating, and remarkably alluring sight to behold – though Hux sincerely hoped he was the only one to feel the latter. The clan followed him with the same ease they followed Hux, and from the many looks and whispers coming from his warriors and servants, it was quite obvious that they were already quite committed to their strange new Crow.

At the moment, Hux, Phasma, and Ren were standing on the parapet of one of the higher levels, a bit to the side on the outer walls, looking out over the vale below them. His captain had brought out maps and some measuring tools in order for them to come up with a counter to whatever confounded plan their enemies had put together. Above their heads, the birds moved like restless black clouds – coming and going like waves against the harsh cliffs of the coast. Ren stood next to them, as still as a statue, his eyes having an empty, distant look to them as they stared out at nothing. He was listening to the birds and to the lands. Eira was out there somewhere, leading the flocks, and Hux guessed that it was her Ren was listening to.

With Phasma occupied with the maps, Hux afforded himself a moment to observe his Knight. This was all very new to him, seeing as Tarkin had never used the Force around people, blaming his mediocre talent, and he wanted to understand as much as he could about it. To Ren, the Force seemed to come as naturally as breathing, and clan Hux had already witnessed more displays of it than they had during Tarkin’s entire life here. There had been no extravagant demonstrations of complex techniques as one could have expected of someone so young – quite the opposite. Ren hardly appeared to even give it any conscious thought when he put their injured messenger to sleep with a mere gesture, before opening the doors of the great hall without even touching them as he carried the man towards the healing rooms in his tower. The sheer routine of his movements had been enough to render them all speechless.

Right now, Hux had to admit that he found Ren’s abilities somewhat unnerving. He could handle doors opening and people being knocked out by unseen forces, but this… vacant staring frightened him a bit. It was like Ren wasn’t even there, like it was simply a shell modelled to look like him. The serene look on his face did nothing to help the situation at all. In that very moment, a small tremor seemed to pass through the tall frame, followed by a sharp intake of breath, and Ren’s eyes blinking back into life. He turned to look at Hux and Phasma.

“Eira says their Crows thinks our flocks are Tarkin’s old birds gone rogue,” he said, voice
somewhat distant, as if he was still listening. “They don’t know I’m here, and they mean to keep you under siege until they’ve starved you out enough to go in and kill you.” He made a disgusted grimace. “Those three Crows do not deserve their titles if they can’t even sense my presence. Pathetic.”

There was a fire awakening in those dark eyes, and Hux found himself enjoying the view a lot more than he probably should. Peering out over the parapet, he ran a hand through his hair while he made a few calculations.

“A siege, you say?” he asked. Ren nodded. “While I’ve always known those three warchief to be fools, I must admit that I’ve still given them too much credit. Skye Castle was built to withstand the very thing they intend to do to it. We could stay comfortable here for years without any problem.” He dusted some imaginary dirt off from the shoulder of his dark blue jacket, an inkling of a plan beginning to form in his mind.

“You wish me to go out there and kill them,” Ren said. It wasn’t, Hux realized, really a question. The Crow had heard exactly what he had thought.

Phasma looked like she was about to have a fit.

“Hux, for Gods sake, you can’t send our Crow out there all on his own against three clans! He may be good, sure, but he’s still so young, and-!”

Hux held up a hand, and Phasma knew better than to push the subject when the warchief did not want to hear it. He looked at Ren, who had his head tilted to the side in that peculiar, beast-like way of his. The Crow didn’t appear particularly phased by the thought of going out there and committing borderline genocide. He didn’t seem the least bit frightened at the thought of being outnumbered or alone. Hux was far more impressed by this than he let on.

“I have no right to ask this of you, my Crow,” he said. “We have not yet bonded, and you are still in need of rest.”

“I know.” Ren looked out into the distance. “Those so called Crows would make for a powerful sacrifice, though. The Gods do not take lightly to people bearing this title without deserving it. Ridding this land of their presence would earn us their favour. With your permission, of course, my lord.”

“The Crows are all yours, Ren,” Hux said. “Along with any others who stand in your way. We will be right there with you.” He gave a menacing smile. “The warchiefs, however, are mine. I have some very entertaining plans for their heads.”

Ren nodded, before heading back down towards the main building. Phasma gave her warchief a long, stern look. Disapproval was practically oozing out of every pore of her as she folded the maps together. Hux raised a brow at her clenched jaw, and motioned for her to speak. It was never wise to allow too much irritation to build up – Phasma rarely exploded, but when she did… Hux still had some scars from the day he learned that lesson. It didn’t make annoying her any less amusing, though.

“There had better be a very solid and extensive plan behind this, Hux,” she said. “Because just now it sounded like you intend to let our new Crow – who hardly looks like he’s past his twentieth winter – just walk down to the field alone and capture three enemy Crows. For someone so adamantly against harming Crows, you seem awfully keen on sending ours on a suicide mission. Did he offend you or something? There is simply no way that he can pull that off! No Crow is strong enough to take on that many-!”
“Phasma.” The calm in his voice threw her off completely. “Haven’t you realized it yet?”

“Realized what?”

“Why his last name is ‘Ren’.”

Phasma’s eyes grew wide as she slowly put the pieces together.

“You mean that…!”

“Our Crow is a Knight of Ren.” Hux looked back out over the vale and the forest of spears covering the grounds near his sacred field. “He’s a son of Death, and if I let him, I have no doubt that he will slaughter every last man and woman on that field. He needs to kill, Phasma. And our clan needs to know that their new Crow really is as powerful as they hope he is. But he won’t be going alone. I think I know exactly how to turn this whole mess into another victory. It will be bloody, but it will be worth it to put an end to this confounded war.”

“Prisoners?”

“Only the ones Ren wants for his sacrifices. We’ve got the summer solstice coming up soon. I imagine our Crow will be wanting to make a statement. Slaughter the rest.”

The grin Phasma awarded him was positively feral.

~*~

The next morning, a little after dawn, Hux arrived at the Crow’s rooms just before the servants came with their breakfast. Ren himself stood where he always stood, by the window, looking out at the vale – that vacant look in his eyes again. Eira was asleep on his shoulder, her head tucked safely under a wing. It amused Hux how the giant bird still looked so small perched on Ren’s broad shoulders. She was obviously very attached to her master, and it appeared that Ren would rather not go anywhere without her either. It had been the cause of some confused looks and raised eyebrows among the men when they had gotten a glimpse at the pair and their interactions. The most menacing look on Ren’s face could soften so quickly at the slightest little noise from the raven, and he spoke to her as if she was human, sharing his food with her, and even allowing her to groom his thick hair while he was busy with other things. One day, Hux would very much like to know how Eira came into his care. He was sure it would be an interesting tale indeed.

The servant came in, carrying trays of food for them both, and Hux hurried to hush at them before they could utter any cheery greetings. One of the servants had done that the previous morning, startling the Crow enough that he had thrown the poor man out of the room by means of the Force before he even knew what he was doing. Ren had quite obviously expected Hux to be angry with him, to punish him. The Knight had seemed afraid, and it had sent shivers of unease down the war chief’s spine. What in the Gods names had he been taught to expect from his master? Corporal punishments for the slightest mishaps? Hux certainly hoped not. It had taken more than an hour for them to actually get around to eating their breakfast. Ren had taken care of the injured servant first, of course, and then Hux had spent a good while trying to assure his Crow that they followed the laws here at the castle. Ren was a Crow, and while there were certainly war chiefs out there with more ego than devotion, that would go against the Gods and hurt their Crows, Hux would rather die than do anything of the sort. Besides, the servant really had no business being so obnoxiously loud so early in the morning. Ushering them out with a quiet ‘thank you’, Hux sat down in one of the two armchairs by the fireplace and waited. A few moments later, Ren seemed to land back in himself, blinking a few times before turning to face his master. After gently setting Eira down on one of the benches, he
strode over and sat down as well.

“Have you been standing by that window all night?” Hux asked while pouring them both some tea.

Ren blushed slightly, but shook his head.

“I always get up early,” he said. “Eira likes to look at the sunrise before she goes to wake up the flocks.”

Hux quirked an eyebrow at that.

“Am I to understand that your bird decides when it’s time for you to wake up?”

“There were no windows,” Ren said, eyes focused on the bread he was cutting. “At the House, I mean. We were supposed to be awake, dressed, and ready for training at dawn, or we’d be punished. Without windows, we had no way of telling what time it was, but the birds always know when the sun rises. They can feel it in their blood. So they woke us up every morning, and now it’s become a habit.” He looked over at his sleeping raven. “Once I’m up, I’m up. She, on the other hand, usually goes back to sleep.”

“No windows?” Hux could scarcely believe what he was hearing. “Where did you live? In the dungeons?”

“Yes,” Ren shrugged, before helping himself to some cheese.

Hux almost choked on his tea at the casual admittance. What in the name of-! What manner of monster kept their apprentices in the blasted dungeons? The Crow apparently didn’t think there was anything wrong with that, seeing how he could share that information and then go on eating his breakfast as if nothing happened. No wonder Ren had been so shocked at the sight of his new home, if that was what he was used to!

They ate in silence for a little. Eira woke up, and wasted no time in landing on Hux’ shoulder and attempting to steal his food right out of his hands. As per Ren’s instructions from when this happened on the first morning, Hux chided her before gently but firmly grabbing the greedy bird and handing her over to Ren. The Crow let her sit on his left knee, and Hux tried not to imagine how much those talons of hers hurt as she buried them in his flesh while he fed her little bits of cheese and bread. Ren looked so at ease when it was just the three of them, smiling often, and not seeming too bothered by Hux not so subtly observing of his every move. It was only when he was around other people that Ren seemed to become awkward again, withdrawing into himself, becoming quiet and reserved. He always kept the hood of his cowl up while outside the tower, and Hux had a feeling that his Crow would much prefer to wear his helmet. It was fascinating to see all these little complexities and quirks that made Kylo Ren who he was. He seemed an endless series of contradictions, and the warchief wondered to himself whether he was ever going to be able to figure him out.

He was brought out of his little reverie by Ren’s polite cough.

“Uhm,” the Crow started, biting his lip. “Do you have an audience chamber here at the castle? I don’t think you showed me one the other day.”

Hux had completely forgotten about that room. He nodded, somewhat embarrassed.

“I completely forgot about it,” he said. “Tarkin never really used it, so we’ve all sort of forgotten it exists. It’s here in the main building, just behind the Great Hall. I can have the servants make it ready for you. There’s likely to be at least six decades of dust in there, so it might take them a little
“I don’t want to be a bother—”

“Ren.” Hux sighed, causing the Knight to go quiet, stiff. “You’re not a bother. What in the Gods name did they teach you to make you – a Crow and a Knight of Ren – think that you can ever be a bother to me? Anything you need is yours. Be it a new building to work in, people and animals for your sacrifices, exotic ingredients from the Core Kingdoms for your potions… kriff, anything at all – I will give it to you. I am bound by the ancient laws to provide for you, and it’s a duty I carry out gladly. Your presence in my castle is the greatest gift this clan has ever been given – if anything, we should apologize for being a bother to you.”

“I apologize, my lord,” Ren said, head bowed and eyes cast to the floor. “This is all so strange to me. I was raised to be a weapon, to obey my master’s every command. I wasn’t expected to….” He went quiet again, biting his lip.

“You weren’t expected to what?”

“To have opinions and wishes of my own.” Ren mumbled it, obviously embarrassed, and Hux’ heart ached at the sight of it.

“Well, then you shall have to learn it,” he said firmly. “As your warchief, I expect you to communicate with me. I want to hear your opinions, not just on political and spiritual matters, but regarding everything. I need you to tell me what you need, when you need it, so I can see to it that it is given to you. Here, you are never going to be a mere weapon, Ren. You are my advisor, my Crow – and hopefully, with time, also my friend.”

Ren stared at him for what felt like an eternity, then swallowed and nodded.

“I need the audience chamber to be made ready, my lord,” he said, as steadily as he could manage. “It’s high time for me to report to the Raven. I was ordered to inform him when I had arrived and nested.”

“Why not send him a bird?” Hux asked curiously. “That’s what Tarkin always did.”

“The situation is different for me.”

“Why?”

“I’m a Knight of Ren. The Raven will always keep a closer watch on me than others. It would insult him greatly if I was to send a bird instead of speaking to him directly.”

“I see.” Hux finished his tea. “Then let’s not waste time getting the chamber ready for you. I, for one, would rather not offend any children of the Gods – and certainly not their leader.”

~*~

“It took you a while, little hatchling,” the flickering smoke-shape of Snoke said. “Had it been any other, I would have sent a search party out.”

Ren looked up from where he was kneeling over the small fire pit, drops of blood from a cut on his forearm hitting the burning herbs that made the smoke-shape possible.

“Forgive me, master,” he said, voice dispassionate, controlled. “I arrived safely four nights ago, and my warchief has provided me with a proper nest and everything else I could possibly require.”
“Then why have you not contacted me sooner, Ren?”

“We are under siege, master.” Ren dared meet the Raven’s steely black gaze. “A messenger arrived here on my first day, telling us about an oncoming attack. There are currently three clans camped on the plains below the castle, intending to slaughter us all. My warchief and I have had to work day and night to take control of the situation. I swear I wasn’t putting off contacting you, master.”

Snoke regarded him in silence for a moment, and Ren held his breath – waiting for a punishment for his disrespect. Eventually, Snoke nodded.

“It’s hardly your fault the Gods drop a war down on your heads.” He leaned in, the smoke making up his body close enough to nearly make Ren choke. “But there is something bothering you, I can tell. Come now, boy, what is it?”

“These clans, master.” Ren took a deep breath to combat his anger at the thought of it. “Their Crows can’t even sense my presence, though I have made no attempt to hide it. They believe my birds are the birds of the former Crow. We have fresh hatchlings with more sense in them than that! They are unworthy.”

“Indeed.” Snoke looked thoughtful for a moment. “If they had any power worth their name they would have felt you before you even entered the lands. I cannot allow such glaring incompetence in our order, Ren. See to it that they are punished.”

“I wish to use them for the great sacrifice at summer solstice, if you will allow it, master.”

“Do it.”

Ren nodded, relieved. Still feeling Snoke’s gaze upon him, he looked back up to find the old Raven looking at him curiously.

“The summer solstice,” he mused, more to himself than Ren, it seemed. “I think it would be a fitting time for you and your warchief to bond. A bit earlier than usual, but one can never be too careful during wartimes.”

“Yes, master,” Ren whispered, then cleared his throat. “I shall inform him of your decision as soon as possible.”

“Good.” The smoke shape began to dissolve. “You’re so obedient, Ren. A most formidable weapon.”

The presence of Snoke disappeared between one breath and another, and Ren got to his feet, reaching for the small container of water next to him and poured it over the fire. One must never let these fires keep burning – you never knew who’d be able to see and hear.

He walked out of the chamber, ignoring everyone he passed on his way back to his tower. Reaching out for Eira, he found that she was with Hux, overseeing his planning, and grooming his red hair. She informed him that Hux had given her bits of sausage and salted fish, and that it was very tasty. He let her stay, glad that she, too, enjoyed the warchief’s company, and went to shut himself in his bedroom. Right now, he needed a little time to himself.

The summer solstice was just three weeks away. Snoke was right, of course. It would be a perfect day to bond; one of four days a year when the borders between the realms of mortals and Gods blurred, when those with the right power and knowledge could tap into the power of the old Gods and rise above their mortal peers. It would send a very strong message. But that day was also a day marked for sacrifice. The Crows usually spent the entire time – from dawn to dawn – with their
daggers in their hands, splattered from head to toe in blood, halfway into a state of trance. He had to find a way to incorporate the official bonding ceremony with the traditional sacrificial ceremonies so that he could not only fit everything in one day, but also do so without disrupting the very specific rhythm and mood that the solstice brought with it. This was not going to be easy. Especially not with the current situation demanding his full attention. Purifying that field after those bumbling idiots had camped out there was going to take a lot of blood, and for a moment Ren wished he had his Knights with him. Together, they would be able to make certain that both sacrifice and bonding went smoothly. But they were scattered across the world right now; Ren, being the eldest, was the only one who had been given a master to serve.

Digging out the codex containing the laws and guidelines for all rituals and ceremonies from one of the chests, he sat cross-legged on the bed and began to go over the details for that bonding ceremony. Hux would no doubt have questions about the whole process, and Ren refused outright to stand there and sputter like some blushing maiden. He was a kriffing Crow; he was no virgin, and he had regularly carried out advanced magic and sacrificial rituals for over a decade. He had delivered children, for God's sake! Explaining the sensual and erotic imagery of the bonding rituals should not be the least bit difficult for him. The official bonding ceremony was, if he was quite honest, really rather tame. There was some blood, yes, and some nudity, but nothing more than that. It was the private ritual between only him and Hux that was going to be a challenge.

~*~

“Does everyone understand what they are supposed to do?” Hux asked his gathered officers. Everyone nodded grimly. “Good. Then start the preparations. We attack in three days time.”

One of the officers, a hefty woman with hair the same colour as Hux’ own, raised a hand, and he motioned for her to speak.

“The other clans… Their Crows, what do we do with them?” she asked. “The laws forbid the harming of Crows. Surely you don’t intend to break the laws?”

Hux sighed.

“Didn’t you listen to a word I said, Enna?” He was not in the mood for this. “Master Ren has specifically requested that he be allowed to capture them and use them for the rituals during the solstice. It is true that none of us here have any right to harm the Crows, and I would die from wound rot a thousand times over before I break the laws, but Ren is under no such restrictions. And that, my dear aunt, is the exact reason why he will be going down to that field on his own. The Crows will try to challenge him, and it will cause the army to be distracted. It baffles me that I have to explain this to you twice!”

Enna glared at him, jaw clenched, and Hux felt his mood turning more sour with every breath.

“Your father would never come up with such a reckless plan!” she exclaimed, defensive now that the war chief had chastised her. “Nor would master Tarkin! He’d turn in his grave if he had one at this plan of yours! Sending a Crow, a wee lad no less, down to the fields against three clans, without even being bonded to him. It’s a disgrace, Braith-!”

The back of Hux’ hand made impact against her face, sending her flying several feet. The war chief was growling as he walked over, and pulled her up by the front of her tunic.

“The back of your hand made impact against her face, sending her flying several feet. The war chief was growling as he walked over, and pulled her up by the front of her tunic.

“Do not – ever – disrespect me, master Tarkin, or master Ren again,” he snarled. “You have been given your orders, and you will follow them. Your group will go in the first wave, so you can see for yourself just how badly you have just insulted our Crow and his abilities. Understood?” He
glared her right in the eye, daring her to say anything. She nodded frantically. “Good,” he said, almost sweetly. “Now, if you ever compare me to my useless coward of a father again, I will have you crucified.”

He let go of her tunic, and she fell back onto the floor – face pale and eyes wide. The rest of the people in the room took a cautious step back, not wanting to be targeted by the warchief’s bad mood. Phasma alone remained unaffected, putting a hand on Hux’ shoulder to help ground him a bit.

“Anyone else feel like sharing their opinions?” she asked. Every person in the room shook their heads frantically. “Good. Then I suggest you get going. We have a lot of work to do.”

The room emptied immediately, leaving only Phasma and Hux. She collected all the maps and papers before she spoke next, giving Hux the time he needed to get a hold of his anger.

“You should go see Ren,” she said. “I think I heard him leave the audience chamber hours ago. See if he has any good news for you.”

“What kind of good news?” Hux muttered.

“About the battle, perhaps. And about the bonding.” She gave him a sympathetic smile. “People are being idiots about the whole thing because they don’t understand it. Perhaps you should tell them about him, though. Make them stop underestimating him.”

Hux shook his head.

“It’s not my place to tell them,” he sighed. “And I’m not sure I can bear discussing the whole bonding issue right now, Phasma. We need to get through this bloody siege first, and I can’t afford any distractions until we’ve won. But you’re right about one thing; I should go talk to him. I’m fairly certain he’ll come looking for her soon.” He pointed to Eira, who was happily picking away at a block of cheese further down the table. “I might as well get her back to her master safely, before she eats herself to death.”

He approached her, and held out an arm for her to perch on, hoping it would be enough for her to get the message. Eira peered up at him for a moment, tilting her head, seeming to consider whether or not it was worth abandoning her cheese and go with the warchief. In the end, she hacked off an impressive chunk of the food, and hopped onto his arm, climbing up to her favourite place on his right shoulder, cawing triumphantly around the cheese. Phasma looked like she was trying very hard not to burst out laughing, and Hux fully sympathized with her sentiment. The only thing keeping him from a rather uncharacteristic fit of laughter were two sets of very impressive talons digging through his thick jacket and into his skin.

“You’re going to be too fat to fly if you keep that up, little bird,” he smiled as they made their way through the halls towards his and Ren’s private wing. Eira shot him a haughty look. “Oh, don’t be like that, my beauty. I’m merely pointing out that excessive eating might influence your ability to fly away from danger quick enough. I wouldn’t want Ren to have to worry about your safely.”

He could feel the disapproval radiate from her snowy form, and he had to admit that she managed to look incredibly regal for an animal with a chunk of cheese in their mouth almost as big as their head. As soon as he opened the door to Ren’s main room, Eira flew over to the windowsill and demonstratively attacked the food. There was a distinct lack of Crow in the room, and Hux wondered briefly if Phasma had heard wrong earlier. Sitting down in his usual armchair, he pondered where the Crow might be and if he should go look for him. It was a little strange that Ren had not come to the great hall after his audience with the Raven, and Hux wondered if the younger
man was upset. That would certainly explain his reluctance to be among people. Or, perhaps, this was another one of those little Crow things; another rule to cage Ren in, to comply with. The sound of heavy footfalls on the stone stairs saved him further worries, and soon Ren’s impressive form stalked in through the open door. He closed it behind him and went over to sit across from Hux, as had become their habit over the last few days. For a moment Hux wondered why he didn’t seem particularly surprised by the warchief’s presence, but then he guessed that Eira had probably told on him already.

Ren pulled the cowl off his head and ran a hand through his hair. He looked tired, and his movements indicated pain or soreness, but the crooked smile on his face told another story.

“I went to see Askir, if you’re wondering,” Ren said. “He broke the arm on one of the stable boys, so I had to take care of the situation. Apparently, they’re too rough when they brush him and he wanted to teach them a lesson. I told him he wasn’t allowed to do that, so we had a bit of an…. argument.”

“Is the boy alright?” Hux asked, choosing not to question how a human could get into an argument with a horse. Ren nodded.

“Fixing broken bones is child’s play, my lord,” he said. “He’ll be back in the stable in a few weeks. It wasn’t a very complicated fracture. He’s resting downstairs, if you want to check in on him yourself.”

“No,” Hux smiled. “I trust your abilities. But the horse seems to have done a number on you as well. No offense, my Crow, but you do appear to be in a bit of pain.”

Ren chuckled at that.

“I’ve had worse,” he said. “It’s only a few cuts and bruises. Askir knows better than to try and actually harm me. He does these things to test my commitment to him. He pushes the boundaries to see if I will abandon him.” The Crow shrugged. “Abandonment does horrible things to a soul, and not only human ones.”

“You are a truly exceptional man, Kylo Ren,” Hux said with a smile. “I’m afraid most of what you’re telling me are things I have never thought about before, but when you say them, they do make sense. Now, the reason I came here was to ask you about your audience with the Raven. I hope it went well?”

“It did. I have full permission from the order to kill the other Crows during the solstice.” He hesitated for a moment. “And, speaking of the solstice…. The Raven demanded that our public bonding ceremony is carried out that same day.”

“That is less than three weeks away,” Hux groaned. “And we’re neck deep in the pig shit that is this bloody siege. Why then? Isn’t the usual nesting time before the ceremonies at least a few months? I think Tarkin wrote something about that in his final letter.”

Ren nodded, glad he wasn’t the only one who felt that this whole thing had suddenly become very stressful. He wasn’t one to question Snoke’s orders, though. The Raven was wise, he was closer to the Gods than anyone. If he said it was the right time, then it was the right time, and Ren would simply have to obey.

“Traditionally, the waiting period is three months,” he said. “But sometimes that period will be much shorter due to circumstances surrounding the Crow and warchief in question. We’re at war. The Raven thought it best if we bonded as quickly as possible, so we can focus on eradicating our
“When the Gods speak, I obey,” Hux sighed. “Three weeks, then. We’ll start making the arrangements after we’ve gotten rid of that overgrown flea infestation currently camping out on our land.”

“When is the attack?”

“In three days. At dawn.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Chapter End Notes

Uhm, hi.
This chapter... I swear it was trying to go in a thousand directions all at once, so if it's messy I do apologize. Writing Phasma is apparently kinda difficult for me, but I'll try my best. But we got more dialogue, more interactions, and Eira being a tiny, fluffy entity of sass. Yes, Askr has abandonment issues. Ren knows it, and does his best to help.

Murphy's Law is unknown to the people of this AU, but if someone was to explain it to Hux, he'd understand it perfectly. He does not appreciate being compared to his father at all, as you could probably tell. And insulting not only Ren, but Tarkin as well... Ooooh, big mistake there, Enna. Hux won't stand for anyone insulting their Crows - even if it is his aunt. I don't think it comes as a surprise for any of you that Hux is not very nice. But he does like Eira. They seem to have a pretty sweet relationship developing there, if I may say so myself.

And Ren, the poor thing, is so confused by this whole thing. What, he's allowed to have opinions now? He's not supposed to blindly obey everything Hux tells him? What? Why has no one told him about this? Halp.
On a more serious note, though, Snoke is effing scary. Tarkin probably sent birds instead of smoke-shapes just so he wouldn't have to face him.

Starting next chapter, there will be some action happening. A battle, a bonding, some other things - though perhaps not all of it in the same chapter^^

If there's anything you're wondering about, or that doesn't make sense, just poke me, and I'll try to either explain or write better - or both. I'm ficlet-machine on Tumblr as well. Come share your nerdiness with me!
He was running again.

His breath like fire in his throat, the taste of bile filling his mouth, the smell of blood and smoke and vomit all consuming.

They were after him. The hounds. He could hear them in the distance, coming closer.

His legs were heavy, his movements sluggish and uncoordinated – the blood loss was becoming dangerous now. The wounds from the last whipping painted his back a vivid red against the white of the snow.

An easy target.

He mustn’t stop. Mustn’t slow down.

Had to escape. Had to run.

If they caught him they’d execute him.

Had to run!

He didn’t want to die. Didn’t want to die. Didn’t want to die!

He ran across the snow-covered field, the hounds closing in on him with every step. He could feel the thunder of their paws against the ground.

The voices were calling from the void: murderer, scum, traitor, bastard, freak – it was impossible to block them out, he couldn’t cover his ears while he ran.

He had to keep running. Had to escape, had to get away, had to get out of here before they killed him!

He didn’t mean to do it. Didn’t mean it, didn’t mean it, didn’t mean to kill them!

All the blood, it clung to his skin. He threw up again, and ran.

To the forest. He had to get to the forest. They’d lose him there for sure. Had to reach the forest.

Then he was falling, the dogs were on top of him, their teeth sinking into his small body, tearing at him. The men came after, called the dogs away.

Smiled. Something wrong with those smiles. They spat at him.

Murderer. Traitor. Scum. The Queen’s pathetic little bastard. You’ll pay. We’ll make you pay.

Pain. Rage. And darkness.

Ren bolted upright in the bed, chest heaving, and body trembling. After frantically checking himself for injuries, trying to remember where he was, he wiped away the tears streaming down his face with the back of his hand. He hadn’t had that dream in years. Nightmares were part of his life, a fact he had long since resigned to, but there were some he prayed daily to the Gods to take away from him. This was one of them. He didn’t need the memories of a boy long dead to haunt his mind; there was plenty of darkness there to torment him without adding that into the mix.

Scrambling out of bed, nearly hitting the floor due to his knees shaking so badly they could hardly support his weight, Ren made his way over to a small table, upon which a pitcher of water and a mug was placed in case he needed it. He certainly did now. His heart was still hammering in his chest to the point where it almost hurt, and his throat felt raw and sore – had he been screaming again? Pouring water into the mug and gulping it all down in one go, then immediately repeating
the action, Ren prayed that no one had heard him. When he’d emptied the pitcher, he sank down on the padded bench by the window. It was still dark outside, and Ren had to fight with all he had not to panic. He hated the darkness. Hated it! All those years at the House, training, sleeping, eating, hurting, healing – all of it in darkness. He needed the daylight. Needed to feel the sun on his skin to banish the memories, the demons and ghosts of people long buried. He was so alone in the darkness, so weak. So vulnerable. So utterly pathetic.

“Little hatchling of mine,” Eira’s voice was full of concern, her presence in his mind a gentle caress. “So strong you are, and yet you think so little of yourself.”

He couldn’t bring himself to answer her. His mind was in turmoil, and his throat hurt too much to speak. She could read him well enough anyway.

“You need air under your wings, Ren. Let’s go outside. It will feel better when you can feel the winds on your face.”

She was right, of course. Nothing helped him overcome the powerlessness, the panic, the fear, like being outside – being able to breathe clean air and lose himself in the stars above him and the whisper of the land below him. There was no point in attempting to sleep again, anyway; the castle had gone to bed early, to make sure everyone were rested and ready to go at dawn. Ren might as well get up and make himself useful; no doubt there’d be plenty of things for him to do the moment he left the private wing. Clan Hux may consist of some of the most hardened and experienced warriors Ren had ever met, but there were always younglings facing their first battle, and it was part of his role as Crow to offer them whatever reassurance they needed in order to go out there with a sense of purpose instead of fear. He had never been very good at comforting people who weren’t injured – violence came so naturally to Ren that he had to remind himself that others might not face the prospect of battle with the same focused calm as he did.

Glad it was too dark for him to see himself in the expensive full-height mirror he’d been given, Ren stripped out of his nightshirt, curling a bit on himself as he dug out some clothing from one of his chests. He’d never been very comfortable in his body – it always felt like his limbs were too long, his shoulders too broad, feet too big, and face too irregular. Surrounded by other he always envied them for their apparent composure and control over their bodies. He couldn’t imagine Hux ever tripping over his own feet, hitting his head on doorframes, or any of the awkward and embarrassing things that had made Ren’s adolescence something of a living hell. The laughter from other hatchlings still haunted him sometimes. The only time he felt at ease in his own body was during combat. He was built for it, he knew that, and it never ceased to amaze him how much control he had over himself and his movements at times like that. He only wished that control could extend to other circumstances as well, such as when he was walking beside his warchief. Hux didn’t walk, he strode. He had a grace to him, a regal aura that was visible with every little move he made. Every single step, every gesture – kriff, even his anger was moulded into something carefully calculated and perfected. Next to him, Ren felt like a bumbling idiot, with his loud steps and poor posture. Next to him, Ren was a walking mess. The most he could hope for was to come across as intimidating – and given the looks most people in the world seemed to give him, he had at least managed to do that right.

It had been a while since he was dressed for battle, and he was glad the leather of his trousers and outer robe hadn’t shrunk too much during the months it had been in storage. No self-respecting Crow would ever be caught wearing armour – that would be to admit that they doubted their own ability to defend themselves. But that didn’t mean they couldn’t be sensible about what they wore to the battlefield. Ren’s battle-wear looked very much like his everyday robes, the only difference was that the sleeves on the inner tunic were tighter, meant to fit under a pair of braces where they wouldn’t get caught on anything, and that the outer robe was made from the finest quality black
leather available in the North. He wore a smaller cowl than usual; the fabric covering only his shoulders, and the hood of it a little tighter so that it wouldn’t get in the way but still allow him to cover his head if needed be. The broad belt he usually wore was now also accompanied by a thinner belt, onto which the scabbard for his sword was attached. He didn’t even need to light a candle, the motions came almost instinctually to him after so many years of being sent out to kill on a moment’s notice. After sheathing his sword, welcoming the familiar weight at his hip, he hesitated for a moment before resolutely picking up his helmet and exiting his bedroom, Eira safely perched on his shoulder. Hux would have to forgive him, but he refused to show his face to those the Raven had deemed unworthy. The anonymity would only add to the terror, he knew that, and he intended to take full advantage of that fact. If everything went as they hoped, the few survivors from the other three clans would have nightmares for years to come about the Crow of Skye Castle.

~*~

Hux stood on the parapet, as he always did for the last few hours before a battle, monitoring the enemy and making some last minute adjustments to his plans. His own army were silently taking up their positions, splitting into smaller battle-groups, helping each other apply the Hux clan’s signature red and black face-paint. They’d done this so many times now that the preparations were almost effortless. Phasma hardly even had to order them around anymore. She did so anyway, mainly, Hux suspected, because it amused her to see them scurrying around like fresh hatchlings, trying their hardest to earn the slightest crumble of praise from their captain. It was perhaps a little cruel, but at least it kept them motivated and alert.

Their clan emblem, a black inverted sun symbol against a scarlet background, hung on large banners from the outer walls on each side of the gates. Several smaller standards were scattered about from different places on the parapets and roofs of the towers. Hux wanted to make certain that their enemies knew exactly whom they were up against. It amused him, despite the grim situation, that they hadn’t thought that he’d understand why they had waited until the previous day to move their army right up to Hux’ doorstep. Their attempts to hide their newly constructed catapults at the back of the ranks, under some very poor excuses for tents, was laughable. Or, it would have been if it hadn’t been so bloody insulting. Hux had laid siege to castles before – he knew full well what to expect from these fools. It irked him that they obviously underestimated him, despite his very successful military career. Well, being underestimated could be quite the advantage if one played one’s cards right, Hux thought to himself as he adjusted the neck of the heavy scale armour he wore over a padded tunic and jacket. The armour covered most of his body, reaching down past his knees and elbows. He wore gold braces on both forearms and shins – heirlooms, and the only trace of vanity he allowed himself to indulge in – and his fiery hair was drawn back from his face and held in place by intricate braids. His sword, a remarkably simple design for a man of his standing, hung from his left hip, and a dagger was safely sheathed on his right. It was a far cry from the usual strict elegance he displayed, but this was perhaps Hux at his most genuine. One did not become warchief through negotiations. The only way to the throne was through battle, and Hux had never once hesitated to prove his worth.

He smiled as he listened to the sounds of wood groaning and ropes creaking as Skye Castle’s own catapults were made ready for battle. Given the general stupidity displayed by their enemies so far, Hux wouldn’t be all that surprised if they’d failed to account for the possibility of clan Hux actually having their own catapults. With their higher position, they had a clear advantage over those of their enemies. The sorry lot outside the castle had to not only break through stone-walls ten feet thick, but also manage it from a lower position, whereas Hux and his clan had free aim at the much softer targets that were the soldiers. He reckoned they’d be able to cut at least a fifth off by catapults and ballistae alone. Knowing full well most warchiefs considered the latter to be exclusively a siege weapon, Hux had redesigned some of his to send a barrage of barbed arrows
instead of the more traditional single large arrows meant to lodge themselves into walls and ease the process of tearing them down. His idea had proven frighteningly successful over the years, and Skye Castle’s parapets now permanently featured them.

A signal from the courtyard informed him that all preparations were complete and the troops ready to head out the second he ordered it. The excitement hung in the air, feeling thick enough to cut with a knife, anticipation and eagerness spreading through the ranks like fire. In the towers above his head the birds were all silent. Only a few dark shapes could be seen making wide circles above the enemy troops before coming back. Good. Ren had obviously made sure they understood that they had to act like it was any other night so that no one would catch on to their plans. Hux had to remember to properly praise his Crow for his amazing control over his massive flock of birds – the warchief didn’t even know how many there were, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to know. It was mystery enough to him how Ren maintained his sanity with all of those voices in his head. Speaking of Ren, it was high time to seek him out and go over the very final little details before the gates would open and the son of Death would show the world exactly why he bore that title.

~*~

Warchiefs Esra Valko, Gure Jonah, and Cail Tannis stood together at the front line – their clans spreading out into the field behind them. The sun had begun to rise over the horizon, and soon they’d be able to see well enough to give the attack signal. Clan Hux had no Crow and a very young warchief – they were fair game. Sure, that Hux lad had managed a few impressive campaigns, but between them they had more years of battle experience than Hux had years lived. Besides, the other clans he’d defeated had been soft lowland people – a little one could invade their lands and win! They were of a tougher breed, proper highland folks, so they weren’t all that worried. Their Crows, two men and a woman, stood just behind them, heads close together, agitated whispers passing between them. No doubt they were feeling the dread of the upcoming battle. Valko glanced over at them, snorted, and spat on the ground.

“They get more nervous than that, I reckon they’ll kriffin’ shite themselves,” he said. “Too soft, them Crows. Always said. No more use than a bloody wet nurse for a stillborn.”

“Only goes to show what sort of folk them Huxes are for believing in ‘em,” Tannis agreed. “I doubt that so called warchief of their even pisses without the Crow’s permission.”

“Then he must be panickin’ something bad now,” Jonah laughed. “How long’s that old bony one been dead now? Two months?”

“Something like that,” Valko smiled. “What I wouldn’t give to see over those walls now. Bet they’re scurrying like headless chickens trying to mount a defence.”

When the sun had risen enough for them to see Skye Castle properly, they noticed the banners and standards signalling that they were expected. But strangely enough, there were no archers on the walls, no sounds of an army moving towards the gate, no birds, no nothing. There was only an eerie sort of silence emanating from the high, white walls. It was as if Skye Castle had been abandoned. The warchiefs looked at each other. This was beginning to feel… wrong.

“Oi, you lot,” Jonah pointed to the Crows. “Make yourselves useful for once. Find out what in the Gods’ names is goin’ on. Send your birds or whatever it is you people do.”

The Crows looked equal parts horrified and offended, but if they had learnt anything over the course of this campaign, it was to keep their mouths shut and do what they were told. These warchiefs didn’t care much for any laws they hadn’t written themselves, and the Crows knew full well they were nothing more than empty symbols. After exchanging a brief glance, the Crows
walked in front of the warlords and summoned their respective flocks, sending them all towards the castle.

They should not have done that.

Hux castle was not deserted, they learned as the single largest flock of birds they’d ever seen took flight – not only from the towers of the castle, but from the surrounding mountainsides. It looked like the mountains were coming apart in front of them, the sound of their wings like thunder, ripping the early morning quiet to pieces as they charged right into the enemy birds. The Crows could do nothing but stand and watch as the bodies of crows, magpies, rooks, and ravens fell like rain around their feet – the Force full of their dying screams, their fear, their desperation, their pain. It nearly brought them to their knees, forced them to hold on to each other for support, as they realized – far, far too late – that this wasn’t a rogue flock. There was a Crow at Skye Castle, and the decision to send in the birds may just have been the worst mistake of their lives. Their warlords would kill them for not sensing it – if they even survived the battle, that was. Just as they shared that thought, the black mass of wings in the sky above them dove right into their ranks, picking and pulling and scratching at anything they could come close to, before rising back up – blacking out the sun as they did so, before attacking again. There was so much anger radiating from the birds, even the regular soldiers could feel it. There was hatred and blood-lust, so intense the air seemed to almost crackle with it. It was too evenly spread among the birds, the Crows realized with no small amount of alarm. It wasn’t their emotions – it was their master’s.

Then the gates of Skye Castle swung open, revealing no army but instead a single, black clad figure, with a Force aura so strong it seemed to distort the world around him. He wore the same black battle-clothing as all Crows, but what set him apart was the helmet. They knew what that helmet meant, had heard the stories, heard the rumours during their own apprenticeships, and suddenly they felt very small – and very, very afraid. The nightmarish figure walked across the stone bridge, his steps unhurried, calm, as if he knew that every single warrior on that field could do absolutely nothing but stand and stare until he’d reached them – a predator-like quality to his gait, stalking rather than striding, only served to make him all the more frightening. It was like looking at the face of Death. The Crows drew closer to each other as he stepped off the bridge and on to the dirt road, praying to the Gods to keep their warlords from doing something rash – to give them time to find a way out of this horrible situation.

It was at that moment that warlord Jonah, in charge of the archers, decided to do something incredibly… stupid.

He gave the signal, and seconds later a tidal wave of arrows were released and headed for the lone Crow. Without slowing down or hesitating in the least, the Crow simply raised his hand, and stopped the arrows mid-air. Then several things happened in quick succession, none of them good. The Crow released the arrows on their troops, warriors falling dead to the ground in the dozens, then the birds attacked again, and again. As they drew back, the Crow reached out again, sending the Force out like a hammer-strike against the three Crows and knocking them unconscious, before lifting them off the ground and throwing them out of the way. The gathered army could only watch in horror as their Crows tumbled to the ground like ragdolls, as still and lifeless as the birds they once commanded. Then, he drew his sword, and before anyone could understand how it happened, the world turned red as he moved through the ranks – parting flesh from bones and heads from bodies as he went. They could scarcely believe him to be human; he was destruction, death, incarnated.

Then the heavy thumps of catapults and ballistae being released could be heard over the pained screams of the men cut down by that… demon. He seemed utterly unaffected by the rain of arrows, rocks, and burning oil as he continued to cut down anyone who attempted to stand up to him. Clan Hux knew what they were doing, the warlords learned, as one by one their catapults were
destroyed – either by fire or stones, and their men were made into grotesque parodies of the straw figures set on fire during the winter solstice to lure the sun back to their lands.

This was starting to go horribly wrong, and the three men looked at each other before shouting the order to storm the castle, kill anything and everything in their way. Kill the Crow, kill any Hux they found, just turn the godsforsaken battle around! They were at least twice as many as the Huxes, this should not be happening! They hadn’t even seen their warriors yet. The warchief himself was nowhere to be seen, same with that monster of a cousin of his. There were only the birds and the Crow, and it should not be possible for them to do this sort of damage to an army of this size.

No sooner had the army begun to move towards Skye Castle before the Hux clan’s war-cry erupted from everywhere around them, the castle gates were thrown open – and then clan Hux descended upon them from all directions. But how was that even possible? They only had the one gate, how could they come from the woods as well? When did they manage to get to the fields behind them? How could there be so many of them? Where in the Gods names did they all come from?

~*~

The battle had its own melody, its own thundering, blood soaked song, and every fibre of Ren’s being was tuned in to it. Right here, in the fray, with his body moving on its own accord – effortlessly dodging, evading, parrying, cutting, stabbing and slicing – colouring the world a beautiful shade of scarlet, Kylo Ren felt at home. He could feel the fear, the anguish, the confusion radiating off the warriors – the Force was burning cold in his veins with it. They were so afraid, so unprepared for coming face to face with a child of Death, it was almost pitiful. Ren himself was long since cured of any lingering fear of dying, having walked side by side with Her for so long, and having been held in Her arms before being given back to the living world more times than he cared to think about anymore. And after so many years of training and perfecting the art of destruction and violence, he knew – without taking any particular pride in it – that he would always be the most dangerous creature on that battlefield. For so long it had been the only thing that made sense to him, the only language he could understand, the only home he knew. No, he didn’t fear battle. Not at all. More than anything, he relished it.

~*~

The battle went on well into the evening, even with their advantage clan Hux was still outnumbered, and it wasn’t until Hux and Phasma had rather spectacularly slaughtered the entirety of Jonah’s, Valko’s, and Thannis’ guard, and forcing the warchiefs to surrender that the battle was declared a victory. The three clans, or what was left of them, tucked tails and fled – scattering like birds to the winds – clan Hux hot on their trail with the intention of making sure none of these three clans would ever forget their mistake.

Hux wiped some blood off his face as he watched Phasma and his guards put chains around the hands, feet and necks of Thannis, Jonah, Valko, and the three Crows. He hadn’t felt this kriffing good in months! Every last detail of his plan had come together perfectly, and now this entire field bathed in the blood of his conquered enemies. Today was a good day. He had to admit to himself, though, that even if he thought he knew what to expect from a Knight of Ren when it came to battle, nothing had prepared him for the sheer brutal brilliance that was Kylo Ren. It was at the same time the most beautiful and terrifying thing he had ever seen, and it made his mind reel when he realized just what kind of power he had been given when the Gods sent Ren to his nest.

“Put them in the dungeons,” he ordered his men once the prisoners were secured. “Separate cells. I don’t want them getting up to anything before I’ve had a chance to piss on whatever’s left of their
“Yes, my lord,” the soldiers saluted, and began dragging the still unconscious Crows and their masters towards the looming silhouette of the castle.

“Phasma,” he said. “Get someone to help you get everyone back inside. No point in being idiots by staying out here in the dark. You never know who might decide to take revenge.” He looked around. “Have you seen master Ren anywhere?”

Phasma shook her head.

“Not since you and him were back to back against those blasted Thannis berserkers,” she said. “Which was a very impressive sight, by the way. I’m sure he’ll show up sooner or later. Maybe he’s gone back inside to start tending to the wounded. Isn’t that what he’s supposed to be doing?”

Hux gave an embarrassed laugh.

“I keep forgetting that he is a healer as well,” he admitted. “It just seems so… against his character. Oh well, I’ll go have a look. We’ll start recovering the bodies tomorrow, once Ren’s birds have had their fill. They deserve that after today.”

“They certainly do,” Phasma smiled, her bright white teeth stark contrast to her smeared black face paint. “Now get your sorry behind back to your castle, warchief. I’ll round up the clan. If you find master Ren, tell him I’d like to spar with him some day. I really want to learn some of those forms of his.”

“So blood-thirsty, Phasma,” Hux tutted. “You sure you’re not actually a Knight?”

They shared a quick laugh and a hug, before Hux and a few of his guards joined in the mass of bloody and dirty warriors headed for the comfort of their castle and the promise of clean clothes and food. There were many wounded, Hux noticed as he passed by several small groups. They’d managed to get away with relatively small losses during the actual battle, but he knew that it would take days before the final body count was settled. Right now, he could only hope that Ren, and those assigned to help him out, could keep up with the steady stream of new patients heading for his tower.

Phasma had been right about the Crow’s whereabouts. After cleaning his face of blood and paint, and changing into a clean shirt and soft jacket, the warchief had gone to the tower to have a look at the situation there. He found Ren on the third floor, still in his battle garments, currently preparing to amputate the arm of a young woman. The Crow helped the obviously shocked warrior drink some water mixed with something from a small vial on the table behind him. She was crying and shaking, moving restlessly on the bed as pain wracked her body, babbling incoherently about something or other, but Ren was patient with her, gentle even. He let her lean back against his chest, hide a little against his larger frame, as he held the cup to her lips – whispering soothing words in her ear all the while. Whatever it was in that cup, it worked quickly, and soon her eyes drifted shut, and Ren nodded to two hefty women standing close by. They grabbed a steady hold of the unconscious girl, presumably to keep her still should she wake up, and watched as Ren tied a length of fabric tight just above the area where the arm stopped looking like an arm and began looking like minced meat.

Hux had seen injuries like that before, and shuddered. Brave girl, that one, to stand up against someone wielding a mace, or had it perhaps been a morning star? Pity to lose her arm so young, but then again, young people healed well and usually found new way to make themselves useful far quicker than the older ones. He steeled himself when Ren picked up a saw, aiming carefully,
before quickly and efficiently working through skin, muscles and tendons. When he reached the bone, the girl jerked, and Hux thought to himself that there would probably never come a day when the sound of a bone being sawed off would not make him feel sick. But he couldn’t stop staring at the young body fighting against whatever potion it was, to try and break free from the iron grip of the two older women and escape Ren’s unceasing sawing. There was compassion in those strange, dark eyes of his, so much that Hux wondered how he could even keep going. He no doubt felt her pain through the Force, but stopping now would not help her. When her movements became too violent, the Crow sighed and put a finger against her temple, causing her body to go completely limp.

“Why didn’t you do that right away,” Hux found himself asking. “Wouldn’t that have been more efficient?”

Ren cast a glance at him before resuming his work.

“No,” he said. “The Force shuts down her entire body, puts it in a kind of sleep where it can’t feel anything. It sounds like a good thing, but in situations like this, it’s not. I need to be able to tell where she has normal sensations, and where the ability to feel sensations has been severed. It’s important to monitor that during the healing, since changes in sensation can be a sign of infection setting in.” He finished, disposing of the remains of the arm in a large basket set to the side. There were other limbs in there as well. “The easiest way for me to know is to monitor her Force signature. It will tell me when something is wrong long before she can even feel it. When she’s like this, her signature is barely even existent.” He turned to one of the women. “Stitch her up and put her one floor down. Tell them to inform me when she wakes up.”

The woman nodded and set to work closing up the wound by means of fine, even stitches. It was obvious she’d done it before, and Hux felt pride at having such competent people serving his Crow. Ren walked over to another bed, this time the patient was a man, a decade or so older than Hux, with bandages wrapped around his head and waist. The bandages covering his midsection were coloured a dark red. Sweat was pouring off his skin, and he barely seemed conscious, eyes glassy and flickering, and mouth moving lazily without any word or sound coming out of it. Ren put a hand on his forehead, sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He’d put it up in a ponytail at some point, but several strands had broken free, framing his face like some dark halo. He looked tired.

“He won’t make it,” Ren said, simply.

“That bad?” Hux nodded in the direction of his stomach. Ren shook his head.

“The stomach wounds I could have healed without problem,” he said, and then pointed at the bandages covering most of his head. “I don’t know why they brought him in here, to be honest with you. He took a sledgehammer to the back of his head. There’s nothing left of his skull back there. The only thing keeping his brain from pouring out all over the floor are the bandages. Even if I healed the outer wounds, there’s nothing left of him in there. Nothing to work with. He’d be a body without a person in it.”

Hux looked at the man, then at his Crow.

“So all we can do is wait for him to die?” he asked, beginning to understand why this bothered Ren so much. It must feel like being taunted, to have a body put in his care and knowing he could do nothing to fix it.

Ren nodded.
“He could die right now,” he said, eyes not leaving the sad form in front of him. “Or he could last days. There’s no telling with injuries like this.”

“Can you ease his passing? Help him over in some way?”

“I can.”

“Then do it. Let it not be said that clan Hux is cruel to its kinsmen.” He paused. “We might need that bed soon, too. For those we can save.”

Ren bowed his head, then reached down and planted a kiss to the man’s forehead, whispering something – secret, sacred phrases of gratitude and farewells – before grabbing his head and swiftly snapping his neck.

“I thought you would give him a potion,” Hux remarked. Ren gave a bitter smile.

“He wouldn’t have been able to swallow it,” he said. “And that is a quicker way to go, anyhow. Poison takes time, and is only very rarely free of unpleasant side effects. He’s with the ancestors now, that’s all that matters.”

“Indeed it is.” Hux looked around him, as Ren was already moving to the next bed, obviously stressed but not letting it affect his performance. “Is there anything I can do to help?” he heard himself asking.

The hours seemed to fly by as Ren put him to work. The warchief was obviously not trusted to handle any of the more advanced tasks, such as stitching, setting broken bones, or popping dislocated joints back into place, but he did prove himself valuable when it came to holding down unruly patients and administrating the various potions and other herbal remedies Ren used. Working alongside his Crow felt surprisingly good, and he didn’t even feel that bothered by having a man younger than himself order him around as if he’d been born last winter. Hux had always respected competence, and Ren most certainly was competent. He did begin to realize why Tarkin had always been in such foul moods after battles like this; there was no time for either Ren, Hux, or the ten people assisting them, to sit down even for a minute to eat or rest. Hux was used to getting at least a few hours worth of sleep once he’d made sure everyone were more or less accounted for, but the Crow could afford no such luxury. There was always a new patient, a new situation, a new problem. They lost a few more lives before morning came, and no sooner had the bodies been moved before the beds were occupied again, but Ren – despite obviously grieving for them – simply went on doing his part. It was incredible to watch, and somehow unfathomable that this gentle healer was the same man who had gone through the enemy ranks like a hurricane of blood and destruction. Hux heart swelled with pride and something more, deeper, as he watched those skilled hands at work.

The sun had long since risen when the last wounded warrior had been brought in and treated. Hux could barely see straight from the exhaustion, and Ren was an utter mess. He was so pale, dark circles under his eyes, and steps slower and more unsteady with every passing moment. He’d sent the assistants away a few hours earlier, ordering them to get some rest so they could come back and take over while Ren got some hard earned sleep. Hux knew he had no obligation to stay and help Ren, after all, he had no obligation to offer it in the first place, but he had to admit to himself that it had felt very good, rewarding, to be a part of this.

His father would never have lowered himself to doing something like this, would have ordered a private feast and then slept soundly through the night after having tormented his mother for hours with what he called lovemaking. He would have told Hux that a warchief was royalty, the finest, purest blood, who stood above everyone and everything. This sort of work was dirty and
undignified, not something for a man of his station to concern himself with. That in itself was reason enough for Hux to want to help out again in the future, but he also felt he had a better understanding of the work a Crow did for their clan now.

He heard the sound of footsteps approaching, and soon three of their helpers walked through the door, bowing to the warchief and his Crow. Ren reported on the current situation, instructing them which medication was to be given to which patient, preparing them for which ones might not make it, and sending them off to tend to a floor each. As soon as they had turned their backs, Ren’s shoulders slumped, and he seemed to almost stagger as he walked towards the door where Hux was standing.

“Go to bed, Ren,” he said softly, when the Knight had to reach out and put a hand against the wall to steady himself. “You have done a truly amazing job tonight, you deserve some rest.”

“You too, my lord,” Ren said with a tired smile. “Can’t have you collapsing from exhaustion mid-feast tonight.”

Hux chuckled.

“Phasma would laugh her head off,” he smiled. “But you’re right. We both need rest.”

Ren moved past him toward the stairs, slowly beginning the ascent to his own rooms.

“Oh, one more thing.” Hux said. Ren looked over his shoulder, an eyebrow arched in question. “Remember to take a bath before the feast. You smell like a slaughterhouse.”

“So do you, warchief.” Ren continued his slow ascent. “So do you. Sleep well.”

Chapter End Notes

Phew! Hello!
Sorry about the long wait. Finals week showed up and kicked my ass, but now I'm free! What better way to celebrate than with an update, hm?
Lots of stuff going on in this chapter, and I had initially intended for it to be longer, but it just seemed to want to end where it did, so I chose to let it. I should probably tell you to start paying attention to details, you'll need them later. Trust me.

Anyway, I'm really rusty when it comes to writing battle-scenes, so my sincere apologies to anyone who had hoped for more. But given that both Hux and Ren are two very violent individuals, I think it's safe to say it won't be the last fighting scene.

Ren's sword is a traditional Scottish claymore, because they are one of my absolute favourite swords. Hux' is too, but his is smaller than Ren's because Hux is smaller than Ren. For those of you who don't know, a sword is always custom made to fit a person's height, weight, and muscle mass. The bigger the person, the bigger the sword. It's got to do with balance and efficiency. Also, I just love two-handed swords. Hux wears a scale armour because it's cool. And he's crushing so hard on Ren, the poor thing. I wonder when he's gonna get his shit together and maybe, you know... mention it to Ren.

I think I've finally managed to figure out the time period for their clothing, too. I
realized I've forgotten to give you a reference there. But we're talking 1280'-1350's Europe here - the height of the medieval period. Lots of long tunics and jackets, chain mail, and so on. The difference is that my characters get to wear trousers. Not everyone did back then. It took a surprisingly long time for Europe to work out the concept of trousers. Same with pockets. They could create advanced weaponry and armour, but not functional clothing. Huh. Go figure. Anyway, if anyone needs a picture or something for reference, just poke me on tumblr - ficlet-machine, and I'll see if I can dig something out for you.

I hope you enjoyed this, and I'll start working on the next update more or less right away. Cheers!
Blood and Bonds

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for: blood, mentions of dismemberment, ritual sacrifice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The great hall was packed to its maximum capacity that evening, the clanspeople having cleaned up and donned their finest clothing. Those who hadn’t made it in time to secure a place at the six long tables running down the length of the hall were seated on benches, barrels, furs, or each other’s laps in the cases of the married couples. The windows were opened enough to allow the birds access to the feast as well, and on the straw covered stone floor, the clan’s little ones wrestled with Hux’ prized hounds. When the double doors opened, loud cheers erupted as Hux walked in, closely followed by Ren and Phasma. The warchief wore a jacket made from the finest brocade, imported from his mother’s native land, reaching past his knees, the pale green colour very flattering against his bright red hair and pale complexion. The servants had polished his gold circlet carefully, and it now shone bright with the reflected light from the setting sun through the windows. The queen of Alderaan herself couldn’t manage a more regal look than that. Phasma wore her finest uniform, the strict black jacket with its red details contrasting beautifully against her pale blonde hair. Even Ren had dressed for the occasion.

The Crow wore a floor length robe in an impossibly deep shade of black, the thick fabric flowing around him in a most entrancing way. His sleeves were wide, reaching only mid-forearm on the upper side of the sleeve, but flowing out to nearly the same length as the robe itself from the inner arm side. Instead of a belt, he wore a sash around his hips the same colour as the Hux clan’s banner, and holding his high collar together was a broche in the shape of a raven in flight – the pale of the silver sticking out against the compact blackness of the robes. He wore tight fitting fingerless gloves that disappeared up under his sleeves, ensuring that his body remained completely covered despite the unusually extravagant design of his robes.

Hux had nearly choked on his own spit when the Crow had come down the stairs earlier. Even Phasma had been impressed. Ren had mostly appeared slightly embarrassed by the whole situation, obviously not comfortable with formal occasions. But none of that showed through now, as he strode up to the warchief’s table, which had been set up just in front of the throne. Only the warchief and his closest people were allowed to dine at that table, and since Hux was a widower, his children sent off to the coast, and Phasma not yet having married, it was only the three of them – Phasma to his right, and Ren to his left. Eira had been given her own little perch on the table next to her master, and as soon as they were seated, she came gliding down from the window and landed there, looking for all like she was the queen of the castle.

“Clansmen!” Hux called, effectively silencing the loud cheering. He looked out over the hall. “I have a few things to say. First of all, I am proud of you. Clan Jonah, clan Tannis, clan Valko – three clans thought they could come to our lands uninvited. They thought they could come to our lands and bring us to our knees in front of our own home. Their Crows too weak to even sense master Ren’s presence here, and still they marched on our castle! So sure they would win, so sure they could best us on our own sacred grounds! But they did not have the favour of the Gods, did they? No. We did. We had their favour. We had their protection. We had their blessing. We have a Crow whose power they could not even begin to comprehend, and we have the true blood of the north! Once again we have shown that any lord, any clan, who dares tread on clan Hux will be
crushed like ants under the heels of our boots!” He paused, a menacing grin making its way onto his face. “Tomorrow we start planning the invasion of their territories. I want those lands to forget there ever were other rulers than clan Hux. In the spring, we march for the south. But tonight… Tonight we feast!” He raised his goblet. “For clan Hux!”

“For clan Hux!” the gathered clanspeople roared as they brought their mugs together, before emptying them in one go.

The food was brought in, and it didn’t take long before the first drinking songs erupted from different parts of the hall. Toasts were announced left, right, and centre, and when the musicians had had their fill of the food, they had half the clan up and dancing on both floor, benches and tables in little to no time at all. Hux didn’t partake in the dancing, of course. He’d never had much of a taste for it, and since he was made warchief no one really expected it of him anyway, and so he could watch comfortably from the side-lines without anyone nagging him to join in. Phasma, on the other hand, had joined in – fully intent on breaking as many hearts as she could manage before morning, and, by the looks of it, doing an admirable job too.

Hux glanced over at Ren, who was currently feeding several of his birds little pieces of the roasted deer on his plate. The Crow seemed more at ease when he had his birds around him, the warchief noticed, and he was glad that most of the party was at the other end of the hall, since it meant that fewer people might come up and start talking to the Crow. Hux felt bad for putting his obviously rather socially awkward and introverted young Crow through these situations, given how rowdy the clan could get, but it was part of his duty. All he could do, really, was to try and gently steer people’s attention away from Ren, and offer him whatever reassurance he could if he noticed the younger man showing signs of distress. At the moment, he seemed rather content, a soft smile on his face as he interacted with his birds. A small magpie got its piece of deer stolen by a larger rook, and Ren gently scooped the smaller bird up and held it close to his chest while he fed it a new piece so that it could eat it in peace. He sent a sharp glare at the rook, which seemed genuinely embarrassed as it flew back out the windows as fast as it could. The birds cawed at each other and Ren, making little quirking motions with their heads, hopping this way and that. It was obvious that they were communicating something, and that Ren understood it perfectly. Hux couldn’t help feeling curious about what they were saying.

“They’re telling me about their nests,” Ren said, voice as soft as his smile. “Nests are very important to them.”

“Were you reading my thoughts again?” Hux asked, unable to keep the smile away. He liked Ren this way. The softness that contradicted everything he appeared to be at first glance. Ren smiled.

“Not actively, no,” he said. “I merely overheard them. It’s rude to read people’s minds without permission, not to mention terribly exhausting, so I try not to.”

“I didn’t know that.” He nodded towards an excited little group of magpies cawing at the Crow from across his dinner plate. “What are they saying?”

“They’re three mated pairs,” the Crow smiled. “They’re young. This is their first nesting season, and they’ve got eggs.” He looked at Hux, eyes glittering in amused affection. “They’re very proud and they want me to come see them. It’s an immense honour, but these pairs have nested at the top of the northern most nesting tower, and if I try climbing up there you’ll be in the market for a new Crow again. They’re wondering why I can’t just fly up there like they do.” He chuckled. “It’s difficult for them to accept that I’m not actually a bird.”

Eira cawed at them from her perch, and then all seven birds took flight, disappearing out the windows.
“Is she going in your stead?” Hux asked.

“Yeah. As far as they’re concerned, she’s my mother, and therefore it’s almost the same as if I were to be there myself. They adore her.”

“Don’t we all, Ren?” Hux grinned. “Someday I’d like to hear how you two met, though I have a feeling it’s not a happy tale. But I’d like to know it anyway, because of how precious she’s become to us all in such a short time.”

Ren blushed, but returned the smile, before reaching over and picking up a rook that just landed on Hux’ head.

“That is indeed a tale for another day, my lord,” he said. “But you’ll be pleased to know that she adores you, and wishes you could understand her so she could tell you that directly.”

“Tell her the adoration is very much mutual. What does she, or all of them, think about our… arrangement, by the way? I’m sure they have opinions of some sort.”

“As far as they’re concerned, we’re a mated pair,” Ren said. “Or, well, will be as soon as we’re performed the ceremony. Right now, by their logic, you’re wooing me.” He gave an embarrassed smile, not looking at Hux. “To them there’s nothing strange about it at all. It’s us humans who complicate things.”

Hux blushed a fiery shade of red at the word ‘wooing’. It came a bit too close to sentiments he wasn’t fully prepared to deal with right in front of his Crow just yet. He still needed to get through that ceremony without any embarrassing… incidents.

“I suppose it’s time we started discussing that too,” he said, trying to will the blush away. “The solstice is only two weeks away.”

Ren nodded, then bit his lip as he seemed to ponder something.

“Come see me tomorrow after you’ve finished planning your campaign for the day,” he said, smile turning mischievous, no longer seeming very flustered about the whole thing at all. “I’ll explain everything to you in manageable bites. Don’t worry, my lord, I’m trained for these situations. Once you’ve delivered a few babies, you don’t really get nervous by a lot things anymore.”

Hux groaned and hid his face in his hands. Ren had obviously sensed his embarrassment, that cheeky bastard. While he was glad the Crow was becoming comfortable enough to poke fun at him, Hux would rather prefer any other topic than that. But if it helped Ren combat his own insecurities, Hux supposed he’d happily let the younger man tease him to his heart’s content. He had a thick hide, and Ren’s smile made it all worth it, anyway.

~*~*~

The heavy door to the dungeons opened for the second time that day, causing the three Crows chained to the walls of the innermost cell to flinch. Their war chiefs had been dragged out of there earlier, kicking and screaming, and they had yet to return. Neither of the three really wished to acknowledge the empty hole in their minds where their presences should be. It was too much to think of right now, the loss of their precious birds still gaping wounds in their hearts. To have lost their bonded masters too… no, it was impossible to even think about right now. Three guards approached the cell, the torches in their hands painfully bright in the eyes of the Crows after days in near complete darkness. Then, they felt it; that force presence, reigned in and controlled now, but still so strong it was making it difficult to draw a breath. The tall figure of clan
Hux’s Crow walked in, hood covering his head, but face uncovered by a mask. He looked so young, yet his eyes so old – hardened by a lifetime of pain and tribulations, no doubt. Coming to a stop just by the cell door, he gave the guards a quiet order to open it. His voice was surprisingly pleasant, low, soft, somewhat distant. As soon as the door was opened, he told the guard to light the torches on the walls between the cells and then leave. As soon as they were gone, the Crow stepped into the cell. Taking his time studying them, he eventually approached one of the males, a man in his late thirties, with pale blonde hair and a wiry build.

“What’s your name?” he asked. The man tried to answer, but his mouth was so dry, he couldn’t properly form a word. The young Crow seemed genuinely concerned, and promptly retrieved a mug full of cool water from a stand over by the doors. After helping them all drink, he repeated his question.

“Vídar, master Knight,” the man, Vídar, whispered.

“Whose Crow were you, Vídar?” the Knight asked as he gently tilted his face up to study the bruise that marred the left side of his features.

“I served clan Valko. For ten years.”

“And look where you ended up.” He looked at the other two, pity clear on his face. “Your masters are dead,” he said, bluntly. “Your clans are scattered all over the north, fleeing for their lives. I’m so sorry, but no one will be coming to save you.”

“What will you do to us?” the female Crow asked, voice wavering as she fought against tears. “Why are you doing this?”

“The Raven demands punishment for your... *incompetence*,” he said, tucking a few stray strands of hair behind her ear – the softness of his touch only adding to his frightening appearance. “You could not even feel my presence in this castle. This is my land; I do not mask my presence here. My birds are connected to my mind at all times, yet you failed to sense me. I looked into your minds for days, and you didn’t even notice it until I unleashed the Force right in front of you.” He shook his head, much like a disappointed teacher. “Such a disgrace to our order,” he said. “Such a pity that weak minds like yours could worm their way into the sacred Flock.” Sighing, he exited the cell, locking it back up before giving them a final look. “Ten days from now I will sacrifice you to the Goddess of Death, down there on the field you and your filthy vermin disguised as clans had the audacity to step onto. Your hearts will burn on the pyre, your bodies will be hung on crosses and given as food to the animals of the forests, and your blood will be poured onto the altar as atonement for your sins against the Gods. Every last member of your clans that my master’s hunters can get their hands on will join you. This is the will of the Gods, and I live to obey.”

With that, he left.

~*~*~

As the summer solstice drew closer, Hux was feeling more nervous by the day. Ren had patiently explained every detail of the ceremony to him at least a dozen times now, but if the repeated awkward silences and shy lip-biting was anything to go by, Ren was nervous too. Hux was not entirely sure if that was comforting or frightening, but neither of them had a choice in the matter, and so all they could do was to go through with it and hope that nothing... *embarrassing* happened. Ren was a terribly attractive young man, there was no denying that, and Hux had been without a bed-mate for a very long time now. He didn’t trust certain parts of him not to misbehave at the wrong time. But then again, given how covered up his Crow usually was, the ceremony must be a nightmare of a situation for him too. It didn’t much help his nerves that Ren himself seemed to
spend his time either down in the dungeons, interrogating and preparing the prisoners for sacrifice, or in the audience chamber planning the ceremony out with guidance from his leader. No one had seen him for almost two days now – Hux even had to eat breakfast on his own, which was awful and infuriatingly boring – whereas his warchief had to be nervous in public. Phasma’s obvious amusement at his discomfort was incredibly unhelpful.

At the moment, Hux was enjoying the silence and privacy of the baths. Immersed up to his chin in the soothing water of the natural hot spring, he let the heat draw the tension out of his neck and shoulders. He was hungry, and therefore not in his best mood, but determined to keep himself in line. This fast was part of his preparations for the ceremony, as was the bathing. Ren had given him several small bottles of scented oils and other things for his skin and hair, along with a sponge that looked more like some sort of torture device than a tool for cleaning one’s body. Its purpose was to make sure Hux was cleaner than he had ever been in his life, not to offer any sense of luxury or pleasure. The only comfort, really, was the knowledge that Ren had to undergo the exact same ordeal – and probably more things as well. After all, he had a sacrificial ritual to lead in addition to their bonding, and Hux did not envy him in the slightest.

After eyeing the sponge suspiciously for a few moments, he took a deep breath and reached for it. No point in waiting, and Ren would probably need the baths soon, anyway – and Hux apparently wasn’t allowed to see him unclothed before they were bonded. As per his Crow’s instructions he poured some thick liquid from one of the vials onto the sponge and worked it in, wincing at the sharp smell of lye and something unidentifiable, before rubbing it experimentally over the skin of his left shoulder – unable to keep himself from growling a string of profanities at the sharp burn of it. This was not going to be pleasant at all.

~*~*~

The bonding of a new Crow and warchief was an important event in the North, and over the past few days clanspeople from all over the Hux’ territory had made their way to Skye Castle to attend the ceremony and pay their respect to their new spiritual leader. Every available space in the castle was full, and a number of large tents had been put up across the bridge in order to make sure everyone had somewhere to sleep. As dawn approached on the day of midsummer’s eve – the sacred summer solstice – the field was rapidly filling up with people. An older female Crow named Aya, from one of their vassal clans, had gained Ren’s approval, and had been tasked with officiating the bonding ceremony.

Hux had asked why that was suddenly necessary, and Ren had informed him that it was actually the usual procedure – but with most of the North engaged in clans wars, and an unusually large amount of hatchlings coming to the House in search of training, tracking down a worthy Crow who was not elsewhere engaged had been very difficult. It was the main reason for his lengthy audiences with the Raven during the weeks since his arrival; they’d been scanning the lands for suitable candidates. This woman, while not very strong in the Force, had officiated several other bondings in her days, and was therefore their best option. Ren could have asked Phasma or one of Hux’ other blood relatives, of course, but it would have been much more troublesome, and would likely have ruined the fragile mood so vital to their ceremony.

When the tiniest sliver of gold was visible on the horizon, the sound of drums began inside the castle wall – steady, rhythmic, like heartbeats. Then the procession made their way down towards the obelisk: eight drummers walked in front, followed by two women carrying the Hux’ clan banner, then the female Crow, and after her came Hux and Ren, Phasma and the high guard bringing up the rear. Both warchief and Crow were clad in a simple loincloth made from unbleached linen, and long cloaks of the same material – their feet were bare, hair loose, and they wore no jewellery or decorations of any sort.

Everyone took their respective places, with Aya by the altar and Ren and Hux facing each other in front of her. Hux’ aunt, Enna, stepped up and removed the cloak from Hux’ shoulders, Phasma
doing the same for Ren – leaving both men standing in only the loincloth in front of their clan. Hux was well muscled in a sinewy way, freckles and old battle scars dotting his frame, and the Hux’ clan crest tattooed just below his throat pit – his body was hardly a secret to the clan; modesty was not something they ever gave much for in the North. Everyone had seen each other naked at some point, and Hux knew he had a body to be proud of. But no one had been prepared for what hid under master Ren’s black robes. To say he was well muscled would be an understatement; the pale bordering on translucent skin stretched over hard lines of well chiselled muscles, birthmarks and moles like constellations here and there, and a multitude of scars told of a lifetime of violence. Then there were the tattoos. Hux had never seen so much ink on one body before, and if the excited murmur spreading through the crowd was any indication, neither had the rest of his clan. Symmetrical patterns of runes and symbols covered most of his torso, two large, thorn-like swirls covered his pectorals and stretched outwards toward his shoulders. The pattern continued down his arms, interrupted here and there by more symbols and runes. Two snakes curled around his beautiful long legs, beginning at his ankles and making their way up around his shins and thighs, their heads – reared and angry – meeting in the centre between his hips, just above the upper hem of the loincloth. They were surprisingly expressive despite being so stylized. As he turned slightly, catching Eira on his hand, Hux could see a raven in the same style as the snakes spreading its wings across his shoulders, reaching down a bit on his back. More of those strange patterns and runes surrounded it – accentuating the lines of muscles and tendons in a most flattering way. Even his feet were tattooed, as was his throat. He was simply… magnificent.

They joined hands as the drums began a new rhythm; tentative, slow, building up to something in much the same way as the air before a thunderstorm. Aya picked up a length of braided silk rope, red, white, and black – to symbolize joy, hardships, and devotion – and wrapped it around their hands and forearms as she chanted in the sacred language of the Crows to bring the Gods’ attention to the event. When they were tied together, she took a step back and nodded towards Ren.

“Cease your restless flight, Crow,” she said, speaking the ancient phrases with experienced ease. “Time has come for you to nest in the safety under your warchief’s wings. Before your Gods and this land, I command you: take your vow, and search no more.”

Ren met Hux eyes, and took a deep breath to steady himself, before straightening up to his full height, and speaking the words that forever took his freedom and life – entrusting them to his warchief, and hoping they’d be treasured.

“I, Kylo Ren, son of no one,” he said, voice loud and clear. “Master of the Knights of Ren, and Crow of the House of Night, stand before you – unmasked, unhidden – to pledge before the rising sun my service to you, Braith Hux of the North. I will hold no secrets you cannot share, my heart will be as bare to you as my skin is now. My sword is yours to wield, my hands are yours to guide. Wherever my service takes me, I will go willingly – I make this choice for myself. I trust you not to clip my wings but allow me to fly. My life, and the life of all the creatures bound to me, is yours to give or take. If I fail you, may the Gods strike me dead.”

The phrases which had sounded silly in Hux’ ears when he read them on paper suddenly seemed to carry the weight of a mountain when spoken in Ren’s voice – thick with emotion, fully aware of the gravity of what he was saying. Hux could walk away then and there if he wished, having not yet said his part – but the second Ren began speaking, his life had ceased to be his own. He would be bound forever to Hux, regardless of what the warchief did. It took an astounding amount of courage to pledge one’s life away like that, and Hux had to swallow hard to overcome the sudden swell of emotions surging through him. Aya nodded to him, and Hux squeezed his Crow’s hands a little tighter in reassurance, before speaking his part.

“I, Braith Hux, son of Brendol, warchief of the clan Hux, stand before you – crownless, unhidden
to pledge before the rising sun my commitment to you, Kylo Ren of the House of Night. I will hold no secrets you cannot share, my heart will be as bare to you as my skin is now. Before the Gods and my clan I pledge to keep you safe from whatever may threaten you, to never steer your sword or hands in the wrong direction, to always bestow upon you the honour and appreciation that your position demands. I fully accept your service, and I swear that here your wings will never be clipped or bound. If I lie, may the Gods strike me dead.”

The shy smile on Ren’s lips made standing outside in nothing but a slip of fabric in front of half his clan all worth it. He realized that Ren must have been steeling himself, prepared to face a life bound to a master who didn’t want him. Briefly he wondered to himself how often that actually happened. Were there Crows out there right now, bound to a life of loneliness and solitude because they were sent to masters that did not care for them. It made his mind recoil in horror.

Aya motioned for the drummers to pick up the pace again, then picked up a bowl containing a mix of clay from the land and red pigment, making it resemble half coagulated blood. She drew a large rune on their backs first, and then their chests, as she said:

“Your union has been witnessed by the land. As long as you stand by each other, your steps shall never falter, no roots shall ever cause you to stumble, and the road shall always deliver you safely back home.”

Then she picked up another vessel, containing water from the creek running past the sacred grove. She gently scooped it up and poured it carefully over their heads.

“Your union has been witnessed by the waters. As long as you stand by each other, your cups shall never empty, no draught shall ever cause you to starve, and the waters shall always carry you safely ashore.”

Next, a shallow bowl full of ashes from the branches of the trees surrounding the field mixed with various medicinal herbs. She drew a line from their eyes to their chin on both sides of their faces, then a rune just above the hem of their loincloths.

“Your union has been witnessed by the flames. As long as you stand by each other, your nights will never be cold, no fire shall ever lick the walls of your home, and the flames shall always guide your way back home.”

Lastly, she reached for a plate upon which a cone of incense was giving off a strange, musky-smelling sort of smoke. With the help of a feather, she blew the smoke over them both – from feet to heads.

“Your union has been witnessed by the winds. As long as you stand by each other, your arrows will never miss their marks, no storm shall ever bring you to your knees, and the winds shall always carry your flocks with care.”

She untied their hands, then tied the rope loosely around their waists instead, allowing them room to move only a few feet away from each other should they wish to. As she was picking up the last two objects from the altar behind her – a knife and a small silver goblet – the drums reached their crescendo, the silence itself nearly deafening as it struck when she reached out and cut Ren across his forearm, collecting the blood in the goblet, before doing the same thing with Hux. Pouring some water in it and using her knife to mix it together, she whispered the last sacred words in the Crow tongue before handing the goblet to Ren. He held it reverently between his hands as he stepped closer to Hux, holding it to his lips.

“Blood of my blood,” he said. “We are one.”
Hux drank his half, finding the copper tang oddly appealing, before taking the goblet and repeating back both words and action.

“Blood of my blood. We are one.”

Ren drank, and as soon as Hux removed the goblet from his lips, Aya raised her arms in a gesture of triumph.

“Before the Gods,” she called. “Before the lands, the bird, the clan, I declare Kylo Ren the chosen and bonded Crow of Sky Castle!”

The ground shook with the force of the cheering that erupted following her statement; feet stomping the ground, hands banging against ceremonial shields, whistles and howls tearing up the morning air. The birds joined in, and for a while it was absolutely impossible to hear anything else. Hux took a deep breath as he reached for Ren’s hand and began gently leading him away from the field, towards the sacred grove. This was the easy part – the lack of clothing and blood drinking being the two main things setting it apart from a traditional wedding ceremony. Technically, what followed next was also part of a traditional wedding ceremony – but this time there was one very distinct difference: Ren was not performing the next step as himself, and neither was Hux. His Crow represented the land, Hux himself the clan – this was all about dominance and submission. Only like this would Ren’s pledge of allegiance be solidified, his trust in Hux proven – his life truly surrendered to his master’s hands.

A baldachin had been put up in front of the altar, soft carpets and furs were placed on the ground underneath it along with large cushions and pillows, to ensure their comfort during the next few hours. They were not allowed to speak to each other until after this, to maintain their symbolic roles and keep from bringing the personal into the realm of ritual. The silence was almost palpable, but not at all uncomfortable. Sound didn’t travel past the trees, and the thick undergrowth ensured that they were out of sight within a few steps of the treeline. It was only them and the grove now, and no one in the clan was stupid enough to venture even close to it until they both emerged again. Even the birds had elected to give them their privacy, and now guarded the grove from any curious people. This was it.

Hux gently led his new Crow onto the furs, helping him lay down on his back and making sure he was resting comfortably against the pillows before reaching down and removing Ren’s loincloth followed by his own. By the Gods, he was so beautiful Hux’ heart ached! All of that pale skin in sharp contrast to the blackness of his tattoos and the hard lines of his muscles – Hux wished they’d had more time so he could worship this beautiful creature properly, and without rules. For now, though, he settled for gently caressing and kissing his way up Ren’s body, starting with those impressive thighs and moving up across his stomach and chest. Taking extra care with lips and teeth on that long, mesmerizing neck – biting a mark just above the junction between neck and his left shoulder, the warchief relished the shivers he felt under his still caressing hands. A soft moan escaped the Crow’s lips, and nothing in this world could have stopped the ginger from covering those lips with his own, coaxing the younger man into a deep, slow kiss. Ren’s hands settled in his hair, massaging his scalp and gently pulling at it until he’d drawn out a moan from his master as well. Hux was hard now, much more so and much sooner than he’d expected from such a situation, and he had to reign himself in so that he wouldn’t go against the ritual.

Searching those large, dark amber eyes for permission Hux’ hands moved downward, exploring, stroking, admiring. A shy nod, a bite of that plump lower lip, and they kissed again, Hux spreading Ren’s legs wider to make better room for himself, and nearly spilled at the discovery that his Crow had saved him the trouble of preparation. He was already ready and waiting for his warchief to lay claim to him. It made sense, of course, given the fact that he was acting as symbol of the ripe and fruitful lands inhabited by Hux’ clan, but it was still maddeningly arousing. Aligning himself, he captured Ren’s lips again as he slowly pushed inside the softest, most unbearably tight heat he’d
ever known – unable to stop himself from groaning loudly against Ren’s neck as he bottomed out. Their pace was slow, even, and although Hux could feel the tension in Ren’s muscles – the tremor caused by remaining still and pliant despite wanting to act and react – the Crow followed with every last little gesture of command he was given. From his lips fell cascades of whimpers, gasps, and soft moans, and his legs were curled around Hux’s hips like a vice – keeping him deep inside. Hux was kind to him, but demanding; the Gods would have no room to doubt that this warchief was in full control and command of his land and that which belonged to it. He would allow no doubt that this Crow had submitted to him and him alone. Their climax built slowly, but came crashing down over them both like an avalanche – their breath being stolen away, muscles seizing, throats constricting, their minds somehow connecting, melting together, as their release was practically torn out of them; the sensation so overwhelming that it ripped all coherent thoughts from them. The Gods must have felt the force of it even in their sacred skies.

Hux collapsed on top of Ren, and they simply lay like that for the better part of an hour, too tired and weak to do much else but allow their hearts time to find their proper rhythm again. Once they were able to move, Hux most reluctantly pulled out, and helped clean them both up, before they turned the attention to the small table of food and drinks that had been brought to the grove. After more than a full day without food and drink they were both ravenously hungry, and they went at the food with great enthusiasm. Once they’d had their fill, they curled up among the pillows again, Ren with his head on Hux’ chest, and his warchief putting his arms securely around him after throwing a blanket over them both. They had a few hours to go yet before the great sacrifice began, and Gods know they both needed some rest before cleaning up and facing their clan again. And Hux couldn’t shake the feeling that Ren needed this. Needed to be cared for, to know that Hux cared enough to hold him while he slept even though he had no obligation to do so since they hadn’t lain together as themselves but rather symbols of their respective station. Ren wasn’t the land, he was a person; a powerful but oh so young and tormented man, whose experience of kindness and care seemed non-existent. Carding his fingers through that glorious mane, Hux hummed a lullaby until they were both asleep.

~*~*~

At noon the drums began again, as Ren – shirtless, dressed in a long, flowing piece of black fabric, which was hung low on his hips and held together with a broad silver belt – began the demanding task of sacrificing a total of twenty-eight people to the Gods. He was joined by the visiting Crows in the ritual chanting, the clan once more aiding the drummers by stomping on the ground and banging their fists against shields. With every heart carved out, loud cheers erupted and mugs of strong alcoholic beverages were passed around. As the hours progressed, their Crow seemed to slip further and further into a deep trance like state, caused by the suggestive rhythm of the drums, the smell of blood, and the sacred herbs liberally poured onto the pyres and put into the mugs of water he was occasionally handled, in order to allow him to transcend his limited human form and become a living threshold between Gods and mortals. He was soaked in blood, from his nails and up to his elbows his skin was dark red, it ran in thick rivulets down his chest and staining his silver belt before getting lost in the folds of the black fabric. His face was in much the same state, and the tattoos on his feet were barely visible under their crimson coating. His hair was plastered to his skin in places, and his pupils were blown so wide from herbs and drums his eyes were nearly all black – the look in them nothing like Ren’s own; an untamed, feral, thirsty gaze met each new sacrifice.

The last three to be led naked down to the field to meet their deaths were the enemy Crows. The moon was already sinking down, time running steadily towards the new dawn, as Ren took their hearts before his assisting Crows gathered their blood in a large barrel, and their corpses mounted on large wooden crosses placed on the other side of the obelisk. The drums were near frantic in their rhythm now, the clan and the Crows alike nearing the point of complete, maddened ecstasy,
as Ren climbed on top of the altar, spreading his arms out – knives in his hands – tilting his head towards the sky as he performed the last of the chants, his voice echoing across the land; ragged and hoarse from so many hours of non stop singing. The other Crows, dressed in similar garments, stepped up onto the altar as well, and with collected effort from the Force, they poured the collected blood over his waiting form. They called for the Gods’s attention, for them to witness the rightful punishment against those who had wrongfully named themselves their children. They called for the Gods to see their strong, true Child bathed in the blood of the unworthy – the blood of those he himself had exposed and executed. The roar of the crowd, the sound of the drums, the manic chanting of the Crows all came to a stop at the same, golden moment – the rapture spreading through the people like shockwaves, a unison scream, a climax, and then: silence. A sliver of light could be seen against the horizon – the solstice had passed. Now, they could only pray and hope that the Gods were pleased with their sacrifice and that their harvests would be bountiful this year, too. The clan in its entirety knelt in reverence as their blood-soaked holy ones stepped off the altar, and slowly left the field. Their steps were heavy, shoulders hung low, exhaustion clear on their still drug affected faces as they followed Ren up the road. None of them would take part in the feast the coming evening – they had earned their rest. The clan would make sure they were treated to only the best they had to offer for next few days. Let it never be said that clan Hux was negligent in the care of its sacred Crows.

Chapter End Notes

*looks around nervously* Hi...
First of all! I will be alternating the updates for this fic and the new one, Bloodsoaked Lullabies, because I've learned the hard way that if I write two different chapters for two different stories at once, I go cray cray. So. Yeah. Don't worry if the updates take a while, it's just me trying to hang onto what little sanity I possess^^

Writing the rituals was hard, you guys. Seriously. I'm a complete nerd when it comes to history and religion, and I'm a research fanatic, so I was driving myself mad with the details. Ugh. But all things considered, I think it came out alright. I had not really planned on the smut bit, to be honest, but it sort of happened anyway. It's not the most exciting or passionate scene I've ever written, but hey - this is ritual sex. It's not really supposed to be all that enjoyable to the participants. It's all about symbolism and meaning, and they both know that. Regardless of their interest in each other, they have to maintain some sort of... professionalism for lack of a better word. I'm a religious studies gradstudent, can you tell?
Anyway, we got some more Ren/Hux interaction, some interaction between Ren and his birds, and Hux being suspicious of a loofa. It could've been worse, I think.

As always, I'm available on Tumblr -> http://ficlet-machine.tumblr.com
“This whole journey is stupid, Ren,” Askr grumbled. “And his horse is daft. I don’t want to be tied next to him another night. Did you know he told the mares they looked fat? You don’t ever tell a mare they look fat, Ren. We owe them our lives. Bad luck to insult someone who could’ve been your mother.”

Ren failed to hold back a laugh, and patted his neck. Hux looked over at him, an eyebrow raised in question.

“Askr doesn’t like your horse,” he informed his warchief. “He’s rude to the mares, and Askr would rather not be guilty by association.”

Hux looked confused for a moment, before throwing his head back and laughing.

“Well, no one can accuse him of having a pleasant personality, that’s for sure,” he chuckled, and stroked the white mane of his own horse, Béla.

“Did you just tell on me, Ren? You did, didn’t you?” Askr sounded absolutely betrayed.

“Oh, calm down, Askr,” Ren soothed. “He’s not going to be mad at you.”

“If he is, I’ll bite your giant nose right off your face.”

“You’re welcome to try.” Ren leaned forward and scratched a spot on Askr’s shoulder he knew the horse liked. “But if you play nicely, I’ll let you have two extra apples with your food tonight.”

“Green ones?”

“Green ones.”

“I’ll try.”

“That’s all I’ll ever ask for.”

Askr tossed his head, then put on his most majestic posture as he danced back up next to Hux and Béla, giving the white horse a haughty look. Clan Hux was on the move; through collective efforts from the various chieftains Hux ruled over, the lands formerly belonging to the clans Tannis, Valko, and Jonah had been conquered, and now Hux was making his way to their respective castles to officially claim them as his. Escorting them were a hundred of his own men, and a few representatives from their vassal clans – all led by Phasma and her high guard. They could do this without much worry; the main part of his clan were still at Skye Castle, keeping it safe and guarded under the watchful eye of another one of Hux’ aunts, Mai – and besides, the three clans they’d just conquered had their territories directly bordering on clan Hux’. If anyone wanted to try something, they’d still be spotted long before they’d set foot on this land. Half of Ren’s giant flock of birds, Gods alone knew how many a hundred animals, had come with them, and seemed to rather enjoy the outing. They flew in billowing clouds this way and that, monitoring the area, and reporting back to Ren. The birds who were taking a break in their flying perched themselves on just about anything they found convenient; the warriors, the standards, the horses, the hounds, and the luggage – but no one really seemed to mind it, if the broad grins and more or less discreet
handing out of tasty little nibbles was anything to go by. Eira had stayed behind to keep watch on
the flock back at the castle, and Hux could tell that Ren missed her. His hand kept going to his
shoulder where she was usually perched, but instead of finding a soft, feathered chin to stroke,
there was only air – and every time his face would fall just a little, just for a moment, before he
schooled it back into something more neutral. The warchief could have sworn he could actually
feel Ren’s discomfort in his own heart.

It wasn’t the only thing he’d noticed over the past two weeks, either. Given, for the first few days
after the great sacrifice and bonding, the clan in its entirety had been too tired and too hung-over to
tell a cow from a wolf, and Ren had slept for three days straight – worrying Hux enough for him to
actually stagger up the stairs to see if he was still alive. But once his mind had cleared some, and
Ren had re-joined the ranks of the living, he’d started to… feel things. Something had truly
happened sometime during their bonding, and he could see it now, in small, subtle ways. The first
thing he’d noticed was how he suddenly seemed to just… know where Ren was, even when he
couldn’t see the Crow. This revelation had come after Mitaka had come to the great hall in search
of Ren, regarding some administrative matter or other, and Hux had, without even thinking about
it, informed him that the Crow was down in the stables, tending to his horse. Then he’d realized
that Ren hadn’t informed him of where he was going, merely stating that he had matters to attend
to. This had happened nearly daily since then; if he concentrated on his Crow, he could somehow
know where he was.

The second thing he’d noticed was how the Crow’s presence changed the entire atmosphere around
him when he was near. The skies could be as murky and gloomy as all hell, but as soon as Ren
stepped into the room, he brought light with him – light, and a feeling like it was easier to breathe.
It was so strange, the whole thing, and Hux wished he’d brought Tarkin’s letter with him; he
distinctly remembered the old man having written something about this. Maybe he should have
read the parts following the segment about the bonding more carefully.

But he was pleased to notice that Ren seemed much more relaxed and comfortable in his presence
now. The young Crow was still rather awkward around others, but whenever they were in the same
room, he seemed to almost instinctually gravitate towards Hux – and he had even stopped flinching
when the warchief touched him. He still buckled under a heap of insecurities, but seemed more at
ease with the thought of sharing them with Hux now. A delightfully sassy side of him had also
begun to surface, and though Hux would pretend to be exasperated with his Crow’s antics, he
actually enjoyed it immensely – something he tried to keep Phasma from noticing, because her
suggestive grins and wiggling eyebrows whenever Ren and him were closer than six feet to each
other was beginning to drive him mad. While he would jump at the chance to have Ren in his bed
again, he knew a lot better than Phasma just how frail the Crow really was, and he’d rather not
traumatize the young man further. For now, it was more than enough to know that Ren felt safe
enough in his presence to relax and show more sides of himself – other things could wait for
another day.

They made camp that night on a small field where the border between the two territories had
previously run. Hux’ men and women were used to being in the field, and the tents, along with the
fires, and the temporary paddocks for their horses were set up in no time. Once the servants
informed him that his tent was ready and waiting, Hux wasted no time getting inside so he could
remove his armour and padding. It was too bloody hot for this, he thought to himself, as he
changed into a lighter tunic and pulled his hair back into a tail at his neck. Once he was starting to
cool down some, he set about making his bed – always having preferred to do it himself, since the
servants always seemed to put too many bloody blankets in there. The rustle of heavy fabric
informed him that Ren had just entered the ante-room of the tent, and a second later, the Crow put
his small saddle bags down on the bed next to his. He didn’t seem too bothered by the heat at all,
despite his dark clothing, but he did remove his gloves with apparent relief – flexing his long
fingers, before pulling his cowl off and opening the top button of his outer robe.

“I don’t know how you survive this heat, Ren,” Hux said. Ren looked over at him and smiled.

“Many years of training, my lord,” he said. “But I have to admit that I do prefer somewhat cooler temperatures.”

“Do you still have to keep all those layers on, even in heat like this?” Hux had to admit he was curious. Tarkin had always worn his midnight, but he was built like kriiffing skeleton, so Hux had always figured he needed the extra warmth of the wool.

“Yes,” Ren said, lying down to stretch his back. “Apart from when I’m alone, I’m only allowed to be seen without my robes by my bonded warchief, or during sacrifices. My body isn’t supposed to be viewed by just anyone – that would put me at the same level as them, as an ordinary man. I’m a Crow, I work in the world, I take part in its happenings, but I’m not a part of it. I’m not a man in the sense that you are, my lord. I am your Crow, your weapon. I am a thousand things before I am allowed to call myself man. Surely my dear predecessor told you this?”

Hux shook his head, trying to wrap his head around the complexities of the Crows and their lives.

“No,” he said. “He never really spoke much about being a Crow at all.” He hesitated, the question burning in his mind could so easily be misinterpreted, and he was afraid he’d accidentally insult Ren. “But…” He took a deep breath. “If you Crows are not to be a part of this world then how come… Tarkin and my grandfather, from what I’ve come to understand, were lovers. Actual committed life partners to each other. Is that even allowed, then? Are you allowed to give your heart like that to someone?”

The second he’d asked the question, the air felt heavy, tense – laden with something they’d so far never dared mention to each other. Ren had that shy look on his face again, but there was insecurity too, apprehensiveness, as if he was afraid of answering, afraid of having this conversation.

“Love is a force of nature, my lord,” he said, eventually. “Not of the Gods. It is not theirs to forbid or restrict. The Doves have tried to do so for millennia, and all they have managed is to make people fear their own emotions. A person who is afraid of parts of themself, natural aspects of their soul, is only ever going to be half a person. You can’t live like that. You just can’t.” He fixed Hux with those beautiful, sad eyes. “Maintaining balance of everything that you are, accepting it without letting it consume you, is the greatest challenge one can ever face, but also the only possible way. You can’t pick light or dark, my lord. This world is made up of both, and so you need both. So, in answer to your question: yes, I am allowed to fall in love. But only… only with you.”

Hux swallowed several times, his mouth suddenly gone very dry, and his heart was beating like mad in his chest as he ungracefully sank down on his own bed – trying to take in the implications of what Ren had just said. He knew he had to ask. This frail, trembling moment might be the only chance he’d get. He had to ask.

“If… If I asked your permission to court you, w-would you let me?” Hux had never felt this awkward before. He hadn’t stuttered while expressing romantic interest to someone since before he grew a beard, but for some reason Ren always made him feel things he wasn’t used to feeling.

Ren’s eyes had widened at the question, the fear in them, the sadness, only becoming clearer as a blush crept over his cheeks. He turned away, not wanting to meet Hux’ gaze.
“Please don’t jest,” he pleaded in a mere whisper. “Please, my lord. I’m your weapon, not your toy.”

“I wasn’t jesting.”

“What...?”

“I wasn’t jesting, Ren.” He sighed. “You can look at my mind if you need to. I would never take advantage of you in any way. I swear it on the lives of my children.”

Ren turned to look at him again, and then he felt a gentle, nudging sensation in his mind. It didn’t feel too bad, he decided, as he did his best to relax and let his Crow find the reassurance he needed. Given the exceptionally bright blush spreading across his features, Ren found it, and then some. Well, Hux would rather the Crow knew exactly how he made his warchief feel than knowing he felt scared and unsure of his intentions. Eventually, Ren’s presence in his mind withdrew – although apparently not completely – and the Crow was silent for a long while.

“I- I think I would like that, my lord,” he said, voice small. “But I’ve never… no one’s ever expressed such interest in me before. I don’t really know… what is expected of me.”

“Nothing you are not prepared to give,” Hux assured him. “I will never ask you for anything you don’t feel comfortable giving.” He walked over and knelt beside Ren’s bed, carefully taking his hands in his own. “If all you can bear is to let me hold your hands, then that is what I’ll do. My… attraction to you does not affect my awareness of your station – it merely gives me twice the reason to be gentle with you.”

Ren looked at their hands, Hux’ pale, calloused and freckled, holding his own large, pale, long-fingered ones as if they were some sort of treasure, some fragile thing.

“M-may I call you ‘Hux’?” he asked. “When we’re alone, I mean.”

The warchief’s smile was like a sunrise.

“Nothing would make me happier,” he said. “But please, when we’re alone, I’d like you to call me by my first name. And, if you would let me, I would like to do the same with you.”

Ren bit his lip, hesitating a little, then nodded – that little smile of his slowly spreading across his features.

“I’d like that.” He watched their entwined hands for a moment. “But I think I still need this to go slow. I… this is nothing I was ever prepared for. I need you to show me the way, my lo- Braith.”

“We have all the time in the world, Kylo. All the time you need.”

~*~*~

Leia of house Organa, queen of Alderaan and D’Qar, sat on her throne, deep in thoughts – only listening with half an ear to the conversations of the people in her throne room. In her fifties now, she was an impressive figure, emanating an aura of control and command, paired with a piercing gaze and sharp mind – priding herself on being at an age now when she no longer had to bother with pleasantries or romance. She was born to rule, and after Alderaan had fallen to another, she simply gathered her forces and moved on to conquer and rule D’Qar instead. With her brother and his Doves by her side, she’d been highly successful, and she took pride in being a devoted follower of the God of Mornings.

It was summer now, and she was growing restless. It had been more than a decade since she’d last
gone to war, taking time instead to raise her adoptive daughter, and while it had been a decade of growth and prosperity for her country, Leia still missed the war. A part of her knew full well that she never was the kind who did well with peace; she needed a conflict to focus on, an enemy to conquer. Rey was almost all grown up now, ready to take on more responsibilities, and the queen found less and less reasons for not making another attempt at conquering the world.

The slight nudge of a presence in her mind informed her that her brother had returned to the palace, and, quite frankly, she’d had enough of shallow, arse kissing idiots for the day. Getting up from her seat, she hardly gave her guards the time to follow as she strode across the massive room – smirking inwardly at the hurried bows and curteys as her underlings scrambled to get out of her way whilst simultaneously paying her due respect.

Luke was in the palace garden, of course, feeding his birds seeds and breadcrumbs as he waited for her to join him. Leia knew she would never see him bow; to Luke Leia was always first and foremost his sister, and only after that his queen. He patted the empty seat next to him on the bench, and she sank down – taking a moment to enjoy the peaceful quiet before nodding for him to speak.

“There’s something stirring up in the North,” he said, blue eyes tired, concerned.

“There’s always something stirring up in the North,” Leia said dismissively. “Those savages probably don’t even have a word for ‘peace’ in their crude language.”

“It’s more than that, this time.” Luke’s voice was grim, very unusual for him, and Leia motioned for him to get on with it. “The Knights of Ren have risen again. More than half the North is engaged in clan wars, more bloody than anything I’ve ever seen. There’s this one warchief, Hux, who seems to conquer every last bit of land he steps onto. Only recently, he slaughtered three clans in one day, and now he’s taking over their territories as well. There are rumours… that his Crow is one of the Knights.”

“This is serious,” Leia agreed. “I think we all hoped the Knights would be only a bad memory after Emperor Palpatine and his thrice cursed Crow died. It’s disconcerting to hear that they’re back. But the Crows are their masters’ puppets, and as long as they keep fighting each other, I seriously doubt we’ll have much to worry about. Let them kill each other; the less people we have to fight when we take over, the better.”

Luke took her hand, fixing her gaze to his.

“There’s more,” he said, pain clear in his voice. “I don’t know if you want to hear this, sister dearest. It kills me to be the bringer of this kinds of news, especially now that you are so happy.”

Leia had an awful, sinking feeling. Please don’t let it be Han, she prayed to her god. Please don’t take him from me. Anything but that!

“No.”

“Leia-”

“No!”

“Leia, he’s still your son.”
Luke pulled her into her arms, and she realized she was crying only when he used the sleeve of his robe to gently dab her face.

“No! That accursed bastard is dead, Luke! He has to be! It’s not Ben! It cannot be Ben! Do you hear me, Luke? It cannot be Ben!”

~*~*~

Clan Valko’s ancestral home was an impressive sight, Hux had to admit to himself as they rode through the village spreading out around it, with its high walls and sleek spires stretching for the sky. The villagers greeted them with loud cheers, flowers, and home made banners bearing the Hux clan’s insignia. It was, on the whole, a rather loud affair, and only years of experience handling Béla kept the large stallion from doing more than dance nervously under him. Phasma kept the guards close around him without making him look too unapproachable, making sure they all made a good impression on their new vassals. Just behind him, Askr’s signature grumbles could be heard, along with the gentle, murmured soothing of Ren’s voice. The giant steed obviously did not care for the present situation, and as the Crow allowed him to come up next to Hux and Béla, Hux could actually see the displeasure on his face. He’d never met a horse with such an expressive face before in his life, but he could see why Ren was so fond of him; Askr had more personality than many of his warriors.

“That’s a fine looking castle, Hux,” Ren smiled. “You sure you don’t want to abandon Sky Castle and come live here on the plain?”

“Over my dead body, Ren,” Hux laughed. “I’m giving Enna run of this place – she’s gotten a bit restless of late. Would probably be good for her to have people of her own to order around. Gods know I’m getting tired of her trying that with me.”

“She is a very domineering woman. I think most of your men are frightened of her.”

“You’re not.”

“Well, haven’t we made clear that I am not ‘most men’?”

“We sure have.”

Both men chuckled, and continued the rest of the way to the castle in comfortable silence. The castle had been well taken care of, and it seemed the villagers had already stripped it of any symbols belonging to clan Valko. Their former lord couldn’t have been a very kind one, if they were this eager to welcome a new ruler to their lands. Hux was used to receiving various different kinds of greetings – from pitchforks and rotten garbage, to cheers and singing – but it always both irked and pleased him when he was so immediately welcomed. It irked him because he loathed the warchiefs who treated their people as if they were there for their convenience; there to work themselves into an early grave while their warchief sat on his arse, getting fatter every winter. People like that had no right to bear that title. To be a warchief meant to be responsible and caring for your entire people, from your high officers down to the latrine cleaners. His father had been like that, too, and Hux had made sure he knew the errors of his ways before the Goddess took him to the ancestors. But it did please him to know his reputation as a fair ruler had travelled, and that people considered it a good thing to belong to him and his clan. It made it that much easier to get everything to run smoothly once his vassal chieftain had been installed.

Once the large banners were properly mounted on the castle walls, the party started. It was almost as if the people had been waiting for a signal, the way they all scrambled to gather their contributions to the feast. Hux had wasted no time announcing Enna’s new title, and to his aunt’s
credit, she handled her surprise promotion with outstanding grace – only yelling at him later, when no one could hear them. But it seemed to have been a wise move to give them a female leader, if the conversations he overheard were anything to go by. It was the general consensus that ruling was a woman’s job, and that old warchief Valko had proven their point with his tyrannical ways. Hux remembered from his schooling that the Valko clan had been ruled by women for centuries, Esra Valko being the first male warchief in generations, simply because he had been born an only child. Yes, Enna would do well here, he had no doubt about that. Just because they didn’t get along much it didn’t mean Hux thought badly of her leadership skills. She’d earned her officer’s rank fair and square, and none of her warriors had ever had reason to complain. She and Hux simply had poor chemistry between them, but neither one would ever let that affect the wellbeing of their clan. Enna’s loyalty was carved in stone.

Sometime around midnight, Ren made his escape back to the room he’d quietly asked to share with Hux, to avoid ending up in the old Crow’s nest. He said the Force imprint of him would still be there, and it would not be at all beneficial to him or his chances of sleeping. Hux didn’t comment on Ren’s barely existent, nightmare-ridden sleep, and instead told him that he’d be honoured to share his quarters with his Crow. Hux couldn’t blame the Crow for wanting to leave the feast; it was incredibly loud, there were people absolutely everywhere, and they had been so excited over the presence of a Crow in the castle that Ren had nearly drowned in excited new Huxes wanting to touch him and speak to him. It was anything but an ideal situation for him, and he’d sent a thankful nod to Phasma, who had also noticed the young man’s distress and provided a distraction while he escaped through a side door.

Now, Hux felt a headache coming on, and that side door looked more appealing by the minute. After managing to signal his departure to his aunt, he informed Phasma that he was retiring for the night, and went up to the room – relishing the silence and cool air of the hallways after so many hours in the hot and noisy great hall. Ren was sitting cross-legged on the bed, meditating from the looks of it, and Hux poured himself some wine from a pitcher some servant had placed on the small desk, before sinking down on the padded bench under the window to let the night breeze alleviate his headache some. He watched his Crow with a fond smile. Ren had taken a risk, and removed both cowl, gloves, and boots, and his outer robe had been unbuttoned halfway down his chest – revealing the equally black tunic underneath. The pale skin of his neck, hands, and feet made a stark contrast to both his robes and the darkness of the room, and Hux really wanted to touch him.

He knew better than to disturb Ren, though, and instead studied his face – the serene look only making him appear younger than he was, yet at the same time his entire appearance clearly displayed power and wisdom. He looked frail, almost ethereal, and yet as solid as if made of stone. It fascinated Hux how a person could be so many contradicting things at the same time, and he felt a deep sense of awe that just yesterday, this incredible person had allowed Hux to openly court him. Though Ren hadn’t even been with them for half a year, Hux’ feelings for his Crow had already reached deeper and more profound levels than he’d ever felt for either of his wives. A part of him supposed he should feel bad about it, but another part simply did not care. They were with the ancestors, they’d died honourably, and Hux had mourned them properly. It was all in the past now, whereas Ren was both past and future simply for being who he was. Ren would always be by his side – it was the will of the Gods, after all.

He was pulled out of his musings, when suddenly Ren jerked back into reality, eyes wide and shocked. He swallowed several times, running a hand over his face, as if to wipe something unpleasant off it, and he was breathing heavily. Once he noticed Hux by the window, he managed a shaky smile.

“The Force is unstable here,” he said. “Difficult to get a clear vision. Too much disturbance.”
“What were you trying to see?” Hux asked curiously as he poured another cup of wine and handed it to Ren, who drank a few large gulps before answering.

“The present. The future. Anything helpful. I got a bad feeling.”

“What sort of bad feeling?”

“I couldn’t see much, but… I don’t know. There was blood. And snow. Blood on the snow. I don’t know whom it belonged to. There was pain. So much pain. Despair.”

“You think someone might go to war against us during the winter?”

Ren looked down, biting his lip.

“No,” he said. “I don’t think it’s the whole clan. I got a feeling it was personal.”

“Do you know who it showed?”

“No. If there hadn’t been so much disturbance, I might have. I’ll try again when we’re home. I don’t want anyone hurt because of an unclear vision of mine.” He sighed. “I think I need some rest.”

Hux nodded, and they both dressed down to their undershirts and trousers before getting in the large bed – large enough to fit at least three more people. Ren looked like he wanted to ask something, but not being sure how, fiddling with the covers anxiously. Hux wasn’t stupid; he had eyes to see with, and he could tell that whatever vision his Crow just had, it had shaken him up rather badly, and he most likely needed some comfort. Comfort being something he had admitted to not really ever receiving, and therefore something he had no idea how to ask for.

“Kylo,” he said, gently, and reached out – pulling the younger man close. “Come here.”

Once Ren had relaxed enough to hide his face under Hux’ chin, resting a hand over his war chief’s heart, Hux put his arms around him and began humming the same lullaby as he’d sang after they’d bonded. It seemed to do the trick, and soon his Crow’s breath grew slow and even, his hand relaxing against his chest as sleep enveloped him. Hux stayed awake a little longer, just in case, but eventually the sheer peacefulness lulled him into sleep as well.

Chapter End Notes

Those of you who hang out on tumblr with me already know this, but this chapter was one long battle against various miniature writer's blocks, a plot that decided to screw my plan over and do something else, paired with me driving myself up the walls with the details. So. Uhm, yeah. This chapter ended up a bit shorter than the previous ones, but I kinda had to admit defeat.

But stuff is beginning to pick up pace now, and soon it'll start to get really interesting!

Hux finally grew a backbone and asked to court Ren - which was not at all planned this way, but I decided that I like it, so I stuck with it. And poor, precious Ren, and his incredible cluelessness about the whole relationship bit! Oh dear, Hux's got a lot of
responsibility on his shoulders now.

And Leia... well, eh. You'll get a better picture of her in the upcoming chapters, I promise!

Also, I'm terrible at answering your comments, because I get so happy, and then I don't know what to say, and suddenly it's been a week, and then it feels embarrassing - rinse and repeat. But I do love them! And I'm glad you all like this little universe. Come chat with me on Tumblr -> ficlet-machine.tumblr.com, and we can be nerdy together!
After that night at the newly re-named Sunstride Hall a few weeks ago, Hux and Ren had shared their bed every night. It was, of course a bit difficult to do so with the beds in their tents, and in the end Hux had let out a long string of profanities, tossed the beds out, and simply made a nest for them out of their beddings right on the ground. When Ren had asked if that was a good idea, considering people might gossip, Hux had huffed that he had no intention whatsoever of treating Ren as some manner of dirty secret. Better that people knew from the start; that way they’d get over any sensation seeking urges of theirs before it could do much damage. Ren had blushed bright red, but smiled like a sunrise – especially when Hux pulled him down into the nest and hid him against his chest, enjoying the closeness. That was as far as they’d gotten, really. A few kisses on Ren’s head or hand, and Hux being allowed to pull him close and put an arm around his waist outside their rooms, too, but so far Ren was not ready for more than that.

At the moment, they were out for a stroll a little way off from their current camp. Ren had taken one look at the vast expense of colourful flowers growing in the field and declared his intentions to gather as much of them as he could since many of them were very useful as medicinal herbs as well. Hux offered to come with him, promising he’d carry the bread and wine Ren was bringing, and the blanket to sit on. His Crow gracefully accepted his offer, hiding his cheeky smile behind the folds of his cowl. Phasma and Mitaka, both usually the ones staying close to their warchief when he wandered off like this, nearly had a fit when – to their enormous surprise – Ren informed them that they were staying behind this time. Phasma naturally bore down on her cousin as soon as he exited their tent with the light packing to question the Crow’s orders. Hux gave a grin that was far smugger than anything Phasma usually let pass, but then he leaned in and explained to them both that he had complete trust in Ren’s ability to keep them both safe, and that both of them needed this time alone. It was difficult to court someone as shy as Ren when they had half a clan bumbling around their feet at all times. At the word ‘court’ Phasma and Mitaka both dropped their protests, promising to keep it to themselves.

As soon as they were out of sight of the camp, they’d joined hands. Now, Ren was stopping every other step, inspecting the flowers, smelling some, picking others, while explaining their use to Hux. The warchief was somewhat confused regarding the Crow’s large collection of aphrodisiacs, until Ren explained to him that they were also often used to aid women struggling to bear children. They were, strictly speaking, mainly for the use of those who had a womb, and wished to carry life in it. He had pointed to some other herbs and explained that those had the opposite effect, used to ensure that a womb would stay barren. Both types of herbs were vital to Ren’s work, and so he had to stock up on them when he had the chance. He now had herbs for treating a vast array of illnesses and other problems. Some of the things he picked were used for poisons, and Ren put them in a separate bag he’d brought. Hux couldn’t remember when he last felt this relaxed and… content. He could spend everyday like this, he realized, and not really miss a thing. Mentally chiding himself for acting like some stripling drunk on his first flirtatious exchanges, he tried to pull himself together before he did something stupid.

Finding a small gathering of trees that offered some pleasant shade, they spread the blanket out on the ground and prepared their midday meal. Hux cut the bread and cheese in slices, pouring some salt on it, before handing one to his Crow – only to notice that he was busy doing something with the flowers, tongue poking out at the corner of his mouth in concentration. It looked quite adorable, and Hux contented himself to wait until he was finished with whatever it was he was
doing. While he waited, he poured them both some wine and laid down to stretch his back and enjoy the coolness of the shade after having been out in the merciless shine of the sun for so long. Eventually, a triumphant sound came from Ren’s direction and he sat up to see what it was about. Ren was looking very excited, but also a little sheepish, and a little anxious. Hux stroked his cheek.

“What have you got there?” he asked, nodding towards the flowers. Ren bit his lip.

“Where I come from,” Ren said, then hesitating. “Where I was born, I mean. There was this tradition, that in the summer couples who were courting would mark their status by wearing matching crowns of flowers.” He blushed. “So, uhm, I made that. For us. Since we’re courting, I wanted to do something for you as well, since you take such gentle care of me. You don’t have to wear it if you don’t want to!”

“Nothing would honour me more,” Hux grinned broadly. “Than to wear those flowers. Come now, show it to me.”

Ren picked up one of the crowns, made from wood cranebill, buttercups, oxeyes, and bluebells – the signature summer flowers of the North, mixed with some strands of timothy grass for body. It was well made, Ren had obviously practiced this before. He gently put it on Hux’ head, smiling brightly at the result.

“You look like the Faerie king,” he giggled. “It looks very good on you. You should wear your hair loose more often.”

“The highest of praise,” Hux chuckled. “So you like my hair, then?”

Ren nodded, and put the other crown in Hux’ waiting hand.


Hux smiled as he gently placed the flowers on Ren’s black locks, letting his hands trace his cheeks and jawline as he withdrew to inspect.

“You look…” Hux murmured. “By the Gods, Kylo, you look so beautiful.”

He swallowed. His Crow looked like something out of the faerie tales he’d been told as a child. Some dark prince of the woods; a child of Nature herself. The black of his robes and his hair contrasted against the paleness of his face and the soft colours of the flowers in the most entrancing way. He was suddenly extremely aware of the close proximity between them, of Ren’s eyes, of the scent of him mixing with the flowers. If he was to lean forward just a little, he could capture those lips with his own. A little more, and Ren would be underneath him. Dangerous thoughts. Very dangerous thoughts for him to think near someone so inexperienced and easily startled. But he couldn’t pull back for the life of him, couldn’t make himself move either way, couldn’t do anything but stare into those huge golden hazel orbs.

“Braith,” Ren whispered, voice oddly breathless.

“Yes?”

“I want to, you know.”

“Want what?”

“What you’re thinking.” He bit his lip, the gesture wreaking havoc with Hux’ self-control. “But I’m not ready for all of it. Not yet.”
“What may I do, Kylo? Tell me, please. I won’t do anything else until you give me permission. But I need you to tell me what I can do.”

“Kiss me.”

And kiss him, Hux did. Their lips met in a soft, chaste kiss, and they pulled away slightly to move things out of the way before Hux pulled Ren into his lap and kissed him again – both wine and bread completely forgotten in the face of these new sensations. When they arrived back at the camp, the sun was already low on the horizon, and Phasma was apparently preparing to send a search party out for them when they came back – hand in hand, and flower crowns more or less intact. Ren’s shy, yet beaming smile, gave everyone pause, and allowed the Crow to bring his newly gathered herbs into their tent without being the target of any questions or comments. Hux knew he wouldn’t get away so easily – not with thirty warriors gaping at him, and Phasma’s face showing a slightly red tint. He shot them one of his more disapproving glares, and the warriors shrunk a little.

“Since you’re going to go off gossiping a bunch of nonsense otherwise,” he said. “I might as well inform you now that I am indeed courting master Ren, with his explicit permission, and anyone – and I do mean anyone – who speaks ill of him, me, or our relationship, or who engages in inappropriate speculations or jokes will be publicly flogged. You will show your Crow the respect he’s due. Understood?”

The warriors nodded frantically, before scurrying off to tend to their chores. Phasma glared at him for a while, then smiled and pulled him into a hug.

“I’m so happy for you, Braith,” she said. “He’s a good man, and he clearly cares for you. But you are gentle with him, I hope?”

“Of course I am!” Hux huffed. “What manner of brute do you take me for?”

“Men like you, who are used to getting their way, do not always react well to being denied – no matter how good men they otherwise think they are. You make our Crow cry, cousin, I’ll cut your balls off with a fruit knife.”

“I’ll- I’ll remember that,” he winced. “But I promise you that there is nothing I want less in this world than for him to have any reason to cry.”

“Good.”

~*~*~

The sight of Skye Castle, shimmering in the bright midday sun against the dark backdrop of Mount Starkiller, was a welcome one after nearly five weeks away. Hux had been pleased to see that all the fields were tended to, and that the livestock were roaming peacefully across the lands as they travelled home. It stroked his pride to know his people took their duties seriously, and always put their best effort into whatever task they were assigned. They would need as much supplies as they could get come spring, or the planned campaign would surely prove disastrous. Now, though, the land was showing itself from its very best side – proving his and Ren’s bonding a success. As they approached the castle, the birds shot towards the towers and spires at their greatest speed, to reunite with mates and parents. One dot, however, could instead be seen making its way towards the large party, looking like it might be almost tearing its wings from its hurry. As it got closer, they could clearly see Eira’s snowy coat, and seconds later she had buried herself against Ren’s chest, nuzzling him with her beak, flapping her wings, and cawing like mad – her talons digging themselves into his forearm for all they were worth. He held her close, kissing her little head, and
murmuring soothing words into her white feathers. She didn’t calm down until they were inside the walls; Ren had had to simply let go of the reins and trust Askr to find the way on his own, because Eira required both his full attention and both his hands to handle. The horse had tossed his head and grumbled, but trotted after Hux and Béla nonetheless.

It was good to be home, and both Hux and Ren were glad no feast had been prepared – they’d had quite enough of those for a while now. Hux’ hangover from the last one had lasted a full three days, and he’d been downright unbearable for most of it. The servants hurried to take care of all the horses and packing while their masters went inside to be updated on the latest happenings.

Mai was Hux’ oldest aunt, his grandfather’s actual firstborn, a tall and hefty woman, with dark auburn hair and steely blue eyes. She was known for being as vicious on the battlefield as she was kind to those in need, and Hux had always held her in the deepest respect. She was currently bent over a pile of maps and letters, a pipe hanging from the corner of her mouth as she studied the items in front of her.

“Aunt Mai,” Hux greeted her. She looked up, and a broad grin crossed her face as she pulled him into a massive hug, nearly choking him against her impressive bosom.

“Ah, there you are, lad,” she said when she let him go. “Good to see you back home again.” She looked over to Ren and curtsied with far more grace than one might expect. “Master Ren, welcome home. You have been missed.”

“Thank you, lady Mai,” Ren smiled as he made his way over to the table to have a look. “It seems that you’ve been kept busy in our absence.”

She nodded and waved Hux over as well.

“It’s like the whole North has gone mad,” she sighed. “Right now, it appears that we’re the only clan not currently fighting anyone. The Moragh clan has invaded the Dulesh clan’s territory – and both of them have sent for our help. They’ve been allies for centuries now; it makes no sense for them to be attacking each other. The Southerners have gotten cocky as well; just last week now, some of the clan Ryder lads caught some Core kingdom scouts and a Dove down by their southwest border, and wrote to warn us. It’s the same all over, really. There doesn’t seem to be much reason for any of the conflicts, either. It’s like a plague, I tell you.”

Ren studied the map, where Mai and the officers had marked out the current conflicts, brows furrowed. He absentmindedly put Eira down on the table while he skimmed through the various letters.

“This makes no sense,” he said, not looking up. “What are their Crows doing? They should be putting a stop to this, it’s part of their duty. No Crow should ever allow their warchief to go to war for no reason – and they should definitely never support it if they did.” He finally looked up at Hux and Mai. “Something is wrong here,” he said. “Something is off. If I may suggest so, I think we need to lay low for a while, and try to avoid being dragged into it as well. We’re the biggest clan in the North now, and if we’re fighting one of these pointless wars too, then who will defend the North against the Southerners? For all we know, it could very well be one of their ruses.”

“I agree with master Ren,” Mai said. “This whole situation has got the wrong smell to it, and I don’t like it.”

Hux nodded.

“We’re laying low,” he said. “I have no plans to get involved in any more fighting before we go south next spring. We need to make sure we have as many warriors and as much supplies as
possible when we do. Even if the situation hadn’t been this suspicious, I wouldn’t take that risk.”

He was silent for a moment, calculating. “Send word to the border villages and garrisons. Tell them that the borders will be closed effective immediately; nothing and no one is to enter our land that doesn’t wear our mark. If anyone asks, tell them there’s a plague. Ren, we’ll need as many of your birds as possible out scouting.”

Ren nodded.

“A lot of them are nesting right now, but I believe I should be able to keep around a thousand or so in the air more or less constantly for a few weeks until the rest can join in.”

“A thousand?” Hux and Mai both sounded shocked. Ren blushed.

“Yes. I’m sorry, but that’s the best I can do. I can’t ask them to leave their nests if they’ve got hatchlings. What?”

“How many birds do you actually have, Ren?”

“One bird for every warrior of yours. They’ll be in the air momentarily.” He sighed. “I should probably speak to the Raven about this. He will surely know something – at least, he will if it’s the Crows that are the cause of it.”

Hux nodded, and looked over at his aunt.

“Thanks to the blatant incompetence of our recently defeated enemies, we’ve got about two thousand new warriors sworn in from the conquered territories,” he said. “Mitaka’s got the exact number, and Enna, Milo, and Rurik will be staying in contact during the winter. They will be ready with their troops when we need them.”

“Then I’ll start giving out orders,” Mai nodded. “Lots to be done if we’re taking the South. Thank the Gods we’ve a whole winter to prepare.” She patted Hux on the shoulder. “Now, go eat something, lad. There will be time for politics in the morning. Right now, the both of you need a bath. Good heavens, you smell like an entire stable!”

~*~*~

“You seem conflicted, my little hatchling,” the smokeshape of Snoke said, peering down at Ren’s kneeling figure. “Tell me what caused such distress in you.”

Ren swallowed, he didn’t really know where to start. It had taken three days for him to make contact with Snoke, which was unheard of. He guessed it was because of all the conflicts, but still he couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off.

“The other Crows must have told you of this, but the entire North is at war, master,” he said. “Over nothing at all, it seems. The Crows should be putting a stop to it, but it doesn’t seem to be happening. I’m worried…” He hesitated. “I am concerned that this may be part of some Southern trick, to cause discord among the clans to smooth their path into our lands. Therefore I thought it best to seek your guidance, master. If anyone can make sense of this madness it is you.”

Snoke’s face was unreadable as he studied his former apprentice in silence.

“You did right seeking my counsel,” he said eventually. “If all my hatchlings were as wise as you, there would never be troubles like this. But even I cannot hear the voices of the Gods clearly in this matter. As Crows it is our duty to carry out the will of the Gods, even though doing so might break us apart. A warchief who drags his people to war over drunken insults and other such foolishness
has no place at the head of a clan. They forget that sometimes, the warchiefs. I have spent much time these past weeks reminding my Crows of the laws of these lands, but they are slow to obey. Nothing like you, young knight; you would never disobey the Gods, I know it.”

Ren bowed his head further, trying to shake the unease crawling up his spine. Snoke leaned closer, a ghostly hand reaching out to caress his black locks as he gave a satisfied hum.

“He is laying claim to you, isn’t he?” he said. “He means to have you, body and soul.”

“Yes, master,” Ren confirmed. “He has asked permission to court me, and since it is permitted by our laws and my warchief is a true follower of our Gods, I accepted. I… hope this doesn’t disappoint you, master.”

“Not at all, Ren. Quite the opposite, in fact. A warchief like Hux is a gift not to be wasted, and if he willingly ties himself even closer to you, then I shall thank the Gods and bless your union. You let him have you, Ren. Let him put his mark on you in any way he sees fit. The Gods have plans for him, and you will want to have him close when the time comes. Just remember, my hatchling, that your allegiance is with the Gods first, a man second – even if he is your warchief.”

“Y-yes, master!”

“Good. Now go see to your clan, master Ren, and leave the wars to me. I shall inform you if there are any developments that require your attention.”

The smoke dissolved, leaving Ren on his knees on the floor, the uneasy feeling settling in the pit of his stomach. Had his master always felt this… slimy?

~*~*~

Captain Han Solo, paramour of Queen Organa, and notorious adventurer, made his way towards the suite belonging to his mistress and life partner. Luke had sent a bird to him the day before, saying there had been certain developments that had sent the Queen tumbling into the foulest mood in years. Han’s presence was needed as soon as possible, before Leia took it out on some poor, unfortunate soul. Luckily, he was heading towards the harbour already, and as soon as the Falcon was secured against the dock, he headed for the palace.

He didn’t bother to knock, he never did. Almost thirty years they’d been a couple now, it would look silly for him to ask permission to enter the very chambers he lived in, protocols be damned. It wasn’t like she was his queen, anyway. Corellia was an independent realm, and an ally of D’Qar, and therefore Han allowed himself to break the rules here and there – let the actual nobles worry about those things so normal people can get on with their business.

Leia sat in a large chair in the shade of her private patio, Rey close by, gently holding her hand. The Queen looked like she hadn’t slept in weeks, skin pallid and eyes sunken. She had forgone her usual extravagant robes in favour of a dark tunic and matching trousers. Her signature dark hair had been collected into a single thick braid, so long it came to rest on the seat next to her – not a grey hair in sight still. When she caught sight of Han, she reached out and he hurried over, kneeling in front of the chair and putting his arms around her. She held on to his jacket as if her life and sanity depended on it, and Han sent a questioning look over to Rey. The princess looked almost as worn as her mother, her hair escaping the complicated coiffure, and her expensive dress rumpled.

“There were some bad news,” she said quietly. “Luke came back from the North a few weeks back, and she’s been like this on and off since then.”

Han nodded, and Rey gave him a little smile before getting up and leaving the patio.
“Leia,” he murmured to her. “Sweetness, what happened?”

He could feel her steeling herself to reply, and he rubbed soothing circles over her back to try and help whatever it was she was feeling. She drew back a little, eyes red and glassy.

“Luke came back from the North,” she said. “He thinks- He thinks Ben might be alive. I just… He can’t be alive, Han. After he escaped the execution, the hounds tracked him down and tore him apart, we know that.”

Han was reeling. Ben? Alive? How? So many questions, so many complications if this turned out true.

“Does Luke have any solid evidence for that?” he asked. Leia shook her head.

“Nothing apart from a description. He could obviously not come near enough himself to see – those barbarians would’ve had him flayed.”

“If he is alive…”

“Then bastard or not, he’s got a legitimate claim to my throne. He is of my womb, and has first right to the crown.” She laughed bitterly. “A monster and a Dove-slayer on the throne of D’Qar. I will kill him myself before I let that happen. It’s clear to me that I should have throttled him when he first showed signs of the Force. Someone like him should never be allowed to rule.”

“So he still has it, then? The Force?”

“Of course he does. Once it’s there it’s there. He’s a Crow now, and a knight of Ren.”

“Didn’t the Knights all get executed with Palpatine and his Crow?”

“They have risen again. They’re like the plague. Cast a hint of a shadow, and those evil creatures will spawn like fungi.”

“If you want me to, I could go have a look,” Han offered. “I’ve always been good at blending in among the Northerners, Chewie is from there, and we’d be a lot less obvious than one of your spies.”

Leia thought about it for a moment, weighing the options. Han made a good point; Corellians looked a lot like Northerners, and Han had travelled through those lands many times before. Chewie, his best friend, knew everything they needed to know about their culture, and he was a fierce warrior – even with his lack of a tongue, he was a real asset in times like these. But it was also dangerous. The North was a harsh land that bred an equally harsh people; if they were found out, Han and Chewie would be lucky if they were just stabbed to death. If a Crow got their hands on them, Gods only know what would happen. Still, if what Luke had said was true, it was better to be prepared than to be caught by surprise. She nodded.

“Go. As soon as you can. If it is him… kill him. He must never set foot in the South.”

~*~*~

In the large bed at the top floor of the Crow’s tower, Ren tossed and turned restlessly next to Hux.

Banners in the wind. A forest of banners.
The sound of horses charging. Men and women screaming.
Deep forests. So much green.
So cold. Dark. Like a tomb.
A black banner. A raven taking flight.
Sunlight against painted glass. Summer. The sound of water. The ocean.
Blood. More blood.
A marble pillar breaking apart. Ivy growing over it.

He jolted upright, and would have fallen out of bed if Hux hadn’t caught him. He gently manoeuvred Ren back into the centre of the bed and put his arms around him, gently rubbing his back and shoulders as he placed soothing kisses on the sweat-soaked black locks.

“What did you see?” he asked when Ren had calmed down some. His Crow shook his head.

“So many things, and still so little,” he said tiredly, extracting himself from the bed to pour himself some water. “Spontaneous visions are a lot more vague than those we seek for a purpose. They always happen so quickly, in such rapid succession, it’s difficult to understand them while they’re happening.” He shuddered, and emptied the mug before speaking again. “It’s so overwhelming sometimes; the visions invade my mind, and I have no way of shielding myself, or lessening their impact.”

“It sounds exhausting.”

“It is. Sometimes I feel like I would need to sleep for days to recover.”

“You know I would let you do that if needed.”

“I know.”

Ren approached the bed again, taking Hux’ outstretched hand and allowing himself to be pulled down and cradled close to his chest. He rather liked it there, he realized. Used as he was to always tower above everyone else, it felt very pleasant and comforting to be hidden away like this, to have someone touch him in a way that allowed him to forget his own darkness for a while – forget all the long shadows cast by his past over his mind. Hux brought their faces closer and kissed him, and Ren allowed himself to forget all about visions and wars, mortals and Gods. He needed this, and he was allowed to have it – so have it he would. Gods knew there’d be enough darkness in all their lives soon enough.

Chapter End Notes

So, there was a heck of a lot of talking here. Writing it, I just felt like suddenly everyone and their cousin had something to say, but politics are politics, and you can't get to the juicy bits before everyone's had their little chats.

The fluff... uhm, I don't know whether I should apologize for the cheeziness, or just hide until next update. One of you commented on the previous chapter that every bit of fluff seems to be followed by angst, and... well, yeah. That pretty much sums this
world up, to be honest. Everyone can be happy and lovey-dovey, but shit will go down at random intervals, and then all one can do is grab their sword and go. I honestly hadn't planned 1.6k words of fluff in this chapter, though.

Okay, Leia. I am not trying to bash her, I swear. But this is a harsh world, and she is a harsh woman. This is personal to her, of course. But there's also a lot of politics involved. She's adopted a new kid, named her heir and everything - for her actual, blood-related kid to turn up alive at this point is a political nightmare. Han just wants her to be happy.

Snoke is gross and scary, and I honestly feel like I need to drown myself in soap after writing his parts.

Lastly, I apologize if they seemed ooc in the beginning of the chapter - but they are both in that silly, giggly, butterflies-in-the-stomach, phase of new love. They'll be back to being violent sassy assholes soon enough^^

As always, I'll remind you that 1) I'm on tumblr: ficlet-machine.tumblr.com and that you're always welcome to come over and be nerdy with me, and 2) that all your comments make me a giddy mess of happy, so do tell me what you think of the chapter before you leave, yeah?
It was the third day now, of Ren’s search for a vision that made sense. He was hungry, so terribly hungry – faint and dizzy from the lack of nutrition, and thirsty, too. The only fluid he’d ingested in the last three days was small sips of a very potent hallucinogenic potion that tasted a lot like something that had been drunk already and then come back up – the red wine he’d mixed it with doing very little to conceal the horrid taste. He was clad only in the black kilt he usually wore for sacrifices, the silver belt replaced with a nasty looking spiked thing that drove into his flesh every time he moved – designed to keep him from falling asleep. Similar contraptions were wrapped around his biceps and thighs, blood crusting around them, and fresh drops falling onto the ground when he moved too much. He hadn’t slept for three days either.

Reality drifted in and out of his focus, swirling and bending in strange ways as he chanted a monotonous, repetitive prayer. Ever since his last audience with Snoke two weeks or so before he’d had this nagging, crawling feeling deep in his gut that something was wrong. He hadn’t been able to contact the Raven again, a distinct feeling nestling in his mind that Snoke was avoiding him – which meant that something Ren had said during their last talk had been crossing a line. Had he been too curious? Too bold? He knew Snoke sometimes punished Crows by withholding his presence and guidance, but this was the first time it had ever happened to Ren – and even though he tried not to admit it to himself, it scared him halfway out of his mind.

Corporal punishments he could take – he had more scars from those than from actual battle – but this… silence, was absolutely terrifying. If nothing else because it put it in bright light just how much Ren had come to depend on the Raven for guidance and security, and as the so called ‘master’ of the Knights of Ren he wasn’t supposed to need so much of either of those things, was he? But then Snoke had always been the one to keep him this close to him, always watching him more closely than the others, always paying him more attention. It had only been days before he left the House of Night that he’d realized that no one got even half as much praise as he did. It had irked him then, but he hadn’t given it much thought seeing as he was busy with his own training – but now it made him feel… dirty. His master’s comments about Hux… it had settled like some slimy sensation on his skin, and he felt some strange urge to scrub his skin raw to get rid of it. He had never felt like that before. Ashamed, yes. Humiliated, certainly. But never dirty.

So now he turned to the only source of guidance he knew that would never lie to him; the Gods themselves and the visions they graced him with. If nothing else, then for the sake of Hux’ sanity. He knew his warchief was very worried; his thoughts were always loud, but every night when the dreams, the nightmares, the visions drove Ren out of the bed in various states of anxiety and fear, Hux’ thoughts screamed in jumbled messes of protectiveness, frustration and powerless anger at whatever it was that made his young Crow feel like that. Hux would likely go to war against the Gods themselves if it would make them leave him alone even for one night. Ren had given him a sleeping potion one night, to at least make sure one of them was rested, and to spare Hux the constant chaos that was Ren’s sleep. It hadn’t gone over well. When Hux had woken that following morning, seeing Ren curled up in a corner of the bedroom, eyes red and puffy, and realizing he’d
slept through it Ren could almost hear his heart breaking, and it had only made the subsequent reprimanding even more painful – even though it was followed by Hux holding him close and covering his face in kisses.

Then, reality warped and surged, and he felt weightless, free, like he was flying. The Gods had finally taken pity on him.

~*~*~

Hux sat on his throne, listening to Mitaka’s reports on the latest happenings in his newly expanded realm. It was quite a welcome break from the planning of the upcoming campaign to the South, even for a man as thirsty for blood as Hux. There had been a few new children born in his absence, and he made the scribe jot down a quick note to send the families appropriate tokens of well-wishes. New children were always good signs, especially when both they and their mothers survived the births. Ren had been somewhat affronted that they had managed to time their births when he’d been away, but he knew the elder women who usually assisted him were more than capable of handling those things. It was mainly his professional pride being slightly insulted.

Their herds were doing well, and with the addition of the livestock from their newly conquered territory, they would have plenty in the way of meat and hide when it came time for slaughter. The harvests were looking promising too, and Hux debated a little with Mitaka about the best way to divide it when it had been brought in. They were going to need an awful lot of supplies, but they also needed to make sure they made it through winter, and that those left behind when the army marched out wouldn’t be at risk of starving. Agreeing that they still had a while to think about it, they moved on to other subjects.

He was glad for Mitaka; the man may be a bit skittish at times, but he was such a gentle, kind creature that it was a blessing in itself to have him around. Born in one of the Core Kingdoms, Mitaka had come to him a slave, a gift from visiting emissaries, but Hux despised the whole concept of slavery, and Mitaka had been free the second they’d left his halls. Hux had given him his freedom and allowed him to go wherever he pleased, but the man chose to stay with him, and he had adjusted to the harsh life of the North with admirable ease. When they marched out, Mitaka would be a priceless asset for the clan, and Hux made sure he knew that he was appreciated.

Mitaka cleared his throat nervously, and Hux arched an eyebrow.

“Uhm, there is something else, lord Hux,” he said, fiddling with his pen.

“What would that be?” Hux asked, confused. “We’ve covered everything for the day, haven’t we?”

“It’s about master Ren, my lord.”

“What about him?”

“Well,” Mitaka looked like he regretted speaking up. “You are courting him, yes? So far, and I’m so sorry if I sound in any way rude, my lord, but… what have you actually done to court him? Apart from… eh, sharing his bed and, uhm, engaging in activities of an intimate nature? You’re treating him a bit more like a concubine than a- uhm, an intended life partner.”

Hux eyebrows shot right up, shocked and impressed by Mitaka’s courage. But then, he was a Southerner, and they took these things very seriously, he knew that.

“You think I’ve laid with him, Mitaka?” he sputtered. “I assure you, my friend, that there’s been no such things going on between us yet. I respect him far too much to pressure him about that. And, honestly, you and I both know that if I tried, he’s strong enough to tear my head off with his bare
“I was hoping that was the case, yes,” Mitaka said, relief evident in his voice. “But you must think about how it looks to the clan. You are older than him by nearly a decade, and master Ren is a very attractive man. There has been some talking, that you… erhm, entertain yourself with master Ren at night, that you’ve taken advantage of his youth.”

“Stop right there,” Hux growled. “The people spreading those vile assumptions around are to be found and given thirty lashes, understood? In front of the whole castle. I will hear no such talk about Ren or me!” Mitaka yelped and nodded frantically. “What do you suggest I do, then? Hm? Ren is frightfully shy and inexperienced. I am trying to let him set the pace, but apparently now I need to take that comfort away from him because of sensation seeking idiots in my own house! Tell me, Mitaka, how to publicly court a man who hates it when people look at him, because apparently doing as he asks isn’t enough for this clan.”

Hux shut his mouth, trying to bring his temper under control. The lack of sleep lately had him more testy than usual, but he refused any help with sleep if it meant leaving Kylo alone with his nightmares. He really didn’t mean to lash out at poor Mitaka, but learning that his own clan, his own bloody family, thought so little of both him and Kylo just made his blood boil. Yes, Kylo was younger than him, but he was certainly no blushing maiden, and more importantly, he wasn’t daft enough to let himself be used as some glorified whore just because they were bonded. He needed to set an example here. This could not be allowed to fester further.

Mitaka swallowed a few times, trying to bring his frazzled nerves into some sort of order. He had to make his warchief understand that he, too, cared for the Crow and that this was for the benefit of them both.

“I’d strongly suggest gifts, my lord,” he managed. “Master Ren is Southern by birth, as I’m sure you can see. In the South, gifts are a very important part of courting. They should be a variation of practical and decorative. Clothes, weapons, but also jewellery and things you know he likes. Books, scented oils… things like that. Master Ren has already done his part, you see. He made you a flower crown, which in the south means he has settled on you. Chosen you. You, my lord, still have to prove that he’s made the right choice. You are courting him, that makes you the one who’s promised to provide for the both of you – so you have to show him and everyone else.”

“That I can afford to keep him safe and happy,” Hux nodded, beginning to understand what Mitaka was getting at. “You want me to spoil him rotten to show my clan I’m serious about him. Well, I’m certainly rich enough, but I don’t know if he’ll take it the right way. He is a bit… avoidant, in matters regarding his past.”

“I think you’ll be surprised, my lord,” Mitaka smiled. “If you wish, I can help you with the gifts, to make sure you get it right. I love the North, my lord, but the Gods know you are all sorely lacking in the finer aspects of courting.” A blush made it onto his face. “And I think that, uhm, you will be quite pleased with the outcome of a properly conducted courtship.”

“You are far more cunning than I have given you credit for, Mitaka, my friend,” Hux laughed after a moment of stunned silence. “I will accept your help. Gods know I’ll tear the world apart if it makes him happy. A few gifts and public displays of affection is a price I pay gladly!”

~*~*~

Ren came staggering back inside the castle at sundown, wrapped tightly in his cloak, shivering like a leaf in strong wind, barely staying on his feet. He would have fallen over in the hallway outside the great hall if Hux hadn’t been informed of his arrival and was coming to meet him just in time to
catch him. Noticing the trail of blood behind the Crow, Hux went from concerned to alarmed in the blink of an eye, but when he moved to lift the Crow up into a bridal style, Ren shook his head, mumbling something about ‘can’t’ and ‘hurts there’, and so the warchief had to settle for holding him up with an arm around his middle as Ren clung to him with every bit of strength he had. It was a slow walk to his tower, and an even slower walk up the stairs; the servants Hux sent to bring hot water and washcloths passed them on the stairs, also bringing with them a tray of light food. Hux had to put the food in another room, because the smell of it caused his Crow to turn slightly greenish, but once he’d closed the door between the bedroom and sitting room, Ren’s colour took on a more normal colour.

The Crow had deposited himself on the bed, attempting to dislodge some form of… torture device from around his hips, but he seemed simply too weak and shaky to unfasten the buckle. The trails of dried blood down his arms alerted Hux to the presence of additional such contraptions on his body, and he was absolutely horrified. Gently shooing Ren’s hands away, he began working on the belt, trying his hardest not to cause more harm to him upon seeing just how deeply those prongs imbedded themselves in his pale skin. It didn’t help matters to see him try not to show how much it hurt with every little movement. He got the buckle opened, then realized there simply was no way for him to remove the thing without causing a considerable amount of discomfort.

“Braith,” Kylo gritted out, so exhausted it came out as little more than a whisper. “Just do it. Pull it off quickly, don’t hesitate. It’ll only hurt more if you do.”

He gave Kylo a moment to take a deep breath, then the pulled the belt off as resolutely as he could, before throwing it across the room. There were tears in Kylo’s eyes, bravely held back by what he suspected was years and years of training, breath coming out in short pants. Blood was already surfacing in the many small wounds, but as he helped Kylo out of his cloak and kilt, he knew he had to deal with the other four before he could get around to cleaning him up. It was one of the worst things he felt he’d ever had to do, his need to keep Kylo safe and free from pain raising its head in conflict against his actions. He hated this, but forced himself through it, knowing that otherwise Kylo would be stuck in them until he had the strength to remove them himself, and Hux just couldn’t wait that long. Kylo looked on the verge of collapse already.

“Why do you do this to yourself, Kylo?” he asked, voice pained, when he’d cleaned him up and dressed him in a soft, warm tunic, and gathered him in his arms under a blanket. “What in the Gods name can be worth torturing yourself for? You’ve been gone for three full days, have you had these on the whole time?”

Kylo nodded against his chest.

“Helps,” he mumbled. “Need to… make myself not… not think. Make myself… let go.”

“So you torture yourself?” Another thought struck him. “You didn’t pack any food or anything to sleep on.” Kylo shook his head and burrowed closer. “I hope whatever you were searching for was worth it,” he mumbled, kissing Kylo’s knuckles. “Because seeing you like this is bloody frightening.”

“Had… a vision.” Kylo’s voice slurred, he was falling asleep.

“A good one?”

“I… I hope… so.”

He kissed the dark hair, running his hands soothingly over the still shivering back and shoulders. He really needed to get back to his duties, but right now making sure his beautiful Crow was safe...
and sound took priority. As soon as he left the tower, though, he’d go hunting for the bloody cretins
who had the gall to speak ill of them and their relationship. This wasn’t something he wanted Kylo
to have to deal with. No, Hux was the warchief, and he’d never tolerated gossip before – they
really shouldn’t be surprised that he cared for it even less now that he had someone to protect from it.

~*~*~

“A concubine, really?” The disappointment in their Crow’s voice was near tangible as he looked
the five men and three women over, laid out on their bellies on the beds of his uppermost healing-
room. Across their backs were large criss-cross patterns of welts and bleeding wounds, all of which
needed tending to. “You actually think so lowly of me that you think I would allow myself to be
degraded in such a way by any man or woman – warchief or not? Even worse, you have the gall to
insinuate that your warchief is the kind of man to abuse his position to take advantage of those
below him. I really should let your wounds rot.”

“Please forgive us, master Ren,” one of them whined as he got to work cleaning and stitching his
wounds, with far less gentle a hand than usual. “But surely you understand how it looked to us all?
Why, with you being so young and– uhm, attractive, and the warchief so obviously drawn to you.
We meant no harm, really! I swear! But with you being so young and… who knows what
experience you Crows have before your bonding ceremony, right? It’s easy to be seduced when
you don’t have any experience- Ow!”

“Shut your mouth,” Ren ordered. “Unless you want that sewn shut as well.” He continued his
work. “While I appreciate your concern, misguided as it is, your insubordination and
disrespectfulness towards your warchief – your blood relative – makes me sick. I expected so much
better of you all. The process of courting is complicated for men in our respective positions, and
believe me when I say that most of it lies far beyond your ability to understand. I am a child of the
Gods, and no matter how deeply I feel for my warchief, I must still submit myself to the same slow
and arduous process as he does – which is exactly what we are currently doing. You think that
because I let him in my bed I also let him have me? Like some cheap whore? You think that of me
after what you have seen me do? Despicable. When, where, and how I give my body to my bonded
warchief is none of your business, and if I ever hear you or anyone else spew these appalling
rumours you will wish that Hux and his whip reaches you before I do. You think he is cruel in his
punishments? I can keep you alive and in pain for weeks if I wish to.” He smiled sweetly at them
all. “Have I made myself clear?”

Frantic nodding was the only reply, as they were too frightened to speak. Ren nodded and
continued his work in silence. This was not what he had wanted to be faced with after two days of
sleeping off the side effects of his vision seeking. He still had a terrible headache, and the thought
of consuming anything more substantial than broth or soup made his stomach turn. And now he
had to deal with these… imbeciles and their disgusting invasion of his privacy. Seeing his warchief
personally flog them had been far more satisfying than he let on; after all, he was not a very good
man, and when Hux told him of the rumours he’d been every bit as infuriated as him.
It was always a problem when a Crow outlived their bonded warchief; clans forgot so quickly the
complexities and myriads of rules that surrounded the relationship between their respective
stations. While Ren was glad for them now that they were courting – seeing as he truly was every
bit as nervous as he’d already admitted to Hux, and the rules played in his favour with the demand
that the process be slow – it was frustrating that their people and their filthy minds didn’t know
better than to gossip about things they had no knowledge of, and thereby quite possibly damaging
both Ren’s and Hux’ standing with the clan. No, he was far too tired to deal with all of this, and he
longed to go back to his chambers and continue teaching Hux how to strengthen their developing
force bond. His warchief had a very soothing presence in the Force, and Ren wanted to get lost in it
for a few hours. Hopefully it would help ease this horrible, throbbing pain behind his temples.

~*~*~

Queen Leia and Princess Rey Organa stood under the comfort of large parasols by a small side gate to the royal city of D’Qar, dressed in somewhat more ordinary clothing than their usual fare. Becoming rapidly smaller against the surrounding landscape were the figures of Han Solo and Chewie and their horses, heading for the North in hopes of finding the missing royal bastard and see to it that the threat to the throne of house Organa was eradicated. Han didn’t like it, Leia knew that, but he would do as she asked. He hadn’t felt the Force, had no understanding of just how a destructive and dangerous thing it could be and that not all Force users were as gentle as Luke – even after he’d seen Ben’s early Force manifestations up close. He just didn’t understand. It had to be done; a Crow could never rule a kingdom, they were too dark, too unstable, too bloodthirsty. A Crow like Ben… It would send her precious land into ruins, she had no doubt about that. Glancing over at her daughter, she could feel the confusion in her. Perhaps it was time she knew the truth. It would come out sooner or later anyway, and with the recent happenings Rey had been growing steadily more nervous and worried. Maybe they should have told her from the start that she wasn’t the first child, but it was too late for such regrets now. It might be better she learned it now that she was older, to keep her from any stupid ideas about her older brother – such as the possibility of redemption. Ben was too far gone for that.

“Rey, darling,” she said later that night. They’d finished dinner and were sitting on the patio, enjoying the cool evening breeze from the sea. “There is something we must talk about.”

“Is it about father?” she asked. “About what he’s doing in the North, I mean.”

“Yes.” She studied her daughter for a moment, looking for a place to start. “How much have you gathered about it so far?”

“He’s going up north with uncle Chewie to find a Crow named Ren, who’s got something to do with us, but not in a good way. You know him in some way, don’t you? You and father.”

Leia nodded, taking Rey’s slender hand in hers.

“This Crow, master Kylo Ren,” she began. “Was born here in D’Qar twenty-six years ago. His birth name is Benyamin Solo.”

“Solo?” Rey’s eyebrows shot up. “Father has a son?”

“He does. And… so do I. Ben is of my womb; my bastard.” She paused to collect herself. Rey looked frozen in shock. “He is not listed in the archives as an Organa, but as an illegitimate Solo. Han is not of royal blood, so we could never marry, and obviously therefore never have a legitimate child together. Officially he is Han’s son, not mine. He… was, is, very strong with the Force even from an early age, and I put him in training to be a Dove, but…”

“But what? Mother, you’re making me worry.”

“I don’t know if you remember, sweetness, but there was a horrendous massacre at the House of Mornings eleven years ago. You’d only been with me for a year then, you were very little.”

“I remember a little,” Rey nodded. “A lot of younglings were killed. I never understood what happened, though?”

“It was Ben.” Tears were burning in her eyes, and she steeled herself. His name alone stung like a thousand nettles in her heart, and she’d never spoken about what happened that day with anyone
but Luke and Han. She wasn’t proud of her actions, not at all, but what sort of Queen would she be if she made exceptions for some but not others? “We don’t really know what caused it, but one day he came to the temple, locked the doors behind him, and slaughtered all the younglings. He killed—he killed twenty-eight children. Twenty-eight. The oldest was thirteen, the youngest only seven. He is evil, Rey. He was arrested, put to trial, and sentenced to death. But he escaped his execution, killed the executioners in front of everyone – tore them apart with the Force. We sent hunters out after him, of course, but only one returned. He assured us Ben had been slain, and that there was nothing more to fear. Your right to my throne was no longer under threat.” Rey looked absolutely horrified as she stared at her mother. Leia continued. “We now have reason to believe that he is alive, and serving as Crow under one of the worst, cruelest, and most power-hungry warchiefs of the North. If he ever learns that he is first in line to this throne – which he is, bastard or not, I’m afraid – then I fear he’ll go after you. He must not come near D’Qar, Rey. This throne is yours, and a monster like him must never be allowed to rule. We learned that the hard way when Palpatine and his Crow were in power. The Core Kingdoms were in constant fear of them. That’s no way to live, child. No way at all.”

Rey swallowed hard. She looked like she was going to be sick.

“I—” she began. “I’m sorry, mother, but I can’t handle this right now! I just can’t!”

With that, she got up and hurried out of her mother’s quarters, leaving the Queen alone with her memories.

~*~*~

A brother! She had a brother! Rey’s whole world was reeling at the news. He’d been there, in D’Qar, when Rey was adopted. Why had she never met him? Or had she, and just couldn’t remember him? She had been so small, after all, when she was taken into the Organa house. But he had been there! An actual older brother, and their mother had tried to have him executed! She knew the role of Queen involved making difficult decisions, but to kill her own child – how could she even think the thought? And it had been eleven years now – how could they be so certain he couldn’t have redeemed himself in that time? The Crows weren’t evil, according to Uncle Luke, just morally very grey. But Leia said he was evil as if that was a fact. Did they even know why he did what he did? So many questions!

A fierce need to know this lost member of her family erupted in her, and along with it anger at her mother for keeping this from her all these years. Every naming day, she’d wished for a brother, someone to lean on and learn from – someone who knew what it was like to grow up in a palace with a thousand rules and no actual friends. She’d always envied those of her companions who had older siblings, and the many tales they shared about their adventures, about things their siblings had taught them, and how protected they all seemed to be by those siblings. The reason she wanted a brother was her own fiercely guarded secret; she’d had one before. He was gentle, kind, but strong and brave – at least that’s how she remembered him, before the sickness took him and her parents. She wanted him back, or at least the closest thing to him, and now her mother told her she’d had that – but no one had told her. And now her father was on his way north to kill him, for a crime he’d committed more than a decade ago – not even sure if he was the same person still.

Nothing made sense anymore.

~*~*~

A large glass jar filled with dried herbs hit the wall, shattering into a thousand pieces. Next came to clay pots and a collection of scrolls and books. Paper, leaves, and oils scattering in every direction. Then Ren went to work on the furniture; using the force to throw the stools and work
tables across the room. The entire tower shook with the force of his anger, and every single living being had fled long ago – even Eira had retreated to one of the nesting towers. It was a frustrated, powerless sort of fury, and tears were streaming down his face as he raged and cursed. When there was nothing left in the room for him to destroy, he sank to the floor, hammering it with his fists until he broke his skin, pulling his hair, and cursing at the Goddess for her cruelty and unfairness. Then strong arms encircled him, drawing him close against a warm chest, and he felt Hux’ lips on his hair, as he rocked him gently back and forth as if he was a child. Ren clung to him like a teasel, unable to rein his raging emotions in.

“It wasn’t your fault, Kylo,” Hux whispered. “You did everything you could, and everyone knows that.”

“It wasn’t enough!” Kylo whimpered. “I wasn’t good enough! If I was, there wouldn’t be a dead woman and two stillborn babies one floor down right now! I failed, Braith! She trusted me! They all trusted me, and I failed them!”

“Hush now, love, listen to me,” Hux brought his face level with his, looking him in the eyes. “You are the most powerful Crow I have ever seen, that this entire clan has ever seen. If you could not save them, then there is no one who could. You tried, Kylo. You fought for them for three whole days – we all saw it. The Goddess takes whomever she wishes, when she wishes, you know this. The world is hard, and women die in childbirth all the time. I should know, I’ve lost both a wife and a child that way. But we all know the risk – the women more so than us. This is not you failing, this is the Goddess taking what she’s due.” He stroked his cheeks, wiping away the tears. “You know this better than anyone, Kylo, yet I have never seen you this upset. Tell me, what happened to make you react like this?”

“I-” Kylo couldn’t bear to look him in the eyes. “I can’t- I can’t talk about it, Braith. But I took a vow, years ago, never to let a child die under my hands ever aga-” He clamped his mouth shut, terror shining clear in his eyes. “To never let a child die under my hands, ever,” he corrected himself. “And now there are two little bodies downstairs, lives that never got a chance to be lived. And I am to blame for that. I should have done more. I know I could have done more. It’s not right, Braith. It’s not right!”

With that he broke down again, deep, gut wrenching sobs wracking his body, and Hux could do little else but hold him close and try to comfort him as best he could. So, Kylo had been responsible for the death of a child? He wondered when and how it had happened, but vowed never to ask about it until Kylo seemed ready to speak about it on his own accord. Not when he reacted this severely to the deaths of two children whom everyone – Crow or not – could see would not have been able to survive for long anyway. This was personal on a level so deep it seemed to be like tearing open a barely healed wound to poke at the flesh beneath it.

*What happened to you?* He thought. *What horrid thing happened to you to make you this way?*

If Kylo could hear his thoughts, he made no sign of it, only continued to cry himself into utter exhaustion. Tomorrow, they both knew, he would show no signs of this meltdown. Tomorrow he would be the Crow of Skye Castle, the man who always knew what to do, the one chosen by the Gods to make sense of the world – perfectly composed and in control. But for now, he was just a grieving young man, faced with the cruel reality of death in all its unfairness.

~*~*~

They were a week into their journey now, not even close to leaving the Core kingdoms yet, and Han already regretted going. He loved Leia more than anything in this world, sans – of course – their daughter, but sometimes she scared him. It was as if all those years of war and conflict she’d
lived through had rendered her incapable of viewing others as anything but allies or enemies. He had never thought this kind, gentle woman he had fallen in love with, who had held their new-born son in her arms like a gift from the Gods themselves – radiating the most profound love and adoration he’d ever seen – would be the same woman who fifteen years later condemned that very child to death by decapitation. She never even spoke to him after he’d been apprehended, wouldn’t allow Han to do so either – and hard as he had tried to shake it off as shock or trauma, it was becoming more and more difficult to do so now. They hadn’t seen Ben in eleven years. Han had mourned his son the entire time, wishing he’d been around more to guide and help him before it was too late. He wanted to know what in the seven hells could have possessed his shy, gentle, insecure son to commit such an act. There had to be an explanation – and that was the real reason he didn’t just turn back to D’Qar, or head out to sea again. If Ben was alive, even if it was in this new shape, then he at least deserved to share his side of the story. Han couldn’t bear to think further than that. He just wanted to see him, see the man he’d become. Hold him, if he could, and hear him out. He owed Ben that much. No matter what happened after that, he owed it to his son to be a proper father for one bloody time in his life.

Chapter End Notes

I'll start off by saying sorry for the hefty amount of dialogue - again. They sure do like talking!

The thingies Kylo's wearing are modelled upon the cilice used by the character Silas in the DaVinci Code. While the cilice was in reality an undergarment made from either animal hair or sack-cloth, and worn under one's regular clothes for reasons similar to fasting, I've deliberately used the historically incorrect version here. Because the Crows take things to extremes sometimes, and honestly, I don't think anyone of you are surprised that they're into the self flagellation bit. The cilice are only used for these specific purposes, though - they are a means to an end, which is a vision. Pain together with lack of sleep and starvation puts the brain in a mode where it's easily nudged into trance like states, and many religions around the world uses these techniques to achieve just that.

Yes, the clan gossips - because that's what people do. "Oh, the warchief is getting awfully lovey-dovey with the Crow? Hm, I wonder what they do when no one sees." And then the gossip circus is rolling. Hux hates gossip, and so does Ren. The accusation made against a ruler that he more or less molestes his subordinates is very severe, and even though same sex relationships are standard in this 'verse and thus not based on some form of homophobia, it's still the matter of age difference and the perceived innocence of Ren. An older warchief taking advantage of a younger, inexperienced Crow is an appalling thought, and the clan - of course - can't help but gossip about it. Hux is fully within his right to punish them for it, since they are damaging his reputation and are disrespecting their Crow. Ren is so done with the lot of them. So done. He's not scared about the sex bit, he's scared about the relationship bit - but here they are, painting him out like some naive virgin, because he's younger than Hux? Idiots.

I hope the Leia and Rey bit helps flesh out the D'Qar part of the story a little. Leia is an ice queen, totally, but she's also the product of circumstances and conditions beyond her control. Just like Ren, she's been scarred by things she's been through, which has warped her relation to the world and people around her.
And Rey, well... She's been wanting her big brother - or at least a big brother - her whole life, only to find out that she not only has one, but that no one has ever bothered telling her about it. Her world is more than a little shaken at the moment.

Ren failed to save a mother and her babies. Yes, this is one of those few things that really gets to him. Everyone has that weak spot, and for him it's children dying. He can't stand more children dying because of him.

And Han... Han loves Leia. But Han also loves his son. And now he's suddenly in a place where he never wanted to be. It's not going to be easy for him.

Still loving the hell out of every comment I get, and if you want to yell at me for this chapter, you're welcome to do so over on tumblr. I think you know my url by now^^
“Try it again,” Ren’s voice echoed in his head. “You’re making progress.”

They were sitting in Kylo’s quarters, in the comfortable armchairs by the fireplace, facing each other and holding hands. Ever since their bonding, their ability to connect through the Force had become stronger, and for a few weeks now they’d been practicing actual mind to mind speaking. It was incredibly difficult, more so than Hux had ever imagined, but it was also very fascinating. His Crow kept his mind hidden behind thick mental walls, but every time they connected like this, he caught a glimpse of what lay behind them. It boggled his mind how someone could carry within them such power, and so many raging emotions and thoughts without going completely mad – and yet here he sat, this amazing young Crow, in full control of every bit of it. He focused again, sweat beginning to form on his brow, and extended a thought.

“H’s… an… yo’… li’… w’… all tha’… ’n… ‘our he’…?” He could almost feel how the sentence fractured on the way from his mind to Kylo’s. How the hells did Kylo manage this? And over long distances as well?

“You’re asking how I live with my own head,” Kylo said out loud, finally taking pity on him. “I don’t. Not really.” He looked into the fire, gaze becoming distant for a moment. “I built those walls for a reason. There are times when tapping into the chaos is very useful to me, but in my everyday life… no. I couldn’t function at all if I didn’t shield myself.”

“Do all of you have that much chaos in your heads?” Hux was intrigued.

“Not all of us.” Kylo looked back up at him. “Some hatchlings come from perfectly normal circumstances. But some of us, well, we’ve faced many hardships before we were given the midnight robes. I think we’re usually better prepared for the training, but even that’s not set in stone. Which is, of course, the whole purpose of it – to see which ones can rise above, and which ones will roll over on their backs and surrender.”

“You rose above.”

“I did. It came at a price, but so do most things in life.”

“What was the price?”

Kylo looked away again, pain briefly flashing across his face.

When you can pluck it from my head yourself, then you’ll be ready to know,” he said. “Now, I think that’s enough lesson for today. You’re making remarkable progress, Braith. You should be very proud.”

“So you tell me,” Hux winced. “I feel like an incompetent idiot.”

“I was born with a stronger connection to the Force than most of my mentors had at age fifty,” Kylo chuckled. “You were born entirely without. Trust me, you are doing incredibly well.”
“I’ll take your word for it, master Crow,” Hux grinned. “Now, out of curiosity, where is Eira? I haven’t seen her in a few days, and given how you two are usually inseparable, I don’t know if I should be feeling concerned.”

“She’s helping out with the hatchlings,” Kylo said. “This is the one time a year she will be happy to leave me to my own devices. The hatchlings make her very happy, and all the nesting pairs are incredibly proud of their broods and want to show them off to her. They’ll be learning how to fly soon, and she doesn’t want to miss a single moment of it.”

“She’s like a little mother, isn’t she?”

“Yes. A better mother than most human ones, I’d say.”

Hux could only agree. Not that his own mother had been in any way a bad one – quite the contrary, actually – but Eira seemed somehow to embody the very essence of motherhood in a way that was difficult to compete with.

“I got news from the borders,” he said after a few moments of silence. “They’ve all closed up as much as they can. No one’s going in or out of the land without good reason for doing so. There’s been a few arguments and the like, but nothing major.”

“That’s good.” Kylo got up and went over to the window, looking out at the setting sun. “I hope it’s enough. These wars, the Crows’ actions… it still feels wrong. I don’t like it one bit.” He took a deep breath, steeling himself for something. “I… I never got a chance to speak to you about it before, but my last audience with the Raven… He gave us his blessing. To, uhm, to commit to each other.”

“You don’t seem very happy about it,” Hux remarked. “Please tell me I haven’t done you wrong in any way?”

Kylo snorted.

“If you had, you’d be dead. No, I just… He’s been disinclined to give his blessing to other Crows before. I was expecting to have to work hard to convince him, but he actually seemed very pleased. I- I guess it just surprised me. But that’s what I get for thinking I can understand the minds of those wiser than me.”

“Well, either way, isn’t it a good thing? To know that the Raven himself has blessed us?”

“It’s a very good thing.” Kylo smiled as he came up to him, pulling him in against his chest and resting his chin on his black-clad shoulder. “Now, tell me about this fair we’re having. I’m afraid it’s yet another thing I’m not accustomed to. When I was a hatchling, our mentors took great care to stay away from such things, since they could be too distracting to our young minds, and when I got older I was usually too busy with other things to have the time to explore them. I assume there will be a lot of people and a lot of drinking. I’d like to know what I’m up against.”

Hux chuckled and kissed him, before explaining the exact nature of the fair. It was one of the highlights of the year for the Hux clan and its vassals. Bright coloured tents would be sprouting like mushrooms on the fields below the castle, various contests would be held, the clan’s traders would be arriving with goods from all over both North and South, people trading and buying what they needed for the coming winter, while ridding themselves of things no longer needed. There would be dancing and entertainment, and, as was the custom in the North, plenty of drinking and general shenanigans. It would probably be a good idea to stock up on bandages and thread, as it could get rather rowdy. There were a lot of marriages being arranged over the week, as tended to
happen when a lot of young folk were left to their own devices along with large amounts of drink, and also a lot of young hot-heads needing a stern talking to about various disgraceful behaviours. Not an ideal situation for Ren, but being the Crow, he would at least be able to demand enough respect even from the worst drunkards that no one would pester him too much. The fair was always held just before the harvest, to allow everyone to get rid of any last bits of summery laziness before the hard work began.

It was also one of the few times when Hux himself participated in the activities. Any warchief who thought himself above wrestling in the mud, or trying to punch someone else’s teeth out, while the rest of the clan were cheering and taking bets, was a warchief not worthy of his name. He didn’t even need to win; these things looked brutal as all the seven hells, but no one took them all that seriously. It was a good way to blow off some steam, and the chieftains knew Hux had his title for a good reason. These games were far from enough to challenge his authority – if nothing else, him partaking in it with the eagerness he usually displayed was additional proof as to why he deserved to lead. He rather looked forward to it, knowing full well he would probably not be able to stop himself from showing off a little bit more now that he had Ren to impress.

The Crows, of course, did not partake in any of the violent activities. If there was more than one present, they usually slunk off to some quieter place to trade gossip and secrets, and probably performing rituals and activities common people would be happier knowing nothing about. Tarkin had always looked forward to it, gathering the younger Crows to him like a parent, practically glowing with happiness at having more of his kind to teach and spend time with. Hux wondered how Ren would handle the other Crows. Aya would probably receive a warm welcome; they had seemed to get along very well, especially after the bonding ceremony. He didn’t know much about the inner workings of Crow society outside of the context of sacrifices, but he assumed they would at least be civil to each other – which was, frankly, more than he could expect from the ordinary clanspeople.

~*~*~

Maybe it had been a mistake, Leia thought to herself, to tell Rey about Ben. Her daughter hadn’t been herself at all over the past few weeks; gloomy and distant, always excusing herself right after the meals, spending more time in some remote corner of the library or up on the garden walls looking North. They hadn’t broached the subject again, and Leia wasn’t really sure she wanted to. Rey was a good girl, intelligent, loyal, very dutiful, but she was still a young girl – Gods, her bleedings hadn’t even become regular yet – and if there was one danger with young minds, it was their tendency to misunderstand things. Even the Queen had made mistakes at her age; decisions that had seemed like the only right thing to do at the time had later proven either stupid or downright disastrous, but she had learned from them, hardened, and made sure never to repeat them. Rey was of a different stock. She was such a gentle, innocent, creature, prone to believing far too much good about people, and far too sensitive to the darker aspects of life. Leia did her best to help her overcome it, but deep down she knew that only experiences and hardship faced would be able to mould her child into the next Queen. Well, better that than turning into a murderer. She only wished Rey would talk to her. It worried her more than she let on to see her so upset. To find out she was the sister of such an evil being must have shocked her to the core. She sighed to herself as she prepared to head for her throne room, straightening up and putting on her most regal expression. At times like this she really wished Han were around more. He was much better at handling situations like this.

~*~*~

At dawn on the first day of the fair, Hux woke up just before dawn, and took a moment to enjoy the feeling of Ren curled up against his chest like an oversized kitten – glad to hear his heart beating slow and steady and his breaths deep and relaxed for once. The Crow had been sleeping
ever worse than usual, worry over the whole situation with the other territories and his master’s
strange avoidance affecting him more than he would let on. There had been a few stressful days for
him lately as well; a bout of some sort of skin disease affecting only the smaller children spread
through the castle like wildfire – unsurprising since most the younglings were raised together – and
up until his last patient was declared healthy two days earlier, Ren had had his hands full
comforting crying children and doing his best to alleviate their painful rashes and the high fevers.
Hux had been glad Caelin and Mara were safely away from this when he saw how hard it was on
the little ones, but Ren hadn’t shared his views at all. This was a horrid illness, yes, but the vast
majority pulled through just fine, and it helped build their bodies up to withstand more serious
ailments in adulthood. But they both knew Ren struggled as much as he did, and the Crow’s mood
had been absolutely foul for several days until he’d successfully beaten the pox back into the hole
from whence it crawled up. It had also helped his mood that several vassal clans had been arriving
early, among them several of the Crows Ren had gotten to know during the summer solstice, and
their reunion had been a heartfelt one.

Hux had his own reason to be glad at his underlings’ early arrivals; with Mitaka’s help, he’d sent
for some appropriate gifts, and he’d been notified that all his requests had been fulfilled – the
chieftains had all considered it quite an honour to be part of it, and Hux was relieved. He just did
not have it in him to beat them too into submission if they’d decided to be idiots about it as well.
Now, he gently extracted himself from the bed, kissing the Crow’s soft black curls before putting
on a loose tunic and a pair of breeches to go fetch one of them. Ren stirred a bit in the bed, a dark
eye blinking open followed by an eyebrow raised in question.

“I’m going to get us some breakfast,” Hux said softly. “Go back to sleep, love. I’ll be back in a
little.”

“You’re giving me breakfast in bed?” Kylo asked with a sleepy smile. “You’re going soft,
warchief.”

“A few indulgences here and there never hurt anyone,” Hux snorted. “What’s the point of being
the leader if one can’t allow oneself a little decadence every now and then, hm?”

“A fair point.”

Kylo burrowed back down, more or less disappearing under the blankets and furs – chasing the
remnants of Hux’ body-heat as if it was a sacred thing. Hux chuckled to himself as he made his
way down the stairs – they both knew that would take a lot more than a quest to spoil his Crow
rotten to make him soft, but Kylo was most certainly not going to pass up such an excellent
opportunity to tease him. Well, Hux would show him indulgence when he got back to the tower.
With Mitaka’s expert advice to lean on, he’d acquired a list of gifts that would make sure this
courtship would not go down in history as anything less than befitting of royalty. The items he was
headed to the throne room to collect would have the men and women of the clan green with envy,
he’d made damned sure of that.

Mitaka and his vassal chieftain Rurik, who was Aya’s bonded chieftain, were waiting for him in
Mitaka’s study, neither of them having bothered to dress properly – today was one of the days of
the year when the ruling class were expected to sleep in so as to be able to make a more dramatic
entrance when the fair was declared open. On the scribe’s desk were three packages, and Hux
inspected them all while Rurik looked on nervously. He certainly didn’t want to disappoint his
war chief in a matter as important as this, and it would reflect poorly on his Crow as well that she
hadn’t managed to make sure his gifts were up to standards. Hux didn’t know what the correct
protocol was for dealing with a Crow who disrespected a higher ranking member of their order,
and he was quite frankly not sure he wanted to either. As he looked over the items, he smiled
widely and nodded his approval to Rurik. The chieftain visibly relaxed let out a breath.
“You have not only met my expectations, Rurik,” Hux said. “You have exceeded them. I will see to it that everyone knows your people crafted these. With any luck, your traders will be even more busy than usual this year.” He took the other man’s hand in a firm grip. “Thank you, old friend. This means a lot to me.”

“You’ve been my friend since before we grew beards, Hux,” Rurik smiled. “This is the least I could do for you. He’s a fine man, your master Ren. Aya tells me there hasn’t been the like of him for centuries, and I believe her. He’s done wonders for that stone cold heart of yours, that’s for certain. The Gods have blessed you, friend, truly.”

Hux pulled him in for a hearty embrace, before turning to Mitaka. The scribe seemed very pleased with the outcome as well, having already begun meticulously wrapping them up in fine paper – a luxury near unheard of here in the North. Wasting precious paper on gifts, when fabrics or leather could do? But Mitaka had insisted it was necessary, and sent dozens of Ren’s birds out to the other clans with inquiries about such materials. It was a lesser miracle that none of the birds had told on them to their master, but here they were. Mitaka had actually managed to acquire several different varieties of this paper, and was now doing some very complicated things with a length of white silk ribbon; wrapping it around the gifts in intricate ways.

“I’m fairly sure Ren’s more interested in the contents than the package,” Hux said, watching in confused fascination.

“You leave the finer aspects of gift giving to me, my lord,” Mitaka said. “I will not have you deliver gifts like this to the highest ranking Crow in the North, wrapped in dead animals. There are limits to what you can get away with, even for a warchief.”

Hux and Rurik shared a glance, both of them deciding not to comment on that. When Mitaka deemed the gifts adequately wrapped, Hux took his leave – telling the other two to get back in bed and enjoy this rare opportunity to sleep late. Rurik laughed, saying something about Aya chasing him out of bed soon anyway, before disappearing around a corner, and Mitaka didn’t even say a word – just went straight for his quarters. Hux carefully carried the items towards the tower, stopping a servant on the way and asking him to have the Crow’s and his breakfast delivered to the sitting room of the tower as soon as possible. It was an honour among the servants to be allowed to enter the Crow’s tower, and the young man shone like a sun at the prospect.

When he got back, he found that Eira had settled in on the pillow next to her master, head tucked under a wing, and a lock of black hair safely gripped by her little foot. The Crow himself had found his way back out of the nest he’d made, and was now sleeping on his stomach, one arm under the pillow, and the other resting in front of his face – showing off his massive tattoos. They’d made progress lately; their sleep shirts hadn’t been worn for a few weeks now, and Kylo was becoming more and more and more comfortable with another naked body next to his. Apparently, the Crows rarely saw even each other unclothed, unless it was some sort of ritual setting. Hux found it strange, seeing as nakedness was such a natural part of life in the North, but he guessed it had some purpose. He got undressed, and put the gifts down on the bed before getting back in – taking Kylo’s hand and kissing his knuckles.

“Wake up, love,” he said. “I’ve got something for you.”

It still took three more attempts before Kylo’s eyes opened to peer questioningly at him. Hux nodded towards the three packages on the bed, and Kylo sat up, accidentally waking Eira – who cawed surly at him, before hopping over to another pillow. Kylo looked at the packages in surprise, then at Hux.

“You’ve… you’ve got me gifts?” he asked. “How- I mean… what- why?”
Hux sat up as well, chuckling lightly.

“I was informed by Mitaka – in no uncertain terms, I might add – that I had been sorely lacking in a very important area of courtship. I have not shown adequate appreciation and affection for you in public, and I mean to change that now.” He held out the first gift. “Open this first.”

Kylo’s eyes had widened, but now he smiled like a sun.

“You’re courting me like the Southerners do.” A delighted laugh escaped him. “You would do that for me? I- thank you.” He inspected the package. “A white ribbon, for pure intentions and honest feelings. Mitaka wrapped this for you, didn’t he?”

Hux nodded, running a hand through his hair. Ah, so there was a science to this whole gift-wrapping part after all. Well, perhaps he should have asked what it meant before he handed it over. Kylo very carefully, almost reverently, unwrapped the package. In it was a simple but elegant rectangular wooden case, with a simple bronze lock, and the Hux clan’s emblem with a… Was that a raven? In the middle of the inverted sun symbol was the same raven in flight as Ren had worn as a brooch the day after the large battle – the brooch being his only personal belonging that didn’t have a practical purpose; his one and only luxury. Hux had made him his own crest, he realized, eyes going wide as he looked at his warchief – the question spilling over into his mind before he could even stop it, and Hux just nodded. With hands trembling from excitement, he opened the case, to find a set of obsidian knives made for his medical practice; impeccably sharpened and polished, not a flaw to be found on them. They were beautiful.

The next gift was a cloak, made from the finest black wool – soft and light, but warm – made to be worn all year around. Over the shoulders and covering all the hems – even around the hood – were the softest, most incredibly shiny black mink fur, and holding it together at the neck was Ren’s new crest, engraved on a silver hexagon. It looked even more expensive than most garments he’d seen his warchief wear, and all he could do was run his hands over it and stare like an idiot at the vast expanse of perfect midnight. He swore to himself he’d wear it until it fell apart around him, never let a single opportunity to show his gratitude go to waste if he could at all help it. This was a gift worthy of kings, and he knew it.

The last gift, a much smaller one, had Hux blushing and scratching his beard awkwardly – it was obviously the most significant. Inside the box, carved from the same dark wood as the case holding his new knives – his crest engraved even on that small surface – was a silver chain, made up from hundreds and hundreds of tiny rings put together into an intricate pattern; a King’s-chain – nearly identical to the one Hux himself always wore. Hanging from it was a single red stone in a delicate silver cage. Hux gently took it from him, bringing it over his head – it only just made it over his ears and nose, which was good, because then he wouldn’t lose it – letting it come to rest against his chest.

“Mitaka said I should wait with this,” he said, voice slightly shaky. “But I don’t want there to ever be any doubt about your standing in this clan and in my life. I did not give you a Queen’s-chain, because you are not below me – do you understand? You are mine and I am yours. You are blood of my blood.”

Kylo could only nod, too full of emotions, too aware of the significance of those words, to do anything other than pull his warchief close and bring their lips together. But Hux was right to give it to him now – traditions and protocols be damned, because this was exactly what Kylo needed; this physical proof of emotions neither of them were able to properly put in words yet, something to physically touch and hold on to, something to remind him of Hux when he could not be there himself. Something that, for now, was theirs and theirs alone. When the time came for Ren to display enough of himself for it to show, he was fairly certain that their new union would have
already been consummated, and he would be able to show it off proudly with no one being allowed or even able to challenge his right to wear it.

~*~*~

“Rey, with all due respect,” Poe, one of her two personal bodyguards and personal companions, said. “Have you lost your mind?”

They were sitting under a baldachin down on the private strip of beach that belonged to the royal palace – one of the few places Rey could go to be left alone, as only the royal family and their personal guards and servants were allowed there. Poe and Finn, both of them a few years older than her – decorated soldiers, and two of the very few genuinely good men she knew – had been a part of her life for the last five years, and even though they could never say it, they were really more of her friends than her servants.

“I have to do something, Poe!” Rey protested, straightening the sleeve of her tunic. “She sent father up there to kill my only brother, for a crime he committed elven years ago! It’s wrong! We don’t even know if he’s the same person anymore, even less if he even wants to ever visit the South or make any claims to the throne! I can’t just stand by and let it happen, I just can’t.”

“You do realize we’ll stick out like peacocks in a henhouse up there, right?” Finn queried.

“You don’t have to come with me,” Rey said. “Considering you both spar with me regularly, you should know I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.”

“In combat, yes,” Poe said. “But when have you ever gone on a journey without an official entourage and at least fifty servants? It a very different world out there for the regular people. If you’re going then we’re all going – if nothing else then because the Queen would kill us if we let you go alone. But you have to understand that it won’t be easy. It’ll be very dangerous. Very, very dangerous. Those clans don’t joke around, and the Crows… Don’t get me started on them. They can do things our Doves don’t even dare dream about. If we get in trouble, Rey, there will be no one coming to help us. No one.”

Rey sighed. Finn and Poe looked at her anxiously. She was right, of course, and she wasn’t a spoiled, frail little thing – absolutely not – but the North was the North, and if you showed even a hint of weakness, it would swallow you whole. They didn’t even know how to get to the Hux clan’s territory – the Northerners never let anyone make it back to the South alive with a map of the lands. If they got caught and someone found out that Rey was a member of a royal family, there was no telling what they’d do to her.

“I have to do this. I have to know for myself what the truth is. If Ben is evil, then at least I’ll know it first hand. If he isn’t, then maybe I can stop mother and father from making a terrible mistake.”

Poe and Finn looked at each other. They knew her well enough to know that when her mind was made up, the God of Mornings himself could not make her change it. Besides, the Queen’s decision didn’t sit right with them either – and in the end, their loyalty lay first and foremost with Rey; where she went, they would always follow.

“We’ll leave as soon as possible,” Finn said. “When can you be ready?”

~*~*~

Han and Chewie were more than a little concerned about their safety at that moment. They’d managed, through various shortcuts and innovative navigational decisions managed to cross the
border to the North two days earlier, a whole week ahead of their schedule, only to find themselves in a war zone – a full blown battle blocking the way further north, forcing them to make camp and try to find a way around it. Chewie was incredibly upset at the state of his native lands, signing wildly to Han about the whole North having lost its mind, and Han had to agree with him. The battle was brutal – more of a flat out massacre than anything – and it seemed that even not the Crows could control the bloodlust of their respective clans. What in the world was going on here?

“I’ve said this before,” Han said, looking at his friend. “But we need to find a way around this quickly, or we’ll end up dead too.”

“I think we might be able to get around it if we go east,” Chewie signed. “The battle seems to be moving away from that direction.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” Han nodded after a few moments of studying the bloodshed. “Better wait for nightfall, though. Don’t want the horses to get all spooked up in the middle of it.”

“The Hux clan’s still a long way away,” Chewie signed despondently. “If this is going to be the situation all the way there… We might be stuck up here over winter.”

“I know, old friend.” Han patted him compassionately on the shoulder. “I don’t like this any more than you do, but orders are orders. We have to try. Too late to turn back now.”

~*~*~

Ren had to admit that he was enjoying himself more than he had thought he would, as he strolled around the fair with Eira on his shoulder. There were a lot of impressions, and he had taken Aya’s advice to heart when she told him to put additional walls up around his mind before going out there, but the feelings were positive. Everyone were happy and relaxed, and it had a very soothing effect on him as well – allowing him to ease out of his shell enough to make conversation with the vendors and the guards who greeted him. Hux had offered to go with him, but Ren had declined. He needed to do this for himself. If he had to rely on Hux’ presence every time he ventured out among people he wouldn’t be much of a Crow at all.

There was another, perhaps slightly more childish, reason as to why he wanted to venture out on his own. He wanted to see for himself the effect the sight of him in his new cloak would have on the people, and for that he needed Hux to be elsewhere – since the warchief had a very awe-inspiring presence himself, which would make it hard to guess if it was the cloak, or just the warchief causing the reactions. But as he walked among the colourful tents and stalls, he relished the reverent looks he received. Respect. The word echoed around in his mind. They looked at him with the uttermost respect. No more of that horribly insulting concubine theme that he had secretly feared – only a sense of amazement at the sight of him openly displaying his approval and acceptance of his warchief’s courting. They were happy for Hux, he realized. They considered him lucky, blessed even, that Ren deemed him worthy of his attention. The Crow himself had never even thought of it that way.

“For such a clever hatchling, you are very daft sometimes,” Eira commented. “Of course he is lucky to have you. Warchiefs are as common as the stars, my little one. There is only one Kylo Ren. At least your mate is wise enough to realize that himself.”

“Now, now, Eira,” he objected. “You cannot fault me for not understanding all of this. I was never raised to have any of it, remember? The Doves are celibate, and not even all Crows ever bond with someone like this.”

“Well, now at least you learned it. That shiny he gave you should be proof enough. That is a proper courting gift, that. He will be a good mate if he keeps giving you shiny things like that.” She gave
an excited little flap of her wings. “I smell something good! Close by. Give me some.”

Ren chuckled.

“Your wish is my command, as always, little mother.”

The ‘good’ turned out to be dried fruits of different kinds, and the vendor absolutely refused payment, assuring Ren it was an honour to be allowed to gift his magnificent companion with a bag of treats or two. Eira even let him stroke her back as a thank you.

Eventually, though, he made his way back to the castle, the other Crows joining him along the way – before shutting themselves in his tower to discuss the state of things in the world around them. The Crows were never off duty, not even for something like this, and right now they all felt the same pressing need of talking about the disturbances in the Force with others who would actually understand them. Foregoing the furniture, they settled directly on the fur covered floor in front of Ren’s fireplace, as was customary when they were alone together, the crackling of the flames forming a calming background noise. They made a large helping of tea, and produced various little treats from their bags and pockets, to ensure that they wouldn’t go without at least some nourishment in case this dragged out. No one would disturb them, they knew better. Even Hux was barred from the tower until Ren said otherwise.

“I haven’t had so many nightmares in years,” Aya said once everyone had been served their tea and settled down. “And the spontaneous visions… I have a near constant headache, and I can’t seem to rid myself off it.”

The other Crows nodded and murmured their agreement. They looked to Ren, who also nodded, sighing deeply.

“It’s the same for me,” he said. “And with all the disturbance, it’s been harder than usual to have clear visions even when I seek them. The things I see… I don’t know if I can trust them.”

“Everything’s so… fragmented,” another Crow, an older woman with white hair nodded. “One moment I’m seeing something that is clearly a vision, the next I’m thrown into the emotions of a battlefield somewhere. There hasn’t been this much disturbance since before Palpatine and Vader were killed – Gods have mercy on their names.”

“I haven’t heard back from the Raven in months,” a third Crow, a small, gangly man confessed. “Do you think it might have something to do with this? I- I can’t remember having done anything wrong, but I don’t understand why else he would neglect my letters unless it’s due to some more pressing matter.”

“You have done nothing wrong,” Ren assured him. “I haven’t been able to contact him in weeks now. Neither by smoke nor bird. I… I don’t like it. There something about all of this that just feels… wrong.”

“He won’t even speak to the Master of the Knights?” Aya was horrified, and she wasn’t the only one. “This is unheard of!”

“I try to think that it’s because he is occupied with the clan wars,” Ren said, running a hand through his hair. “It must be a nightmare for him, too, to have this situation erupt before him. But still. We’re the only land not currently involved in the conflict – we could be of help, a neutral party. I don’t understand why he would cut us off like this. And… I don’t understand why he hasn’t sent my knights in to deal with the situation either. Surely, that would be the logical thing to do? I managed to contact Silass, and she said they were still at the House. The Raven has not given
them any orders besides continuing their training.”

“Strange, indeed,” the older woman nodded. “It seems we are left to make our own strategies for this situation. I’ll be thrice damned before I let this land I love so much succumb to this plague of madness.”

“Hux would never allow it.” Ren put his hand on her shoulder. “But you’re right. We have work to do, and precious little time in which to do it. Let’s not waste it.”

Chapter End Notes

This took forever and I'm so sorry for the delay! I did a double update-thing for Lullabies, and then my spooine brain decided to take me for a ride through Mt. Brain-fog.

The skin disease is chicken pox, in case you're wondering. The affected children were put in Ren's care to keep them away from the other children in hopes of minimizing the spread.

The gifts. I'm sorry if that bit became too mushy, but it kinda had to be. Obsidian knives because Obsidian can be sharpened to a point where it could probably cut a mountain in half if you really wanted to, so they're excellent for Ren to use in his work. The cloak being both practical and luxury all in one - a way for Hux to show everyone that oh yeah, he's rich as a bloody dragon, and he can afford to dress his Crow in the finest things money can buy. For reference of the King's-chain and Queen's-chain, please Google "Kungakedja" and "Drottningkedja" (Swedish for King's-chain and Queen's-chain respectively). They're very old Scandinavian designs, worn - as far as the professionals have gathered - by kings/chieftains and their spouses during the Viking era. I think they're very beautiful.

The birds don't have a word for jewellery, so Eira simply calls everything a 'shiny', because that's the important bit to her.

And things are going on down in D'Qar. Rey think mom Leia's actions are fishy, and won't stand for it. Never let it be said that Rey is the type to sit by and let bad stuff happen. And she's got Poe and Finn to watch her back I mean, what could possibly go wrong?

Chewie uses sign language, and Han has made sure everyone around them has learned it as well.

Mitaka being sassy is one of my favourite things. Hux let's him, because it's Mitaka, and in this situation, Mitaka knows best.

And the Crows sit down to talk. For non-native English speakers: A group of crows (as in the bird now, not Ren & Co), is actually called a 'murder', while a group of Rooks is a Parliament. But I didn't want to make anyone scared by naming the chapter A Murder of Crows. There are limits.

Do the Knights have canon names, btw? Do tell me if they do - otherwise I'll happily continue making up my own^^
It was so strange, Rey thought to herself as they rode along a small road a bit away from the main trading route, to be able to see – almost from day to day – how not only the landscape but also the seasons themselves changed as they made their way north. In D’Qar, summer had still been at its highest point; warm, sunny, and with beautifully blossoming flowers and plants everywhere. The fields and plantations spreading out like lush green carpets against the surrounding landscape, and the sea glittering like a thousand mirrors in the sunlight – inviting the people along its coats to come cool themselves down after a hard day’s work. But in the three weeks they’d been traveling now, the vast expanses of perfectly tamed and cultivated nature had been growing steadily more wild and untamed. Fields and cypress groves yielded to meadows filled with the strangest flowers, never-ending forests of birch, oak, ashes, and all sorts of trees she couldn’t quite remember the names of from her old school books.

Gradually, though, they began to notice the change in the climate; the nights and mornings were growing colder, the sun set earlier, and even at its zenith it felt less and less warm against their clothes. Now they were seeing more and more shades of bright yellows and fiery reds in the crowns of the trees they passed, and the scent of the sun against the dark trunks began to mix with a hint of frost. Rey was absolutely entranced by it all. At the court, everyone spoke of how rough, savage, hostile a land the great North was, and how they couldn’t understand how anyone would ever choose to live up there, what with its short summers and blistering cold winters? Why would anyone choose such a life when they could have the warmth and sun of D’Qar all year around? But Rey was finding it harder to see why one wouldn’t want to experience this majestic land and all its different faces. Yes, it was true wilderness, this. They had encountered enough of the local wildlife to know that for certain, but how could anyone not see how hauntingly beautiful it was with all its strange contrasts between deep, silent forests, roaring rivers, towering mountains and cliffs? The night before they’d camped by a lake the size of the entire palace grounds – not a single human to be found anywhere, the surface of the water completely still, sans for the little waves created by some sort of birds gently cruising along further out from the shore. Rey had spent her entire guarding shift staring at the moon reflecting against the surface, completely in awe of the silence, her own tininess before all this.

Poe and Finn were quite affected as well, only years of strict military discipline keeping them from simply sitting down and staring at everything around them. But still, it was noticeable that this land did something to them. They spoke much lower, as if their voices would be offensive in the face of this undisturbed nature, and they were even more careful than usual when they hunted for small critters to fill out their supply of flour and grains, wax-coated cheese, and other travel friendly foods. They had deliberately stayed off the main roads for as long as they could – just in case the Queen had sent people to retrieve them, but in a few days they should be far enough to the north to be able to travel safely with the other people on one of the large trade routes that spread out across the land. Just as well: they would need to re-supply some things soon, and at the moment they were still very much walking blind. They knew they were going in the right direction, consulting their compasses regularly, but in order to find out how they could get to the Hux clan’s central stronghold, Skye Castle according to the information they’d managed to acquire, they would need to ask someone. That part was not something they looked forward to; it was a massive risk, and there was no telling how it would go with the three of them being so obviously Southern, and none of them speaking any of the Northern tongues or dialects. But they didn’t have much choice – after all, nothing good would ever come out of them turning back around now.
“What do you mean, ‘the border is closed’?” Han stared wide-eyed at the guard in front of him. The man was almost taller than Chewie, and wore impressive armour together with an even more impressive sword, a huge hand resting on the hilt. “Why?”

“There has been an outbreak of the plague,” the guard explained patiently. “No one is permitted to enter or leave the land until the Crows confirm it has run its course.”

“You’re awfully calm for someone in a plague stricken land,” Han snorted. “I don’t believe you. Now, I’m telling you – again – that me and my good friend here need to see the warchief and his Crow. It’s a matter of the utmost importance.”

“So you say.” The guard wasn’t impressed at all. “An important matter, which – let me guess – you cannot disclose the nature of to anyone but the Crow.”

“Exactly!”

The guards, five of them that Han could see, shared a glance and a chuckle. The one whom he’d been speaking to gave Han a pat on the shoulder that nearly sent him to his knees.

“We’ve heard that one before, my good man,” he said. “We still can’t let you enter. The warchief forbids it. Now, you are more than welcome to stay at the inn over there for the night.” He pointed to a house, just south of the rest of the buildings making up the border village and garrison. “Not wise to stay outside up here when fall’s approaching. Lots of creatures out there that will be happy to eat human flesh if given a chance. But tomorrow, you’ll have to turn back. The border is closed.”

“Can you at least send a message?” Han tried. “You’ve got to have birds here to send to the castle, right? Just send them a note that ‘Han Solo’ needs to speak to master Ren in person. He’ll know who I am. I promise you.”

“Of course he will.” The sarcasm was practically dripping from the guard’s voice. “Now, be on your way, or we’ll have to take you into custody for creating a disturbance.”

Han was positively fuming as they headed for the inn, but he was determined not to give up. There had to be a way to convince the guards to let them pass. If all else failed, they’d simply have to make a break for it – even though it would probably end in disaster. All around the village and garrison were open fields, recently harvested and impossible to hide in. they’d have to go at night, but even then it would be risky. It had to be done, though: they had no idea of how many days of travel they still had to get through before reaching the legendary Skye Castle, and this simply couldn’t wait much longer. There had been too many delays as it was, and they would soon have to look for some way to spend the winter up here without anyone killing them before they could head back south come spring.

~*~*~

The Crows had spent the entire week in long discussions about the future of the North in general, and their clan in particular – only taking breaks to go out and show the appropriate amount of admiration and support for their respective chieftains when they went at each other in the fighting ring. Aya had explained to Ren that Hux was doing this to prove his strength and worth not just to the clan, but to Ren especially. This year, him partaking in the fighting was more personal than ever before – because he needed to show both Ren and his chieftains that no one deserved the Crow’s affection more than him, that no one was better equipped to care for him.
They all agreed that it was a bit silly, given that the Crow had already settled on him, and wouldn’t be allowed to bond with anyone else, anyway. But Ren had to admit to himself that the sight of Hux in only his trousers, covered in blood and mud, beating opponent after opponent into the ground with the use of both strength and technique, as well as every dirty trick in the book, was a very impressive and alluring sight. The green eyes shone like emeralds under the layer of filth, and the red hair flowed out like a fiery halo around his head with every move. Of course, he complained about the aches and sores for days afterwards, mainly, it seemed, to have an excuse to let Ren massage his sore muscles and sleep in. This appeared to be as traditional as the fighting itself, because none of the fighters seemed to crawl out of bed before the sun was already high in the sky. The Crow found it amusing to see what his lack of sympathy did to his warchief. Hux seemed to take it as a personal challenge to return with wounds actually worthy of his time, and he endured the treatment with more grace than Ren had expected him to.

But eventually, the fair had been declared over, and everyone had returned home. The Crows had agreed to stay in close contact with each other – setting up meeting places for whenever it would be possible for them to leave their homes for a few days – and make sure their birds never ceased to scour the lands for news. They all felt better for knowing they were in this strange situation together, but still none of them could quite shake that unsettling feeling in their guts that something was very, very, wrong.

The harvest had kept everyone busy from sunrise to sunset, Ren and Hux included, and now, with the leaves falling from the trees in bloody reds and sun-kissed yellows, the hunting season was in full tilt. As the Crow, Ren didn’t participate in the hunting. He was kept far too busy overseeing the activities at the castle, together with Mitaka, and taking care of whatever injuries the workers and hunters had managed to acquire that day.

Hux, however, spent nearly every day out with Phasma and his closest circle, bringing in copious amounts of fresh meat to be prepared and preserved for the winter. One of the benefits of Skye Castle’s location was the fact that some of the tunnels down under the mountain were more or less permanently covered in ice – allowing them to store otherwise perishable foods for long periods of time without having to worry about it going bad. They made good use of them in the winters, building up a large supply, in case they needed it. The meat not stored in the frozen tunnels and rooms was usually dried to use as rations for their troops and emergency supplies in case everything else had been eaten or gone rancid.

The castle buzzed like a giant beehive with activity, and if there ever was a time everyone – from youngest servant in training to warchief and Crow – felt proud of their clan, it was during this time of the year. Everyone did their part to ensure the health and prosperity of their clan, and no one complained or tried to worm out of it – they all knew they depended on each other to make it through the harsh winter months.

~*~*~

Hux knew, the second Béla reared and threw him off, that he really should have listened to Ren that morning when he’d said he had a bad feeling about today’s hunt and urged Hux to stay at the castle, and let the hunting party go without him – just for today. The warchief had assured him that he would take care of himself, and that it was rare that anyone got hurt during a deer hunt. Sure, there were plenty of both boars and bears roaming the forests, but they would probably be scared off by all the people and horses long before anyone could come too close. Now, though, he cursed himself for his sudden strike of reckless bravado.

Scrambling to his feet, he only just managed to take in the sheer size of the boar in front of him before it lunged at him, all snarls and tusks and massive weight, and he had to throw himself to the side to avoid being impaled. It was no use, he realized, as a sharp pain erupted from his right thigh...
where a crooked, yellow tusk buried itself deep in his muscle, probably grazing the bone, too. He struggled to get his dagger free from its sheath so he would at least have something to defend himself with as the beast went at him again, and again. He could feel the impact of its hooves against his ribs, the creaking sensation of several of them breaking, as he tried to keep himself out of the way of the tusks. He stabbed wildly with the dagger, making impact here and there, but he knew he was in real danger of dying right there on the spot. There was a reason they always wore armour while hunting boars – and today, being a day for deer-hunting, they had foregone the armour in order to stay more mobile. Oh, how he regretted it now.

~*~*~

When the warchief’s hunting party arrived back at the castle, with a barely conscious Hux on a stretcher between two horses, Ren was already waiting for them. The birds had alerted him when the boar had attacked, and after sending them to warn the party, Ren had prepared for their arrival – a tight lump of fear and anxiousness heavy in his belly. He ordered them to follow, and they gently deposited Hux on Ren’s own bed, which had been fitted with clean sheets and extra pillows to make the warchief comfortable, and got to work.

It was bad. Admittedly, it could still have been much, much, worse, but Hux was still seriously injured by any account. He’d lost a fair amount of blood from the wound in his thigh, and one just above his hip, there were several broken ribs, a broken collarbone, a multitude of cuts, scrapes, and bruises – and guessing from the large cut at his right temple, he also had a concussion. The bones he could set in his sleep, that wasn’t much of a worry, and the cut to his head would heal fine with some stitches and a bandage. The two main reasons for concerns were the wound on the thigh and hip, and he took every conceivable measure to make sure they were properly cleaned out and bandaged to minimize the risk of an infection setting in. The wound to his hip, although big and nasty looking, was a clean cut, thankfully, and thus easier to manage, but the other wound was bone deep, and any slight speck of dirt could cause an infection that could take his leg.

But he worked efficiently and tirelessly, not showing Hux any more softness than his other patients, despite the warchief’s loud curses and protests when his many mixtures and ointments made contact with the damaged tissue. Despite his weakened state, it took Phasma and two more men to keep him still and prevent him from making anything worse while Ren treated him. It wasn’t until hours later, when he’d done all that could be done for the moment, and sent the rest of the people away, that Ren allowed himself to feel everything he’d pushed away in order to be able to perform his duty. He fixed Hux with the steeliest glare the warchief had ever found himself the target of, an eyebrow raised, and his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned against one of the bed-poles.

“A boar,” he said, voice cold and trembling from the flurry of emotions raging under his calm demeanour, threatening to break loose at any moment. “Really?” Hux swallowed, and nodded weakly. Ren pursed his lips. “This, Braith, is why you should always listen to your Crow when he tells you things. I know better than most just what sort of damage a beast like that can cause. I have had the dubious pleasure of losing more than one patient to infections caused by those tusks – not to mention the crushed bones and internal bleedings. I told you to stay at home today, and you patted me on the head like some… like some silly child, and went on your merry way! What, the prospect of killing things seemed more important to you than the advice of your Crow? You think I would bother informing you if I wasn’t certain it was important? You think because I am in love with you I have suddenly gone all soft? I am not some hysteric old mother, Braith! When I tell you there is a reason to worry, I mean every single word of it! You could have died, you damned fool!”

His voice had risen to an angry shout at the end, the fear and frustration bleeding through, and causing his voice to break slightly at the last words. Despite his best efforts, tears began escaping from the corners of his eyes, and he wiped them away with the back of his hand, turning his back
on Hux and going to stand by the window, trying to reel himself in and keep Hux from seeing him like this. The warchief had shrunk under the force of his anger, never having had it directed at him before, nervously glancing around at the objects rattling against the surfaces on which they were placed, or floating several inches in the air above them.

He bowed his head in shame.

“You could have died, Braith,” Ren whispered again, only just loud enough for him to hear.

“I’m sorry,” Hux managed, a lump rapidly forming in his throat. “Kylo, love, I’m so sorry. You’re right, I got so caught up in the thrill of the hunt that I didn’t think anything could go wrong. I should know better. I do know better. My love, please look at me. Please.” Kylo turned his head slightly, cheeks wet with tears and dark eyes flashing with anger and fear still. “I am so sorry. I will never ignore your advice again, I swear it on the lives of my children.” With his good hand, he patted the space next to him on the bed. “Please come here. Please let me hold you. I don’t want to see you this upset. Please, let me make it better somehow.”

After a moment of hesitation, the Crow came over and settled close to him on the bed, careful to avoid any injured areas. Hux wrapped his good arm around him and pulled him as close as he could get, kissing the black hair where he could reach.

Ren watched him closely all throughout the night, keeping him from falling asleep until he was sure the worst part was over and he was no longer in danger of falling out of consciousness. As the hours progressed and Hux’ body allowed itself to relax, the pain came with a vengeance, and for the following day and night, he drifted in and out of sleep, courtesy of Ren’s powerful pain-medications. Just as well, since it saved him from having to hear the scolding Ren delivered to Phasma and the other hunters about their outrageous negligence, which had led to their warchief being so seriously injured. What if it had been an enemy? What if it had been a throwing knife or an arrow? Hux could have died out there, because they weren’t by his side to protect him.

It was nothing short of an utter disgrace that they were allowed to call themselves his friends and high guard, if they couldn’t even keep watch on him. Had they completely forgotten that the entire North was at war? How could they be so certain no one would try to start one here, too? He didn’t care about any of their excuses about tracks and spreading out to cover more ground, and not even Phasma got away without some scathing words directed at her.

By the time he was finished, both the great hall and all surrounding rooms had been evacuated by frightened clanspeople, and they all quickly came to the general agreement never to anger their Crow. Two of Phasma’s high guards had been stupid enough to talk back, leading them to lie panting on the floor like fish on land after Ren had used the Force to choke them for their insubordination. Then he’d told them to take the boar’s corpse out of the castle and burn it. It was bad luck, eating the beast that nearly slayed their leader, and the thrice cursed boar itself certainly didn’t deserve the honour of being food for this clan. Never had the high guard obeyed an order faster, and the carcass was in flames within the hour.

~*~*~

Despite Ren’s best efforts, a fever did set in, and for several days he had to work day and night to keep Hux cool and the wound clean. Hux was not a very compliant patient, even while burning up with fever, so for the most part Mitaka had to act as the voice of the two rulers while Ren used every trick he knew – and occasionally brute force – to keep his warchief in bed. When the wound on his thigh needed cleaning, it took several people to hold Hux down and still while Ren removed the pus and cleaned it with strong-smelling and frightfully scathing mixtures – completely ignoring the curses and threats raining over him every time he so much as looked at the wound. For two days, Hux had been in a bad enough state to keep the clanspeople up waiting, praying to their Gods
to let him live. It was a cruel reminder to them all how easily their lives could be cut short. A hunting trip gone wrong could happen to anyone – even their warchief – and then his great skills in battle, his fearsome reputation, and his brilliant strategic mind meant nothing. The Goddess claimed whomever she wanted, when she wanted – they were all equally insignificant to Her.

But Ren was not called a master for nothing, and he eventually managed to bring the fever back down and force the infection out of Hux’ system by means of a collection of the most foul-tasting potions Hux had ever encountered. Still, the wound would take time to heal if he wanted to avoid any lasting damage, and so for the time being warchief Hux was confined to his bed – news he did not take very well. Ren was entirely unsympathetic, and merely reminded him that it was his own foolishness that had put him there. At least the Crow let him spend the days in a comfortable recliner that had been brought up to the Crow’s sitting area, allowing him to continue his planning without aggravating his injuries – but at the moment, the relationship between Hux and Ren was on the colder side. Hux was ashamed of himself and his juvenile lapse in judgment, and Ren struggled with the near loss of the man who had rapidly become his entire world – they both knew they needed to talk it out, but with the warchief still being very affected by the pain medications, and Ren kept busy from sunrise to past midnight running the clan, there was precious little opportunity to do so.

~*~*~

The summoning came just before dawn. Ren felt rather than heard the call to the audience chamber; a slight pull inside his head, and he crept out of bed as quietly as he could, putting on a simple tunic and breeches before heading down into the main area of the castle building. A part of him wanted to be relieved to finally hear from his leader again after so many weeks – months even – of that nerve-wrecking silence. But another part, a just awoken and quiet voice at the back of his head, could only whisper over and over how wrong this all felt. For the first time in eleven years, Ren realized that he had had begun to feel doubt, and he knew he had to keep the Raven from ever finding out just how deep it ran.

Once in the chamber, he quickly got the smoke going, hands operating on their own accord after so many years of doing it, while Ren carefully built a protective wall around some of the more dangerous thoughts. He didn’t think Snoke would go looking for them, but he couldn’t stop himself from feeling less than certain – something that almost scared him more than the thought of having the Raven’s mind invade his again. It was an experience he would rather gut himself with a twig than go through that again – to have one’s innermost space brutally torn open and laid bare for the scrutiny of another. It had taken months and months for him to stop flinching away at the slightest touch of another’s thoughts after that. Only the tender care of his knights had helped him overcome it. At that time he’d thought he’d deserved it, but now he couldn’t for the life of him remember what his supposed crime even was. At least now he knew; some of his thoughts were borderline treasonous, and he also had the thoughts of the other Crows fresh in his memories. He had to protect them as well – their minds would shatter if subjected to the same intrusion that he had once endured.

Cutting open the scar on his forearm from where always took blood for this purpose, he knelt on the floor and awaited his Raven’s attention. Snoke appeared, looming over him like a mountain, those eerie black eyes glimmering in what little light existed wherever he was at.

“You were quick to heed my call,” the smoky figure said, clearly pleased. “I’m glad to see your obedience has not suffered in my absence.”

“I live to serve, master,” Ren said, bowing his head. “When my master calls, I come.” It felt like poison, just saying the words. He realized they were no longer true, quickly concealing the
realization behind the wall.

“You’re a pride to our order, my hatchling. Always were. Which is why I never doubted that you
would do fine even when left temporarily without my guidance.” Snoke leaned back a little,
studying the man in front of him. “But now, there are things happening in the world that requires
the full attention of us all. Therefore you and your subordinate Crows will leave for the House of
Night as soon as possible, preferably within the week.”


“You will find out once you arrive. Do I need to inform you, Ren, that this is not negotiable?”

Ren swallowed.

“I can’t, master,” he said, bracing himself for any repercussions. “My warchief… he’s been badly
injured, and the clan is currently depending on me for guidance. I cannot leave so soon. I will need
at least two weeks before he is strong enough to go back to his duties.”

“Your warchief and his ailments are of no concern of mine,” Snoke’s voice turned cold. “You will
do as you are told, hatchling. In seven days time I expect you to be on your way north.”

“But, master, you said that- *aaah*!” His entire body seized as pain invaded every last inch of his
body, the feeling like lightning, like being crushed under heavy rocks, like ice, like fire all at once.
Snoke watched as he squirmed on the floor, trying to remember how to breathe, but his master – as
usual – showed little pity. Once he finally let up, Ren could do little else but lie there, eyes blown
wide from terror, sweat soaking through his clothes, breath coming in shallow, short pants.

“It seems you’re not as obedient as I thought anymore,” Snoke said. “That will have to be
corrected. I cannot have the master of the Knights of Ren display such blatant insubordination in
front of the other Crows.” His figure began dissolving. “Seven days, Ren. Your Crows are already
on their way to you. Tarry, even for a day, and you will be punished.”

It took the better part of an hour for Ren to pull himself off the floor, put out the fire, and begin the
slow, staggering walk back to his tower. He would never have made it if Phasma hadn’t been on
her way back to her own quarters after a night in someone else’s bed. She half supported, half
carried him up the stairs and helped him back into bed. Ren didn’t even manage to thank her before
his consciousness fled him.

~*~*~

Hux watched with ever growing worry as Ren moved about the tower. When he’d woken up a few
hours earlier, Ren had been asleep next to him, despite the fact that the sun was already high in the
sky, and Eira was pulling frantically at his hair, cawing and chatting, trying to wake him. When he
did wake up, he seemed slow, sluggish, and he moved stiffly, as if he was in great pain, but he
didn’t share the reason why – only apologized for oversleeping and causing Hux to go without
further pain relief. The warchief had assured him that the pain wasn’t so bad anymore, and that
he’d rather like to stop taking those confounded potions now. Normally, Ren would’ve offered a
witty retort and a grin, but now only a small smile showed, followed by a murmur of if he was sure
he was feeling better, then why not try.

He’d been watching him for hours now, seated comfortably in the recliner, going over the daily
business for the clan with Mitaka and Phasma. The Crow was still acting like he was trying to hide
his pain, but Hux saw the winces, the slow movements, the shaking hands, and the way sweat
dotted his brows. Eira had landed on his shoulder, and he’d nearly buckled, the bird herself
hurrying off and chatting worriedly at him. Deciding that this needed addressing, he sent Mitaka and Phasma away, claiming fatigue, and once they’d closed the door behind them, he turned to his Crow, who had just dropped a jar full of some sort of leaves and was clearly upset by it.

“Kylo,” he said gently. “Leave the jar be for now, and come here. Please.” He had never said that word so many times in his life as he had since the incident with the boar, but it seemed to work well on Kylo. “Love, please. You look like you’re about to faint.”

Kylo didn’t answer, but sank down in the closest chair with obvious relief, hiding his trembling hands in his wide sleeves. Hux gave him a moment to gather himself before he spoke again.

“What happened?” he asked. “You seemed fine yesterday, but today you look like you were the one to wrestle a boar during the night. Will you not tell me?”

“I’m-” Kylo began, then paused, swallowing hard. “I’m leaving.”

“What?” Hux could have sworn his heart actually stopped for a moment. “Why? What did I do wrong? Surely, the accident wasn’t-”

“You did nothing wrong,” Kylo assured him, voice trembling slightly. “The Raven, he… He has ordered all Crows to return to the House of Night. I have no choice, Braith. I have to go.”

“But, why?”

“I don’t know.” Kylo curled on himself a little, pain flashing across his face. “I tried to tell him that I couldn’t, because you’d been wounded. That I needed more time. He… He did not approve, and he made sure I understood that.”

“He did that to you?” Hux felt sick. How was that even possible over such distances?

“It was my own fault. I shouldn’t have questioned him. I know better.”

“Don’t defend him,” Hux growled, anger taking over. “No one deserves to be in such pain merely for questioning someone.”

“But it’s the truth,” Kylo sighed. “He is the Raven, I’m only a Crow – it’s not my place to question his orders.”

Hux chose not to question that statement for now. It would only lead to an argument, and neither of them was in any sort of state to handle that right now. It was bad enough that they had been so distant with each other for the last few days - they didn't need further trouble.

“When- when do you have to leave?”

“Seven days from now, if I know what’s good for me. Aya and the others are on their way here.”

“When will you be back?”

Kylo looked more helpless than Hux had ever seen him, the tears he’d been fighting back finally spilled over.

“I don’t know.” He hid his face in his hands. “I don’t want to go, Braith. Everything just feels so wrong, and I’m just- I’m just so conflicted, I don’t know what to do. I can’t stop feeling like something really bad will happen, and I can do nothing to prevent it!”

Hux reached out as far as he could with his good hand, which was just enough to give Kylo’s robe
a little tug, and the Crow allowed himself to be pulled over to the recliner and hidden against his chest. Hux kissed his hair, a gesture Kylo had said made him feel safe, and gently rubbed his shoulder and back.

“Will you be able to speak to me through the Force?” he asked. Kylo nodded. “Then I want you to do that. No matter what time of day – if you need me, reach out. I will be here, even though I’m not able to reach you very well yet. You said I only needed to think what I wanted to say, right?” Another nod, Kylo seemed too tired to speak. “Then we should be fine. I won’t let you go through this alone. I promise. I don’t care if it’s the Gods themselves, Kylo – if someone harms you ever again, I will hunt them down and slaughter them all.”

Chapter End Notes

Sooo.... Sorry about the delay. I have no excuse, I've just been slacking off like mad.

What can I say? Accidents do happen, even to warchiefs. And they don't exactly have hospital standard medical facilities or antibiotics. Infections happens, and Hux needed a little reminder of his own mortality - he's been too badass for a while now.

Snoke is an asshat. An abusive, horrible, asshat.

And things will not be peachy for anyone for a while. Just so you know.

Also, heads up! I'm heading off on two trips out of town starting next week. I'll be back on August 17, and updates will be back to normal after that, but I can't guarantee I'll manage to squeeze out another chapter for this fic before that. I still have Lullabies to update as well. But I'll be doing some low key chapter planning and stuff, so things should probably run at least somewhat smoothly. :)

And, as always, I'm always happy to chat over on tumblr, and you're more than welcome to drop by my askbox and/or drop me a message :)}
When the border patrols caught Han and Chewie attempting to sneak across the border the third time in as many nights, the two were promptly arrested and quite literally thrown into separate jail cells in the cellar below the garrison’s main building. Han had really thought for a moment that the guards’ relaxed demeanour signified the usual lack of proper training and competence – as many rulers tended to send the new men down to the borders to toughen them up a bit, and the misbehaving and lazy ones could also frequently be sent to the border garrisons as punishment – but apparently these men were not only highly trained, but had regarded the Southerner and his friend as a source of amusement until they finally decided that enough was enough, and had them arrested in a shamefully short time.

Han hadn’t been disarmed and neutralized this quickly since he was a youngster, and he wasn’t quite sure how to feel about it. Chewie was conflicted as well. His Northern blood demanded he be proud of his fellow Northerners and their skills, but at the same time he was very ashamed at having been so easily apprehended. And so now the two men sat in their respective cell, quiet, mutually agreeing not to speak about this ever again should they survive this. Now it was just a matter of time before the guards would return with the decision about whether they would live or die. They could try to break out, of course – there was always that possibility – but they were both too old and too slow to get away again once they were out, if they even made it that far, so their best option for now was to simply sit there and contemplate their lives and their choices.

“You could, you know, tell them who you are,” Chewie signed after a few hours. “The Queen would never allow anyone to execute a family member of another royal house without first speaking to them in person. Hux, as far as I know, is a civilised man. Maybe he does that, too?”

Han sighed.

“Maybe,” he nodded. “We can try, but I wouldn’t put too much hope into it, old friend. Right now I think our best option is to try and run for it on the way to the gallows or whatever it is they do here.”

“Gallows,” Chewie signed. “Or beheading. Depends on the access to timber and suitable trees.”

“That’s not very reassuring, Chewie.”

Chewie shrugged.

“Could’ve been worse. Could’ve been an arena. Like down in Arkanis. Or they could’ve fed us to the dogs, like down in Tatooine.”

“You. Are. Not. Helping.” Han gritted out. “Sometimes I wonder what they do to you northern folks to make you so completely flippant about the subject of death and executions.”

“The Goddess takes who she wants, when she wants,” Chewie shrugged. “We’re not stupid enough to think we can change her mind. Besides, we take death far too seriously not to joke about it. The only thing both kings and slaves have in common, after all. We’re all ants to her – might as well laugh about it.”

“Chewie. You are my friend and brother. You are my family, and I love you dearly – but right now
you are not helping this situation at all. I need to think right now. My son is in this land somewhere – probably convinced we all hated him – and the woman I love wants to kill him. I need to do something to fix this pile of fish-waste of a situation before this becomes a war.”

“I thought you were going to kill him.”

“He is my son, Chewie – my only son. My firstborn. I will not kill him any more than I would kill Leia or Rey. I just need to see him. See what became of him. Ask him what happened, where we went wrong. I –” He hid his face in his hands. “I just need to see my boy.”

~*~*~

There had been four very busy days following Ren’s summoning. He had tried to inform the clan in a manner as relaxed and assuring as possible – not wanting them to know how upset he was by this – but the clan had still not taken it very well. Their Crow being forced up North in the middle of burning war, being forced to leave their wounded warchief behind – what, had the Gods gone mad all of a sudden? Everyone and their cousin wanted a moment of his time, and together with Mitaka he had been kept busy from sun up and long past sun down trying to organize as much as he could before leaving. Hux was thankfully making good progress, and could now even manage to walk between rooms with some support, making it easier for him to take over some parts of his duties again. Against his wishes, Ren had carried him downstairs to his own chambers, so he wouldn’t have to battle with the stairs every day. Only the Crow’s promise to spend every night with him there placated him enough to allow it.

Aya and the other Crows had arrived the night before, all of them pale and shaken, more or less falling into Ren’s arms for some form of comfort – their leader gathering them to himself like little children, stroking their hair and whispering soothing things before ushering them inside and up the stairs to his tower. That, more than anything had upset the people around them – to see that every single one of their Crows was upset and anxious about this journey, that something had happened to them, something bad. Ren had sent for extra beds so that they could stay in the tower until they left; it was the safest place he knew in the castle, and they had spent the entire first night behind that closed door, discussing Gods knows what, and emerged in the morning, pale faced and hollow eyed – jaws hard set, and gazes determined.

This did not look good.

Hux had watched how the insecurity and fear, the look of a beaten dog, had crept back and taken over Ren’s entire presence and posture again over these few days, and he wanted nothing more than for his body to heal so he could take his army with him and burn the world down, acre by acre, until they found the Raven. It would be his great and absolute pleasure to make sure it took at least a week for that wretched old man to die for undoing all the progress it had taken Ren months to make. He knew full well he was being dangerously close to blasphemy with his thoughts, but he could not care less, because Ren was steadily working himself into a spiritual crisis, and this was something he could not in any way afford at this moment. So many people looked to him for guidance, so many people studied his every move, his every last little frown, to see if there was cause for worry. And that was only here at the castle; what would happen once they reached the House? What would the other Crows think when they saw the Master of the Knights of Ren looking like a dog waiting for his master’s boot to hit?

At the moment, he was sitting naked at the edge of his bed while his Crow gently but thoroughly washed his skin clean with a sponge dipped in very pleasantly smelling water. As much as he enjoyed Kylo’s hands on his body, the intimacy of the touch, there was nothing particularly sensual or erotic about it – but he couldn’t help but feel very loved as he watched how carefully
and gently Kylo worked the sponge over his skin, always making sure he wasn’t scrubbing too hard or came too close to a wound or put too much pressure on the area where most of his broken ribs were. The Crow really didn’t have to do this, usually this was something an older, trusted, servant or one of his aunts would do – washing the body of a wounded warrior was a fairly mundane task, and nothing that really merited any thoughts about more… sensual aspects of nakedness. A body was a body, and that was that. But Kylo refused to let anyone else do this, seeming for all as if he considered this some sacred task, and Hux certainly was not stupid enough to complain about it. He just wished he wasn’t in this situation to begin with.

Once Kylo had finished washing his skin and carefully dried him with a soft cloth, he went about changing the bandages on the wounds on his thigh and hip. Both looked better by the day – no signs of any more infections, only the healthy shade of healing skin, but the areas were still sore, and it stung when the Crow gently examined the area before cleaning it up and re-wrapping it in new bandages, and re-positioning his left arm in its sling to keep his collarbone healing properly. After helping Hux move to lean against the mountain of pillows stacked against the headboard so he could sleep somewhat comfortably, Kylo’s hands lingered on his shoulders, his eyes fixed on the contrast between his own pale, ink covered skin, and Hux’ lightly tanned, freckled one, as his hands seemed to move of their own accord across Hux’ chest and shoulders – as if he’d never seen anything like it before. Something in the mood of the room changed as Hux reached out and caressed his cheek before burying his good hand in Kylo’s hair and drawing him closer.

A blush had started rising across Kylo’s face, eyes wide, uncertain, expectant, and altogether much more innocent than Hux had ever thought them capable of as they locked gazes with each other. Tilting his head slightly to give them both a better angle, he brought their lips together, gently and slowly, not trying to press further until he felt Kylo respond and reciprocate fully. The kiss remained slow, but deepened and filled with a searing, molten heat – spreading through their blood like lava, their grip on each other becoming more tight, more insistent, more desperate, but when Hux reached for Kylo’s belt, the Crow stopped his hand and broke the kiss, searching eyes locked onto his.

“Braith,” he whispered, voice breathless, ragged, beautiful. “A-are you sure you’re up for this? You’re only just beginning to heal properly, this could make it worse.”

Hux kissed his forehead and gently shook his hands off his arm.

“I don’t know when I will see you again, love,” he said, eyes glassy with emotions, voice hoarse. “I can’t stand the thought of never having held you in my arms before you leave. I want this, Kylo. These wounds be damned, I want… I need to know that this, us, has been consummated and made solid – that you are mine and I am yours.” Some tears were starting to build up at the corners of his eyes, and he willed them to remain unshed. “If something were to happen to you, my love… I can’t stand the thought of it. I need to know that I at least held you once. That I at least showed you once how deeply and truly I love and desire you.”

Kylo closed his eyes, treacherous tears escaping down his cheeks as he nodded, resting their foreheads together as he helped Hux remove his belt, before bringing their lips together again. Together they peeled layer after layer off of Kylo’s body, Hux kissing every new patch of skin bared before him, committing it all to memory, the salt of his and Kylo’s tears mingling with the taste of the Crow’s skin under his lips and tongue, Kylo’s broken whispers of his name falling like some unholy, heretic prayer from his lips, desperate hands in his hair, over his shoulders and back, the soft black hair like silk between his fingers, the stark contrast between the compact black of the massive tattoos and the pale skin beneath it. He needed to remember this. All of it.

The North was a harsh land, it’s winters cruel – but nothing so cruel as the Goddess, who took what she wanted, when she wanted; kings and slaves equal before her, and this summoning of the Crows sounded too much like the sweet whisper of Faeries luring hunters to their deaths. They
knew better than to believe Kylo would return unaffected. All they could hope for was for him to return alive, to return without having been damaged beyond what could be repaired. He needed to remember Kylo like this; the mesmerising blend of frailty and strength, pure allure and innocence, compassion and cruelty – there was no telling what man the Kylo who returned would be.

This painful, tear-filled, trembling and desperate moment was all they had. It had to last them. They had to make it count.

As the last garment fluttered to the floor, Hux coaxed Kylo to straddle his lap, taking care to avoid the injured areas, and kissed him deeply. Kylo pulled his hair free of the braid it had been kept in while he washed, running his hands through it, gripping it tightly as if those blood-on-copper strands were his salvation, his anchor, his only life-line on a storming winter sea – their kiss transforming into something more hungry, frantic, their bodies picking up a rhythm, moving restlessly against each other as if they wished to blend together into a single being. Only when air became a dire need did they part, and only an inch, panting breaths still mingling, eyes fixed to one another, the entire universe shrunken down to this room, this bed, this shared heat, this moment.

Kylo held out one hand, and the small vial containing a slick substance designed for this purpose alone – it had been sitting in a pocket of his robes for weeks now, waiting for him to finally, finally, gather the courage to do this – to give this last little, but oh so significant piece of himself to his beloved warchief, to finally belong to him.

“Let me,” Hux whispered, as if his voice alone could shatter the air around them. “Please.”

Kylo only nodded, not trusting his own voice to carry sound, and poured a generous amount onto Hux’ waiting hand. As Hux prepared him, with such gentleness and reverence it made Kylo’s heart ache, the warchief’s lips never once left his skin or lips, the touch of them, the trembling breath following it… it was worship; complete and utter, blasphemous worship. Right here, in this moment, the only God to Braith Hux of the North was Kylo Ren, son of no one – and even at the threat of damnation, no force in the universe could ever make Kylo apologize of feel shame for the strength and power he felt surge through him at the realization. The Gods could damn themselves – in this moment, they were naught.

As their bodies finally joined together, the feeling of being connected, of belonging, of finding that place, the moment, where the world finally fit together – where the world finally made sense – washed over them with the power of an avalanche, causing Kylo's hold on the barriers of his mind to slip, obliterating the walls remaining between their minds until they simply could not tell one mind from the other, one touch from the other, one thought from the other – only moving together, chasing the sensations rippling through them, breaking apart and coming together as something new, something tainted yet pure, solid, invincible; a bond between souls as well as bodies and hearts – consummation at its highest peak.

Their climaxes built slowly but hit with the force of an ocean, torn violently out of them; their minds blanking out, the world ceasing its existence, hearts stopping, breath halting, lips locked together as if they would die if they let go. Slowly moving through the aftershocks, letting their minds settle back inside themselves, they took their time to caress each other’s sweat-soaked skin, nails softly dragging over scars and tattoos, painting abstract little patterns in the salty rivulets running down their chests.

As they parted, Hux ran his hand through Kylo’s sweaty hair, swearing to himself he’d never seen anything more beautiful in his entire life than this Crow, sweaty and dishevelled, hair tousled and lips swollen, eyes red from the tears still escaping them, but smiling like some divine creature, glowing in the darkness of the room.

“I love you,” Kylo whispered, gaze soft, hand trembling from exhaustion as he reached to tuck a
strand of hair behind Hux’ ear. “Whatever happens, whatever the Gods bring upon us when we reach the North, know that. Know that I love you more than anything, and that I would burn this world to ash should it try to break us apart or take you from me.”

“I love you, too,” Hux smiled, green eyes dark with emotion. “More so than I ever thought myself capable of and more so than I ever thought it possible to love another. I am yours and you are mine. And if anyone objects to this or tries to part us, I will tear them and the world apart to stop it from happening – I promise you that. By the Gods, Kylo, my heart was yours from the first moment I ever laid eyes on you.”

Kylo blushed, leaning in to kiss him again. He’d have to wash Hux’ body and clean his wounds all over, but for now he wouldn’t move for anything in the world. Not when he’d finally found the belonging he’d spent his life searching for.

~*~*~

“So, if I understand you correctly,” the guard said, exasperatedly. “You are Queen Organa’s secret husband, and our Crow, master Ren, is your long lost son – and you need to find him before the Queen starts a war, because of something related to the order of succession. You do realize how daft this all sound, I hope?”

Han sighed. They’d been at it for hours already. The guards asked the same questions over and over again; who are you, why are you here, where did you come from, what in the Gods names is so important that you try to sneak across our border three times despite being denied entry? The angles and wordings differed, but the subject remained the same. At least they’d stopped hitting him an hour or so ago, when they realized he wasn’t changing even a word of his story, even under the threat of execution for trespassing on forbidden ground. Now, they were all looking at him as if he was some sort of madman, vividly hallucinating a reality that made absolutely no sense to them.

“Trust me,” Han said, too tired to even bother being flippant. “I hear exactly how stupid this all sounds. I understand perfectly why you’re not inclined to believe me – but this is still the truth. I am Queen Organa’s paramour, though. Not husband. I’m not a nobleman, so we can’t marry. But master Ren is my- our, only son, who was lost to us years ago. We believed he’d died, up until a couple of months ago when we learned he not only lives, but that he’s joined the Crows and is now serving under your warchief. I need to see him. Drag me there in chains and put a sword to my throat if you need to – but please, I am begging you, let me see him.”

The guards looked at each other for a moment, and then Han found himself dragged back to his cell while they deliberated. They hadn’t bothered questioning Chewie, partially because no one here could sign, and partially because of their disgust that one of their fellow Northerners had joined up with this piece of Southern garbage, thus betraying his own noble northern blood. The giant man was very offended by this, since he could probably offer a much more coherent statement than Han, and he knew the rules around here – but he also understood the depth of his own treachery. One did not simply leave the North behind only to return in the company of a Southerner – people had been killed on the spot for less than that.

The guards were apparently having trouble coming to a decision; the hours passed one after another, and there was little else for Han and Chewie to do but try to get some rest, say their prayers, and hope that they’d somehow make it out of here. It was nearing evening when the locks on the door to the cells were opened and two guards came in, one of them carrying two bowls of some sort of stew on a tray. After they’d been served their dinner, the guard that hadn’t carried their food – probably one of the officers, given the way he carried himself – looked them over.

“You’ll be pleased to know that the decision regarding your fate has been passed on to higher
“We’ve got a personnel change scheduled tomorrow, and some of our lads are heading home to Skye Castle – so the Captain decided you’ll be going with them. You’ll remain restrained for the duration of the journey, but at least you’ll get to live for a while longer.”

“T-thank you!” Han sputtered. “Thank you for believing me! We’ll be on our best behaviour, you have my word.”

“We don’t believe you,” the guard retorted. “But we’re not stupid enough to risk anything, just in case that mad tale you told is true. The decision is up to the warchief and Crow – they’re the only ones with the authority to judge in your case. I’d rather they be angry with us for wasting their time than for being guilty of starting a war. You won’t be able to keep anything secret from the Crow anyway.”

With that, he left the cells, and Han and Chewie were left alone again. Finally, they were getting somewhere! Han felt a twinge of giddiness inside as the news settled in his mind; he was going to see Ben again. He was actually going to meet the child he thought he’d buried more than a decade ago but never for a second stopped mourning. While he never suffered any delusions about being a good man, there were limits – even for him – and condemning his own child to death had left a mountain of guilt on his shoulders that no distance, no running, no amount of drink could ever lessen. If they hadn’t had Rey to care for, Han was certain Ben’s death would’ve been the thing that finally drove them apart where nothing and no one else had succeeded.

~*~*~

“This is all wrong, my little one,” Eira whispered worriedly inside Ren’s mind, from where she was perched on Hux’ headboard, watching her master watch his sleeping warchief. “It’s not right to part a mated pair like this. To force you away from him like this. It’s not right. I wish I could go with you.”

Ren didn’t answer right away, instead he caressed Hux’ bearded cheek, running his hand though his sleep tousled hair, before placing one last kiss on those plump lips and withdrawing – putting his gloves on, followed by his helmet and cowl.

“You’re right,” Ren said. “This is wrong, and it shouldn’t be happening at all – let alone like this. But I have no choice, little mother. I must protect you all.” He stroked her white head. “He will need you by his side while I’m gone. Try to speak to him – our bond is strong. You should be able to reach him through it if you try.”

“I will do my best.” She hesitated. “Please come back to us, hatchling of mine. Me, him, the Flock, we need you. You are what holds us together.”

“I promise. Tell the Flock to protect him – no matter the cost. And don’t let him feel alone. Stay close to him always. Both you and the rest of the Flock.”

“We will keep him safe.”

Taking one final look at the sleeping face of the man who had come to be the very centre of his world, Ren bit back the tears, forcing himself to straighten his back and hold his head high. The time for softness had passed. Kylo, lover of Braith, Crow of Skye Castle had to remain behind. If he was to keep them all safe and find a way out of this mess, he had to make sure that the Raven saw only Kylo Ren, master of the Knights of Ren, and son of Death – his most loyal and devoted follower, and his ruthless, unquestioning enforcer. He had to pretend that this newfound heart of his was nothing, that he had never felt even a flicker of doubt, that nothing mattered more to him than his order; that he remained forever the one true follower.
It was the only way he could keep the other Crows and the Raven at a safe enough distance for him to work out what was going on and how he could protect those he cared about should it be something malevolent. He felt sick to his stomach that his belief in his leader was so shaken that he couldn’t even trust his intentions any longer, but he made himself ignore it. There was no room for it now – he knew what he had to do; his first and foremost duty as Crow: Obey the will of the Gods, protect his clan, and guide his people. He would not let anything come in the way of that – not even himself.

With a last little nod to Eira, he turned and left the room – knowing that Hux wouldn't wake for hours yet, courtesy of the sleeping potion he had slipped him along with some pain medication earlier. It was better this way. Having to say goodbye would break them both.

~*~*~

There was no moon that night, and the clouds hung thick and low, bathing the landscape in ominous darkness – making the black shapes of the Crows almost indistinguishable from their surroundings as they exited the front gates, reins tight until they were safely across the bridge, before galloping down the road, quickly swallowed up by the night. Only the sound of hooves against solid earth could have given away their departure had it not been for the fact that every single guard, servant, and stable boy awake that night had been put into a trance-like sleep by the midnight clad people hours earlier – once the Force let go of their minds, the Crows would be long gone.

It was better this way.

It was the way of the Crows. They came and they went, goodbyes were not in their nature to give, and they could offer no promise of return. Better then, to be swallowed up by the midnight they wrapped themselves in, to seem like a strange dream in the hearts and minds of the people around them. Better then, to remind the ordinary men and women that Crows were creatures of another world, another order, and that mortal rules did not apply to them.

It did not mean their hearts did not break, left behind as they were with people who would not understand their actions and who might not ever truly understand them.

The Crows rode on, silent and grim. To anyone who saw them pass, they would have looked like a bad omen, a promise of dark times ahead.

How dark, only the Gods could tell, and they remained silent.

~*~*~

Hux knew, from the moment he woke up a few hours after dawn, that Ren was gone. There was an empty feeling to the air around him, his heart heavy and aching as if it had been hollowed out and robbed of its core. He couldn’t say he was surprised; there had been something final about the way he’d whispered goodnight as Hux fell into sleep, something of a farewell in the way he had cleaned them both up after their lovemaking, the way his eyes were dark, empty pools of sorrow when he thought Hux wasn’t looking. Of course, he understood why Ren had to do this, why he had to go, why he had to leave in the night like a common thief with no wishes of a safe journey – no tears shed – for him. The North was harsh, and the Gods had little sympathy for the frail hearts of mortals in the face of their own, grander schemes. No, it wasn’t a surprise, but that didn’t make it hurt any less.

All he could do now was to throw himself into his work, to keep his plans moving forward. When spring came, the North would march. They would take the South, raze it to the ground and rebuild
it in the name of the Gods of the First Order – with or without their Crows.

It was going to be a long winter, and for the first time in ages, Hux wished he had his children with him – their carefree laughter filling the halls like music, their playful antics bringing some much needed light to the castle – banishing the dark silence caused by Ren’s absence. But he knew better than to risk moving them. They had to stay at the coast with his mother, until it was safe for them to step back into the light.

It was going to be a lonely winter, and Hux willed his heart to match the cold of it – there was no more room for softness now. War was coming, and the Hux clan were the ones sounding the drums. There was no room for a heart in this, not anymore.

He had to keep them all safe, no matter the cost.

Chapter End Notes

I, uhm, have no excuses at all for this. Sorry.

I'm not entirely positive I managed to display the severity of this situation, and how uncertain it is for everyone what will happen and what the consequences will be for them all - but yeah. It's not looking good, folks.

Han is having something of a change of heart, and it's going to be interesting to see what happens when you put Hux and Han in a room together.

I'm heading North for a few days, Aug 10th -17th, to visit my parents, and while I will be bringing my laptop with me, their internet is a disgrace to technology, so I probably won't be able to update. Lullabies will be updated before the next installment here, so be on the lookout for that sometime after the 17th.

Like always, your comments give me life and motivation to keep pouring my heart and soul into this fic, so do tell me what you think before you go, yeah?

See you soon, my lovelies!
The Crows pushed their horses as much as the animals would let them, in order to reach the House as fast as they could. The creeping, crawling sensation down their spines told them they were closely watched, and none of them wanted to give Snoke any reason to punish them for their tardiness – despite the fact that they had left well before their days of grace ran out. They knew better than to take any risks when they were already on his bad side. Passing villages and garrisons at careful distances, only stopping for a few hours of rest each night, and sharing their meals while in the saddle, they were covering the distance at a good speed, but the House was still several days away. None of them spoke much, it was like they had all withdrawn into their own minds, looking out at the world from some safe space deep within their souls – protecting what they could of themselves, trying to keep their resolves steady as the changes in the landscape told them they were so far from their homes they might as well be in a different world.

Other Crows, having received the same summoning, joined them along the way, glad for the company on the long journey – but the silence and tension from the Hux Crows spread quickly through their ranks, and more than ever they seemed like creatures of some supernatural kind; a grim and silent dark mass of billowing cloaks and pale faces under deep hoods. The sound of hooves against the cold ground the only thing that marked them as real things as they passed through the lands. There must be at least thirty of them now, riding together in tight little groups – each clan to their own, with the wandering Crows dotted about among them. When they made camp at night, clan Crows kept their distance from each other, the wandering ones stayed at a respectful distance from them, and everyone made sure to give master Ren and his Hux Crows a very wide berth – knowing better than to come too close to a Knight without due permission, even at a time like this.

Frost covered the ground around their camp, glittering like little stars in the pale light of the slowly rising sun. The horses’ breaths stood like glittering clouds around their muzzles, their heavy blankets and bridles tinting white from the vapour coming off the animals’ warm bodies. Kylo sat alone on a fallen log a little to the side of the Hux Crows’ camp, elbows on his knees, and chin resting on his glove-clad knuckles – lost in thought. He’d barely gotten more than a few hours of sleep since they left Skye Castle, the darkness bringing out more memories than he’d faced in a long time – the loss of Hux’ soothing presence next to him proved to have a larger impact on his state of mind than he’d initially thought. Now sleep eluded him, and he hated the thought of all the other Crows hearing his tormented sleep through the thin fabrics of their tents. So he volunteered to guard the campfire, only allowing himself short periods of rest when one of his own Crows were there and the other Crows asleep.

He occupied himself with prayers, planning, going through his vast amount of forms – sword cutting through the still night air with low hisses as he cut his way through it, imagining the ghostly forms of long dead enemies around him and channelling his anger and frustration through the blade. There were so many possible scenarios that could happen once they reached the House, so many things that could go wrong, a few that could go right, far too many minds to keep track of and loyalties to gauge. The confusion and worry was reeking off of his fellow Crows – upset feelings and anger from the still on-going conflicts simmering much too close to the surface for his liking. Gathering all the Crows under one roof after a summer like this one had a potential to end in disaster. They rarely fought amongst themselves, but when they did – it never ended with less than brutal bloodshed as their own violent natures got the better of them.
Crows were not good people. They didn’t need to be. Sometimes that was their strength; the ability to make the decisions no one else could make, do the unspeakable things no one else could bear doing, face the horrors no one else had the strength to face. Sometimes it was their weakness – balancing the light and dark inside them was never easy, and certainly not when their entire world was being shaken to its core and centuries old peace was shattered in their hands. Darkness always was their home, and like anyone else, when things went wrong they would always want to seek the safety and comfort of a familiar place.

Kylo knew he had to keep his own fears and worries as hidden as he could. As the master of the Knights, he was supposed to lead by example. If they could see him give in to fear and anxiety, it would be all too easy for them to succumb as well, and then there’d be no way to save the situation. So he prayed and planned, pretended the compulsive repetition of fighting forms was nothing more than him maintaining his strict training routine, and hoping they’d believe him. It was a small blessing that most of the other Crows were so afraid of him that they wouldn’t dare reach out with their minds in his general direction, let alone hone in on him in particular. He could hide nothing from his own Crows, though. Aya, especially, had an uncanny way of understanding the discord inside his head. She was a tough woman, Aya, Northerner through and through – a formidable fighter, wise teacher, and a brilliant healer, and he’d joked with her often that he wished he could’ve had her as a mother instead of the one who bore him. Now he felt her Force presence as she approached the place where he sat, gathering her heavy cloak around herself as she took a seat next to him – looking out over the surrounding forest. They remained like that, sharing a companionable silence for a while, until she reached out and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Did you get any sleep at all?” she asked.

“An hour or so,” Kylo shrugged. “I’m alright.”

“We both know you’re not.” She glanced over at him. “We’ll be at the House within a week. I know you worry about what will happen – we all do – but remember; you are the master of the Knights. Your words and opinions carry more weight than most of the Elders’. Our siblings will listen to you. They will hear you out.”

“It’s not our siblings I’m worried about,” Kylo sighed. “Some of them will agree with me, some won’t. Some I can convince, and others I’ll have to fight. It’s as it’s always been. But the Gods are so quiet, Aya. I’ve always heard them whisper in the back of my head – ever since I was a little one they’ve been there, guiding me, keeping me focused, but now there’s just… silence. I don’t know what to do. What if… what if they’ve left us?”

“They’re still there. They’re still with you.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t,” Aya admitted. “But I have to think they are, because I can’t bear the thought of them not being with us.” She sighed and patted him on the back. “Come now, we have to get going. Lots of ground to cover yet, so we might as well get an early start.”

He nodded and followed her back to the camp, where his Crows were already breaking camp and getting their horses ready. Askr bumped his ugly head into Ren’s chest in an unusual display of affection when Ren came over to saddle him, and Ren allowed himself a few moments of running his fingers through his thick mane and stroking his soft muzzle – much to Askr’s contentment – before he got to work. Soon only the piles of smoking ashes were left to tell anyone had ever been there – the Crows already dots against the horizon, and by the time the sun reached its zenith, they were miles away.
Hux was in a foul mood, had been ever since he woke up to an empty bed and the distinct lack of Ren’s presence in his mind, and he simply could not bring himself out of it. Ten nights had passed now. Ten nights alone in the large bed at the top of the tower, the hours dragging on and sleep evading his grasp. The days were better, if only just a little, since he could keep himself relatively occupied with planning, ruling, and generally sticking his nose into everyone’s business in order to update himself on the things he’d missed during his long confinement to the bed. The itching and stinging in his wounds grated on both his nerves and his patience, and though Ren’s assistants were quite competent in wound care, their bandaging never seemed to fit as comfortably, and their ointments always smelled too strongly or stung too much.

It was a trying time for them all, and he pretended he didn’t notice how people gave him an even wider than usual berth as he moved around the castle with the help of a walking stick – having finally gotten rid of the crutch they’d saddled him with - trying to find some outlet for his restlessness without ruining his progress. It was a long time to go yet, before he could get back out on the training ground or up in the saddle, and if there was anything Braith Hux needed in his life, it was to be able to be outside and do things – being confined to his castle like this was torture. The frustration made his tongue sharper than usual, his temper shorter, and the only one who seemed unperturbed by his unpleasantness was, as always, Phasma. Her silent presence and non-judgemental enduring of his bouts of anger was a balm to his frazzled nerves, and he was grateful to have her by his side.

At the moment, the cousins had just finished their lunch – Hux sitting as comfortably as he could on his throne, Phasma in a fur-clad chair next to him on the dais, a table with the remains of a roasted chicken on it between them. Eira was perched on top of the carcass, happily picking away at what was left. They’d spent the morning going over Phasma’s plans for a new training regime to make sure their troops were in peak fighting condition when spring came. There were many younglings in the clan who’d be seeing their first field campaign that spring, and the older troops could always use some more training just in case. If they were going to take the South, they could not slack even a little when it came to competence and skill. He was impressed, as always, by her through research and minute attention to details and differences – and he’d given her the all clear to send directions out to the rest of the clan just as their meal had been brought in.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something,” Phasma said as she sipped her ale.

“Oh?” Hux said. “Nothing bad, I hope?”

“Not at all.” She smiled, and he noticed she was blushing slightly – which was unusual for her. “It’s about Mitaka.”

“Mitaka?”

“Yes. I intend to marry him.”

Hux choked on his ale, staring at her wide-eyed, brows having shot straight up. Phasma laughed and patted him on the back to help him out.

“When did this come about?” he croaked eventually. “And why hasn’t he asked my permission yet? He, if anyone, knows the law requires a warchief’s permission for to members of the court to marry.”

“Well,” Phasma said. “He hasn’t asked me to marry him yet. But I intend to ask him, so this is me needing your permission.”
“Does he know of this intention?”

“Not yet, no. But he’s a good man, a kind man – he is a brave one, too, in his own way, and he
knows his place. Besides, I happen to find him very appealing to look at, what with that soft little
face and those huge dark eyes of his.”

Hux was quiet for a while, trying to process this. If there was ever a marriage he’d never thought
he’d witness, it would probably be that one – but it did make sense in a way. Phasma had never had
much patience for the clumsy “courting” of the warriors in the clan, no matter their gender – their
only use to her was as soldiers or a short encounter to relieve tension during a feast or post-battle.
Mitaka was bright, clever, impeccably respectful, and had a backbone of steel when it mattered. He
would never treat Phasma as anything less than a goddess.

“I always thought I’d see you with a woman,” he admitted. “But if your heart is set on Mitaka, then
I am not one to deny you. Just… just be gentle with him, would you? I need him whole and sane if
this campaign is going to work out.”

“Thank you, Braith!” she smiled, looking younger and happier than he could remember seeing her
in a long time. “And don’t worry, I’ll treat him like the finest treasure.”

Hux was just about to give her a snarky reply, when Eira’s head shot straight up, and she took off
like an arrow out through one of the open windows – a furious caw splitting the air in her wake.
Then, a commotion could be heard from outside. The angry beating of hundreds of wings and
angry chatters and caws from the birds, and surprised yells from the people out in the courtyard
broke the peaceful atmosphere they’d been enjoying, and then the double doors flew open to reveal
one of Phasma’s high guards.

“Lord Hux,” he yelled. “You must come quick! The birds, they’ve gone mad! They’re attacking
the prisoner transport!”

~*~*~

Mount Starkiller had been on the horizon for two days already when they finally came over the hill
at the opposite end of the vale. Han had never quite understood just how enormous the mountain
was, or how majestically it’s surrounding, lower peaks towered above the landscape. And now,
when Skye Castle was visible before him, nestled as it was among the high cliffs, he almost felt
lightheaded trying to take in the proportions of it all – especially as they came closer and the castle,
which had appeared so dwarfed by the mountain, rose above in all it’s splendour. Skye Castle, the
Throne of the North, indeed. Finally, he understood how it had become so legendary; he could
hardly believe that it had been built by mortal hands. The red and black banners waved proudly in
the breeze, the simple – almost strict – elegance of the Hux clan’s banner the perfect contrast to
the wild nature around it. So, this was Ben’s home now. He tried to picture him wandering around
here, but it was difficult when all he could remember was the quiet, withdrawn, gangly boy he’d
been all those years ago. Too tall, too thin – he never seemed able to put on any weight – with his
big ears and long nose, and that awkward shuffling walk of his as he tried to make himself smaller,
invisible. How did he look now?

Before he could put too much thought into it all, the carriage entered the main courtyard, and the
shrieks of thousands of furious birds rose above him before the whole world turned black as they
swarmed the wagon, talons tearing and beaks stabbing at its walls and bars, trying to get to the man
inside. He and Chewie had to throw themselves to the floor and huddle in the middle – trying to
keep out of reach, but it was difficult for two men as tall as them in a space so small. Then they
realized from the unpleasant smell rising from their clothing that the things hitting them from the
barred openings in the roof was not rain but something much worse. From the sounds of surprised
and agitated shouting coming from somewhere on the other side of all the birds, they gathered that the guards had not anticipated this situation, either.

This was not how he had hoped to face his son again.

~*~*~

Hux and Phasma hurried out the large doors to the main building, coming to a dead halt on the stone stairs leading up to them as they took in the scene in front of them. There were black, white, and grey feathers everywhere, bird shit all over the flagstones, the guards, and the carriage – and they could hardly hear themselves think over the angry caws and shrieks.

“What in the Gods’ names is going on here?” Hux shouted over the ruckus. “Who’s in that carriage?”

One of the guards who’d escorted the prisoners cautiously approached his warchief.

“The prisoners from the border, my lord,” he stammered, fiddling anxiously with the hem of his soiled cloak. “The ones the captain sent you the letter about…?”

“What bloody letter? The hells are you talking about?”

“We’re from the Green River garrison, my lord. Down by the south border, towards the Sigr clan’s territory.” He looked back at the carriage. “These two tried to cross without permission several times, until we apprehended them. They said it was a matter of life and death that they’d be allowed to speak to you, my lord. And, uhm, especially vital that they’d see master Ren. I’m sure the captain sent a bird here to warn you.”

“They’re Southerners?” Phasma spat. “Why in the seven hells would you bring two Southerners here? Who are they? How do you know they’re not spies?”

“We don’t, commander. But one of them, well… He says he’s master Ren’s father. Says something about a war. We didn’t want to take any risks, my lord.” He looked pleadingly at Hux. “Better safe than sorry, yes?”

Hux nodded and dismissed him with a wave of his hand, carefully making his way down the steps and towards the carriage. His heart was beating away like a sledgehammer in his chest, mind reeling. Ren’s father? Here? Why?

Seeing a large, yellowy white form near the edge of the mass of feather clad bodies, he took a deep breath before yanking Eira away from it – holding her tight against his chest. She was clearly not pleased by this, as demonstrated by her angrily picking at him and trying her best to claw her way free.

“Eira,” Hux tried to soothe her. “Eira, please stop this madness! Call them off!”

She cawed defiantly, and Hux could have sworn he heard a small, female voice in his mind saying “He hurt master!” Electing not to question it for the moment, he kept his firm grip on her.

“Eira, I have to speak to these men. Call the Flock off, now! If they’ve hurt my Crow, you can trust that I will slay them both, but for now you must let them be!”

Her intense glare reminded him rather painfully of said Crow when he was angry – how it could be possible for a man and a bird to be so similar he couldn’t say, but they were. Eventually, she gave a
sour caw, and the Flock immediately scattered, landing on every available surface that was out of reach for the humans. Their eyes didn’t leave the carriage for a second, and their anger could still almost be felt through the air. Hux had never thought he’d see them react so strongly to something – especially without Ren here to point them in the direction of it.

The guards wasted no time getting the two prisoners out, and what a sad sight they were; dishevelled, bleeding, and covered in bird shit. Hux only afforded himself a glance at them, before turning and walking slowly back up the stairs, giving a sharp order to have them both bathed and dressed in something clean before they brought them to the great hall. He needed a little time to prepare himself to look closer at the man who had sired his beloved Crow, and, sensing the anger and hurt emanating from the little body in his hold, he thought Eira might need it too. Whispering soothing praises to her and gently kissing her little head, he took her back to the hall and let her sit on his lap while she groomed her ruffled feathers.

What a strange day this had turned into. He could only hope that strange for once did not mean bad.

There had been enough pain at Skye Castle these last few weeks, and Hux found himself recalling Tarkin’s words about the Knights of Ren. About their power to warp the fabric of the world around them, about how chaos and destruction followed them like their own shadows, about how one could never know whether they would be the greatest blessing or the most terrible curse to befall a clan. The Knights were the true children of the Gods, forged by trials no mere mortal could ever understand – it would not be possible for them not to affect the world around them.

But no matter what would come of all this, he could never consider Kylo Ren a curse. Not when he knew how much love this strange young man was capable of giving, how deeply he cherished every life he touched, despite the cruelty with which the world had treated him.

~*~*~

“Listen, girl,” the exasperated guard said, rubbing his eyes tiredly. “The border is closed. Do you understand? Closed. That means that you cannot cross it. We’ve got a plague running through the lands – why would you want to go where there’s a plague? You got a death wish or something?”

Rey fixed him with the most pleading look she could muster, but he wasn’t having any of it – instead turning to Finn and Poe, who stood a step behind her. They didn’t seem to be buying the explanation about the plague, but it didn’t matter – they would not allow them to cross the border.

“I don’t know who you people are, and I don’t care what you want – the border is closed. Now please take your little sister or wife, or whatever she is, and go back to where you came from. Attempt to cross our border and we will have no choice but to kill you.”

“No no, no, please!” Rey begged. “Listen to me. Have two men come here before us? Tall men-uhm, or, well, average height here. One of them got grey hair and a scar on his chin, and the other is… uhm, very hairy, and can’t speak. Please, I need to know.”

The guards looked at each other. They’d thought peace and quiet had been restored to the border when they sent those two buffoons up north two weeks before, but apparently they were wrong. One of the older guards eventually sighed and stepped up.

“Go to the inn,” he said. “Stay there until we send someone for you. We’ll talk to the captain, and inform you of his decision.” He held up a hand to silence the cheer from the three youngsters. “We make no promises, and I cannot stress the importance of you staying on this side of the border enough. Do you hear me?”
The Southern trio nodded enthusiastically and headed for the inn. The guard shared another look.

“What in the seven hells is going on here?” one of them said, spitting at the ground in front of him. “Why do half the bloody South suddenly need to come talk to our Crow? Makes no sense at all, that.”

“Who knows,” the older guard sighed. “Way I figure, it’s best not to meddle in the affairs of the Crows. Better leave it to those higher up the ranks who understand these things. Go tell the captain. The sooner he knows, the sooner we’re free of this whole mess. It’s got the wrong smell to it, I tell you. Something’s not right, and I’m not sure I wanna know what that is.”

No one argued against that, and one of the younger ones headed off toward the main building to break the news to their captain that another group of Southern idiots were trying to cross the border to see the Crow. This was turning into one strange month, this was.

~*~*~

Northern style clothes were incredibly comfortable, Han realized as he and Chewie got dressed after their bath. They’d been taken to another house, a public bathhouse from the looks of it, given towels and strong lye soap to wash with, and provided with a new set of clothes. The old woman who’d taken them there had deemed their old ones beyond salvation, and sent someone to find something that didn’t reek of weeks’ worth of travels and bird waste. Chewie had changed into his with apparent relief, always having complained about how the fitting of Southern clothes just wasn’t quite right, and now Han could understand what he meant. The undergarments were soft, unbleached linen – a pair of short breeches and a long sleeved tunic – and the simple grey trousers were loose around the legs, tied together with strings at the waist, pooling slightly over the edges of the wrappings around their lower legs. The tunic, or jacket, he wasn’t quite sure which it was, was made from a thick, greyish blue wool, made to over-lap itself like a robe, and held together with a leather belt at the waist. It had elegant trimmings around the hems and collar – and the brooch Chewie helped him attach higher up on his chest, helping to keep the garment closed, was made from polished bronze. The warchief had obviously made sure they’d be dressed according to their standing. He did struggle a bit with the low cut boots they’d been given to wear – he wasn’t used to wearing shoes this soft and snug on the foot.

“How in the seven hells do they manage anything in shoes like this?” he grumbled as Chewie helped him tie them up properly. The giant man smiled.

“They don’t,” he signed. “This is casual wear. We wear different things for different times, just like in the South. Military boots are nothing like these, nor are the winter boots. Don’t worry, you’ll manage. Just be careful with the stairs – if the floor is wet, it can get slippery.” He looked thoughtful. “Also, try to avoid mud. That’s even more slippery, and it’ll get in the shoe.”

The old woman appeared again, clearing her throat, and giving them a stern once over. After correcting the fit of Han’s tunic and Chewie’s brooch, she nodded for them to follow. As they crossed the courtyard once more, they tried to ignore the mix of curious and suspicious looks thrown their way from the Huxes. It really struck him, now, what a majestic people the Northerners were; he’d always thought Chewie was the largest man he’d ever seen, but here, he was just slightly above average. And they all carried themselves with this remarkably regal yet relaxed air, their bright colours in hair and eyes contrasting sharply against the dark greys and whites of the buildings around them. He couldn’t help but feel a tad nervous at the thought of facing these people on the battlefield. They made for one impressive sight, no doubt about that.

Another thing he noticed was how clean and ordered everything was here. From what he’d previously been told, from emissaries, other travellers, and some from Chewie on the rare
occasions he shared something about his life before, the Northerners were a savage bunch, living more or less in the muck and filth with their animals, their houses dark and smelly, their customs barbaric and brutal. Skye Castle threw those preconceived notions of his on end – because here everything was kept clean and neat, the space was light and airy, and everyone seemed occupied with various chores. He struggled to overcome his amazement that so many buildings, not just the main one, had glass windows – some of them even had coloured glass laid in with the ordinary kind. It was a far cry from anything he’d imagined.

At the top of the stone steps leading into the main building, that didn’t seem to have a name of it’s own, stood that tall woman from earlier. Judging by her armour and the authority she radiated, she had to be an officer of the guard or something similar. Beside her stood a man, a Southerner by the looks of him, dressed in an elegant but simple teal coloured jacket and matching trousers. The older woman gave them a respectful nod, then left. The pale blonde woman studied them for a moment longer, making both of them shift uncomfortably under her stare.

“I’m Phasma,” she said eventually. “Commander of the High Guard. This is Mitaka, the Warchief’s scribe and advisor. He will escort you to the Great Hall. Any trouble from either of you, and I will personally slay you. I will not tolerate any disrespect towards my warchief or clan. Do you understand?”

“Yes, lady Phasma,” Han nodded, doing his best to sound polite. “We haven’t come here to cause trouble, I assure you.”

She only snorted, before turning on her heel and disappearing back inside. The man, Mitaka motioned for them to follow him through the vast entrance hall.

“You said you came here to speak to master Ren,” he said as they caught up and followed him. “I must warn you that the subject is a very sensitive one for lord Hux at the moment. These last weeks have been… trying, for all of us. I strongly advise you not to push his temper too far. It will not end well for you.”

With that he opened the impressive set of double doors opposite from the exit, not giving Han or Chewie any time to ask what he meant by that.

The Great Hall of Skye Castle was as impressive as the rest of it. The ceiling was high, Han was sure at least five men would have stand on each other shoulders to reach it, painted in the same white as the walls. Running along both sides of those walls, just below the ceiling, were large windows, and between them ran thick rafters, held up by support pillars in the same white stone as the outer walls. Benches and low tables were grouped around several large fireplaces also placed along the outer walls, keeping the large space warm and light. Large furs and rugs covered the floor, and at least a dozen giant hounds lazed about here and there, their soft snoring accompanying the faint crackle of the fire. But what really caught his eye was the huge red and black banner on the wall at the opposite end of the room, and the low dais below it – where a huge and intricately crafted and carved chair stood in lone majesty. A white fur, possibly from a bear, covered the high back and seat, and a white… was that a raven? Yes, a white raven was perched on top of it like a silent guardian to the man occupying the chair.

It was the first time Han Solo laid eyes on Braith Hux, the Demon of the North, warchief of clan Hux – and he was in awe of the regal figure in front of him. Beside him, Chewie seemed to be in a similar state, and Han remembered that Chewie had never seen him before either. He was young, in his thirties maybe, with long and bright red hair kept in place by the simple red circlet he wore, and a short red beard. They noticed that his left arm was held in a sling around his neck, and that a walking stick leaned against the chair on his right side. But even with the apparent injuries, he
emanated an aura of such natural command and power that Han felt taken aback by it. The green eyes sparkled with intelligence and suspicion in equal amounts as Mitaka lead them closer. This was the man Ben was bonded to? Han could only hope he treated his son kinder than his looks suggested.

“So,” he said as they came to a stop in front of the dais. “You are the one who claims to be Kylo’s father.” Han nodded. The warchief looked thoroughly unimpressed. “There had better be a very good reason for you showing your face here. Kylo hates the mere mention of his past, and his birds are being held back from killing you only with my greatest effort, since, as they’ve made very clear to me, you have hurt their master.” He leaned forward a bit, fixing Han’s gaze with his own.

“There is a death penalty in the North for harming a Crow, and we don’t care much if it happened in the past of present. So, for your sake, I hope whatever story you are about to present me with is good enough to merit me holding off your execution until my Crow comes back.”

Han swallowed harshly.

“C-comes back?” he asked, hating how pitiful it sounded. “He’s not here?”

“The Crows were summoned to the House of Night,” Mitaka said quietly. “Master Ren left ten days ago. He is likely hundreds of miles away now.”

“So, how’s it going to be, Southerner?” the warchief asked. “Will you explain yourselves, or should I just let the birds loose here and now and be done with it?”

Han Solo had never been afraid of many things in his life, but that cold anger, the blood-thirst in those sharp green eyes… He willingly admit to himself that he most certainly feared those. Suddenly the epithet he’d been given by Southern travellers made perfect sense. This man considered them a threat to his Crow, and to a man loyal to the Gods of the First Order any threat made against a child of the Gods must never be allowed to live. They were in terrible danger if Han couldn’t convince him that he really needed to speak to Ben.

This was not going to be easy.

Chapter End Notes

Phew, ok. It seriously felt like this chapter took forever to write.

Anyway, let's start with a correction on a previous note of mine, regarding the time period of the clothes they wear in this fic. I think I said 1280's - 1350's before, but the fic had its own idea, so now I'm going to have to expand it. The Northern folks have clothes from different points in time between the Viking era (~800-1100 AD), mainly their casual wear - and the 1350's to late 1480's/1490's when it comes to their nobility and their formal wear. Southerners range from 1360's-1520's, and around there, depending on the situation. So, fabric ranges from linen and wool, to brocade, silks, and velvets. Not using those short fop jackets, though. All jackets are knee length if not otherwise specified. I don't know if this makes a difference to anyone else, but my brain refused to let me leave it be. So, now you know^^

And whoa, the Crows are not feeling too good about it all, and there's plenty of tension all around among the ones from different, warring clans. Good thing they're all too busy being scared of Ren to dare start shit.
The birds, on the other hand, obviously dared to start shit - quite literally, too. And yes, Eira was so angry she even managed to Force communicate with Hux. That one very angry raven, that.

And I feel so sorry for the guards down by the border. Those guys are just so done. So done. Fecking Southerners.

Hux and Han... Hm, this might get very interesting. Hux is in full on protective mode, and he - being a true Northerner - hates the Southerners already, so Han is really gonna have to work for that pardon. Because yes, Hux would kill him, happily, to keep Ren safe. Han is beginning to realize this.

Your comments mean the world to me, so do take a moment to tell me what you think before you leave?

Also, I'm going back to uni next week, so updates might be slower until the end of October when one of my courses ends - but fret not! Updates will carry on, albeit at a slower pace. :)

It was high noon when the House of Night finally appeared in the small valley before them. The Crows – there had to be well around two hundreds of them by now, more and more of them having joined up alone the way – collectively paused to take in the sight. The House stood in lone majesty, a black colossus against the frozen tundra and sparsely spread gnarly little pine trees, its high walls a silent and ominous message to anyone who dared wander this far north to keep away. It seemed to drain the light from the surrounding landscape, and soon the long winter would set in, and there would be no light sans what the moon could offer for several months. Though they never really spoke about it, there wasn’t the Crow in the world who didn’t remember the first time they came over this ridge and laid eyes on their new home for the first time. It wasn’t a sight one would forget in a hurry, nor were the memories of what lead them all here.

Ren had come here in the dead of winter, a pale moon struggling to shine through thick clouds, the snow deep around them as they rode along the barely visible road, and the few lights from the visible windows made the structure look like some mythological beast waiting to devour him. He’d clutched Eira closed to his chest under the ragged but warm cloak he’d been given, and he’d been exhausted, still aching all over from his injuries – his long, gangly limbs stiff and uncooperative. The one who had come for him, a strange, heavily tattooed man named Maul, had given up on trying to keep him in the saddle of his horse – and so he’d spent the last few days half hidden under both his own and Maul’s cloak, back against the compact blackness of the older Crow’s chest. As he looked out at the valley, he could remember it all so well – as if it happened just yesterday. He’d been wandering the woods for days, bleeding, starving – lost to the world around him, the small, broken body of a white raven hidden under his tunic. The only thing he knew, and he’d known it with a certainty he’d never felt before, was that he had to keep going north. Keep moving north, and they’d find him. They’d be found. Someone would find them. They’d be safe. They just had to hang on. They’d be saved. At the time his mind was too broken, too chaotic, too exhausted to ask himself who ‘they’ were, and so he simply kept moving until he had finally collapsed by the side of a small trail. He could still remember the gentleness of the hands that gathered him up and wrapped him in thick furs, the soothing softness of the deep voice that whispered assurances to him as he struggled weakly – so far gone in his delirious state that he couldn’t believe in the existence of anything but more enemies. But Maul was nothing if not experienced and patient, and he had given Ren all the space he needed during the first few days when travelling was simply out of the question. When they’d reached the house, Maul had continued to tend to both him and the bird until he was well enough to join the other hatchlings. When Ren struggled with his temper, with the discipline, with the nightmares and visions – all of the things his assigned teachers failed to handle, Maul was the one they sent for. He’d get Ren to saddle their horses, and take him out wandering until his mind settled again. Maul had a connection to the Force that few others could mimic or even understand, and it remained an eternal mystery to the Crows why he had never sought to become a Knight – preferring instead to wander about, to study the Force, to lead a reclusive life interrupted here and there by mentorship of new hatchlings. His quiet, serious presence had always been a blessing, and Ren looked forward to seeing his old mentor again. He could only hope they wouldn’t end up on different sides in whatever conflict would inevitably break out. Maul was perhaps the deadliest warrior he’d ever met, and he really did not want to have to go up against him should it come to that.
Stealing a glance to the sides, he noticed that they were all waiting for him to move first – none of them wanting to cross this final distance between the ridge and the giant gates. Askr danced nervously under him, and he reached down to stroke his strong neck before straightening up and urging him into a gallop. There was no point in delaying this. The sooner they got inside, the sooner they would have answers. He wasn’t foolish enough to hope they’d bee good ones. The sound of the Crows’ horses galloping down through the valley towards the slowly opening gates rolled like thunder across the landscape, though there was no one sans the birds around to hear it. The nearest village was miles away. Up here there was only silence, interrupted by the discordant songs of the Mother-flock. As Kylo rode through the gates, Askr’s hooves clattering loudly against the cobble stones of the central courtyard, he wanted nothing more than to turn around and ride for all he was worth back down south – back to Hux. But the gates closed behind him with a sound that echoed inside him, the sound of something final.

Now, all he could do was to bury his newfound self behind the equally awe-inspiring and terrifying creature that was Kylo Ren, master of the Knights of Ren – the one true follower. The board was set, the gods had cast their dice, and now their children would have to play their parts.

~*~*~

Han and Hux’ talk had been interrupted by some important matter regarding one of his many vassal clans, and so Han and Chewie had found themselves escorted to a room by the gentle natured scribe. He had apologized for the warchief’s busy schedule, assuring them it was probably a good thing during the present circumstances to let Hux have proper time to process Han’s presence in the castle. Han had asked what he meant by that, and Mitaka had given them this look – this very stern and proud look, that was remarkably fierce in such a soft face – and informed them that master Ren was, apart from his children, lord Hux’ most precious person. The lengths to which he would go to protect his Crow were endless. Han was walking a thin line here, he had to understand this, because not only was the Crow lord Hux’ spiritual advisor and high priest, he was his lover and life partner. Hux did not take kindly to anything that could threaten his happiness or well-being, and therefore it would be a good idea for Han to proceed with the utmost caution. The warchief had the laws on his side, an entire clan who all loved and would go through all the seven hells for their Crow – Han had nothing.

The room was on the ground level, a short distance down a corridor that seemed to be intended to house visitors, and while the furnishing wasn’t overly lavish it was all very comfortable and obviously made from the highest quality materials. A look out the window informed him that they were next to a small garden that apparently belonged to the castle’s kitchen – a few younglings in aprons deftly picking herbs and root vegetables from the neatly ordered rows covering the space between the two wings of the building. If there was ever a thing that looked the same all over the world, it was the kitchens and their workers – always the same quick movements, reddened skin from working long hours in high temperatures, and the ever present fear of being yelled at in the postures of the young helpers.

They’d been everything they could possibly need in terms of clothing and comfort – a sign that, at least for the time being, the warchief considered them guests rather than enemies. But both Han and Chewie had been around for long enough to know better than to count on this good grace to last. They’d have to tread carefully here – an extended stay in the prison cells was not something either of them really wished to experience. Having allowed themselves to rest a bit after the eventful day, they were woken up at sundown by a servant bringing them their dinner, and informing them that the warchief wished to see them after they’d finished. Their meal consisted of some sort of meat stew with carrots and other root vegetables, smoking hot and smelling absolutely delectable from the different herbs and spices it contained. They were given a large, round bread to drip in the thick gravy, and a generous tankard of ale to help them swallow it all down. Chewie went at the food with apparent delight, and Han couldn’t fault him – it
was the best meal he’d had since they left the South. The ale had a fruity hint to it, apples, Chewie guessed, and though they could feel the burn of the alcohol it was remarkably light.

The servant returned to escort them through the long corridors and up one flight of stairs to where lord Hux would see them. It surprised them both when they stepped in through the massive oak door that they’d been invited to have this conversation in the warchief’s own quarters. Hux himself sat in one of several large, stuffed chairs placed in a half circle around a beautifully built fireplace. On a low table in front of him was a carafe of wine and three glasses. The white raven they’d seen earlier was glaring brutal death at them from what looked like a nest made from a shawl placed on the window seat. Hux motioned for them to sit down, and poured them a glass each of the deep red wine.

“So,” he said as he casually sipped his glass. “Have you thought out a reason why I should let you two live yet?”

Han swallowed. He had a reason – the question was whether or not it was good enough for the man in front of him. Hux’ green eyes were even more piercing and harsh up close, and he had a distinct feeling that even in this injured state Hux could still do significant damage should he think it necessary.

“I’m not going to lie, lord Hux,” he said, rubbing his neck awkwardly. “I wasn’t the father I should have been to Ben- I mean, Kylo, and I doubt he thinks too fondly of me – but I need to speak to him. Warn him. There are things happening in the South that will affect him very badly if they reach him. He is in danger, lord Hux. Very grave danger, and I want to help him.”

“What danger?” Hux asked. “And why now?”

“How much has he told you about his life before he became a Crow?”

“Not much,” Hux admitted. “And I haven’t asked, because it’s obvious to anyone with eyes to see with that it’s a subject that is indescribably painful to him. Trust me when I say this, Solo, Kylo has had enough pain to last three lifetimes. I refuse to be the one to cause more of it, and I have taken a sacred vow to kill anyone who does.”

He said it with such fierceness that Han was taken aback for a moment.

“You love him!” he blurted out. “You really do love him, don’t you?”

Hux snorted.

“I thought that much was obvious,” he retorted. “He is everything to me. And you are avoiding my questions.”

“I don’t know where to start, really,” Han said, apologetically. “It’s a long and ugly story.”

“The beginning would be preferable. You’re his father, as you have stated several times now. Who is his mother, then? I take it she’s not a commoner, or she wouldn’t be able to be involved in any situation that would merit your journey here to warn your estranged son about the threat to his safety. Who is she?”

Han swallowed hard, before taking a large gulp of wine to steady himself. Hux watched his every move with those eerie, sharp eyes of his.

“Your Kylo Ren,” Han began. “Was born a bastard. His name is Benyamin Solo. His mother’s name is Leia Organa, Queen of D’Qar.” Hux’ face gave away nothing of his thoughts about that
revelation, and Han continued. “We could never marry, obviously, so to protect her reputation we hid her pregnancy as much as we could, and listed him as my bastard. The birth records aren’t public – and he’s registered as born in Corellia, not D’Qar – so it was easy to keep his mother’s identity a secret.” He took another sip of wine, smaller this time because it was actually rather strong. “At first it was easy to pretend I’d just brought him with me to the palace from wherever his imaginary mother lived. I’ve always moved around a lot, so no one questioned it. But as Ben-Kylo got older, we knew it would become apparent to everyone that he was, in fact, Leia’s bastard, too. He looked so much like us both, and what was worse… what was a lot worse, was the fact that he started displaying the Force unusually early – just like his uncle, Leia’s brother. The difference between them was that Ben’s, what do you call it, Force manifestations happened very often when he got angry during his training sessions. And he had these awful nightmares all the time, something about someone speaking in his head at night. So, uhmm, Leia decided that any hopes we had of him one day taking the throne were gone, and he had to go join the Doves so he could learn to control his powers.” Han drew a shaky breath, the memory still raw in his mind. “He was only six winters old, and he was so small, so frightened of everything – and we told him this was for the better. That he needed this so he wouldn’t hurt himself or someone else. And then we let them take him away from us. They had to forcefully pry him away from my cloak, because he wouldn’t let go.”

“Did you see him again at all after that?” Hux asked. Han could hear very clearly that he was anything but impressed by their way of handling their son. “I am not very familiar with the internal structures of the order of Doves, but I can’t imagine he was very happy with his situation.”

Han shook his head, and even Chewie looked mournful for a moment.

“No, he was miserable,” Han admitted. “Said he didn’t fit in, didn’t have any friends, and we just thought it was him, you know, being unused to sharing the attention with other children. We only got to see him once, maybe twice, a year. The Doves aren’t supposed to form attachments, so for him to see us at all was very close to breaking the rules as it was. It was only because of Luke, his uncle, that we got away with it. But after a few years, he stopped asking to come home. We thought it had gotten better.” He gave a bitter chuckle. “Oh, how wrong we were. He just kept withdrawing into himself, avoiding the company of others, becoming quiet… Like he was trying to make himself smaller, or even invisible. But Luke told us he had these fits of rage sometimes. These horrible destructive fits, that had the older Doves put him in solitary confinement for days, sometimes weeks, because he was a danger to both himself and the others.”

“Solitary confinement?” Hux questioned, eyes narrowing dangerously. “And what, pray tell, does that entail, exactly?”

“I’m… I’m not sure, but from what I understood when Luke told me, it was some form of cell, with a small window, and no things in it sans his mattress and blankets. Those in solitary are supposed to spend the time praying and meditating, to center themselves again and be forgiven for their failures by the God of Mornings.”

“And you wonder why he was miserable?” The distaste was practically oozing from Hux’ words. “That you would subject your own child to this… As a father myself, it baffles me, truly. And you Southerners think me a monster? Please.”

“Well, uhmm, things carried on in much the same manner for a few years. I was travelling a lot, and Leia was busy ruling the kingdom, so we didn’t see him much for the last three years or so. We thought he’d be alright. But then when he was fifteen, something terrible happened. Have you by any chance heard of the massacre of the children at the House of Mornings?”
“I sincerely doubt there’s a single person in any of the Northern courts that has not heard of it.”

Han nodded grimly.

“It was him. Kylo. He’s the one who killed them all. We- We still don’t know why he did it. One day he just locked himself in there with them, and when he emerged again, he was soaked in blood and they were all dead. He… He didn’t even try to resist when they arrested him. Apparently, he just came out into the courtyard and sank to his knees – just waiting for them to take him into custody. Luke… Uhm, Luke said that he didn’t even-” Han had to pause again. He’d never really talked about this with someone who wasn’t there. Truth to be told, he’d never really spoken about it at all. “That he didn’t even look like himself. His eyes had this emptiness to them, like he wasn’t even present in his own body. He didn’t resist, didn’t say anything, didn’t so much as blink.”

“I assume he was given a trial?”

“Yes.” Han hung his head – the shame was eating away at him, even more than usual, under that venomous gaze. “Leia forbid it. Said we could not afford to show any sort of friendliness or, God forbid, any affection for an accused child-murderer. I didn’t see him until the day of his execution. When he… He broke out of his chains, killed his executioners. He just tore them apart like they were made of parchment instead of flesh. I had never seen anyone do that with the Force before – I didn’t even think it was possible. But he did it. There was this moment, this horrible moment when time seemed to stop, and he looked at me, and he looked so lost. Then he just ran. Leia sent hunters out after him. They tracked him for days – he always was a very fast runner – and in the end, only one returned. He was covered in blood, I remember the stench of it, and he said they’d managed to kill him. Burned and buried him on the spot, like they were ordered to. We… He was the finest hunter at Leia’s court – we had no reason to doubt his words. And… well, we thought he was dead, and I mourned him, lord Hux. I’ve mourned the loss of him every day for eleven long years! Then, this summer Luke came back from a journey northover, and told us of this Crow that looked exactly like Ben. Like Ben would look if he’d lived. It shook Leia to the core to learn this – because if he is alive, that means he is first in line to the throne of D’Qar. And we, uhm, we have a daughter, Rey, who’s been raised to take over after Leia already. It’s a political nightmare. Rey’s adopted, Ben is blood – and blood has precedence over adopted children according to our laws. Leia is a devout follower of the God of Mornings – for her to give the throne to a servant of the Old Gods… It’s unthinkable.”

“So she sent you to find out the truth?” Hux’ voice had taken on a coldness that made Han’s hair stand on end. “And what exactly did she want you to do when you found him, hm? Kill him?”

“Yes.” Han forced himself to meet Hux’ gaze. “But I won’t do it. I can’t. For eleven years I’ve lived with the guilt of having let my own child be killed, I refuse to do it again. He is my only child, lord Hux. All I want is to be able to see him speak to him. See the man he’s become. I need to know what happened to him that day – why he did what he did. I need… I just need my son. You said you’re a father yourself. Surely you can understand that?”

“That, I will admit, is so far the only part of your story or actions I can understand,” Hux retorted. “Because the rest of it merits execution ten times over – and that is if I’m feeling lenient. No wonder Kylo can’t stand the thought of anyone mentioning his past, if this is how he grew up!” He gave an irritated sigh, trying to rein his temper back in. “And for the Gods’ sake, what is your friend trying to say with all that waving?”
Chewie repeated his signs, and Han nodded in understanding before translating.

“Chewie can’t speak with his mouth,” he explained. “So he signs instead. He says you don’t seem all that shocked about what Kylo did to the youngsters. He wants to know why that is.”

Hux huffed, then got out of his chair, pacing the room like some animal in a cage. He went over to the window, looking out over the darkening lands outside for a moment – as if to collect himself – before answering.

“I threw my father over the parapet,” he said with a shrug. “I’ve killed two of my cousins, and the Gods alone know how many more people in my days. We’re a harsh breed, Solo, and I have no right, nor indeed any desire, to make any moral judgments against him.” He glanced over at them, seeming to gauge their state of mind. “Besides, I have seen more of his mind during our time together than you ever did. You paint him out like some evil demon, and I can assure you that he is not. Far from it.” He sighed, pain flashing across his face, then carefully concealed again. “You have to understand this, Solo; my Crow is not your son. That boy is long gone. But Kylo lives every second of his life haunted by what was done to him. Kylo is a Crow, through and through. He is brilliant, strong, immensely powerful, and wise far beyond his years. He is the strongest warrior I have ever had the honour to fight alongside, and his ability to wield the Force is unparalleled in the North. But he is also perhaps the single most damaged and frail soul I’ve ever met – he is utterly incapable of considering himself worthy of anything, especially not my affection or devotion. He doesn’t doubt my love for him, but he doesn’t understand how I can feel that way about him. As for the voice in his head, I do have my suspicions about what that was – but that, I’m afraid will have to wait for another day. If I have to look at you for much longer, I am going to murder you both, and I’m far too tired to deal with the cleaning up of two corpses of your size tonight.”

He walked over and opened the door, indicating that their meeting was over. Han and Chewie wasted no time getting to their feet and leaving the warchief to his thoughts. They were both more than a little tired and shaken by this encounter, and they needed to process this whole confounded situation in the peace of their assigned quarters. The warchief was an enigma in his own right, this surface eerie coldness that only just seemed to conceal an ever present maelstrom of violence, fire and rage. It was like being caught in the path of a raging forest fire; fascinating, awe inspiring, and utterly terrifying. Hux clearly cared very little about showing mercy to those who in any way wronged him or those he considered his. Men like him were dangerous – Han knew that. It was men like him, with minds sharp as a sword’s edge and hide thick as a dragon’s scales, that would raze empires to the ground if they saw it fit. If Leia went up against this man, even with the entirety of the armies of D’Qar and it’s colonies, she would bring death and ruin to her people – because Hux wouldn’t consider this war as much as vengeance. And vengeance, for men like him, did not allow for mercies like rules and limits. It allowed only for the complete and utter annihilation of anyone and everyone who shared in the guilt.

And so Han was faced with a new problem. Somehow, he had to make sure this war never happened. Because if it did, Braith Hux and his Northerners would tear the world apart, and they would all be facing the choice of surrender or death. He had to warn Leia off this, somehow. It wasn’t worth the price. Nothing was worth that price.

~*~*~

Once he was alone, Hux gently put Eira on his shoulder and began the slow ascent up the stairs to the Crow’s tower. His leg was getting better by the day; soon he’d be rid of the cane too. The wounds were healing spectacularly well, only thin lines now, and getting smaller with each progressing day. The only injury still bothering him was his arm – and he was glad that at least it
wasn’t his sword-arm that had been affected. The fireplace in the bedroom had been lit, and as per his request, the sheets and blankets had not been changed since Kylo’s departure. Perhaps it was sentimental of him, to refuse it simply because he wished to sink into Kylo’s scent, wrap it around himself like armour to keep all his fears and loneliness at bay until they could reunite, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. The longing was heavy and sharp in his chest, a searing, clawing thing, like a demon curled up under his ribs, eating away at his heart – and for all his worldly might, he was still powerless against this.

Learning just how lonely and neglected childhood Kylo had endured – how much he had suffered and despaired – had affected him more deeply than he’d thought it would. He’d felt the swirls on the surface of Kylo’s mind through their bond, and he’d almost fallen to his knees from the force of it – to learn just how much deeper it all ran had felt like a thousand daggers through his heart and soul. Who would lock a child in a cell for weeks without contact with another living being instead of trying to understand what was happening to him? The son of a queen? He couldn’t understand it. Mara had gone through a phase when she was around six when she had been an absolute nightmare – disobedient, aggressive, cruel, obstinate and disrespectful. Even Caélin had avoided her, lest he be the primary target of her anger.

They called Hux a monster, but at least he had sat down with her, asked her what in the world was going on with her, and let her tell him to the best of her own ability. She missed her mother – or, rather, she missed the thought of having a mother. Her envy towards the other children, towards anyone whose mother was still there, still breathing, had completely consumed her, and she lashed out at the women of the clan who tried to teach her. She did it as a frustrated, desperate protest against the thought of someone else taking that mother’s place. Once they’d worked that out, they had been able to help her – there had never been a problem with any behaviour of hers since. To do what Kylo’s parents and uncle had done to him, simply because he was different… That, he thought, was monstrous.

So Kylo had slaughtered those children? The thought disturbed him some, he could admit as much to himself – but there were so many factors around it that made him very reluctant to blame him. He’d seen first hand how precious children were to his Crow – how excruciating it was for him when they were in pain, or when he failed to save them. When he’d brought new children into the world, he’d smiled as if they were his own as he held them close to him for their first moments – whispering the ancient blessings and protective spells, to make sure the Gods would care for them the same as they cared for the rest of his people. It was impossible to reconcile this with the image of the Dove-killer – the monster who had attempted to wipe out the order from within. And he had only been fifteen years old, for pity’s sake! He hadn’t even defended himself, and still they went merrily along and condemned him to death?

No, it wasn’t right. Not at all.

And Hux couldn’t help but think he knew just who that voice had been, whose slimy presence had been polluting Kylo’s mind and sent him down a path far away from any chance at redemption or second chances. It scared him more than anything had ever done before to know that right in this very moment Kylo was, if not already there, but at least on his way to that vile creature’s lair. There was not a night now, in this crushing, loud silence, of his empty tower that wasn’t praying to each and every God and Goddess in turn to have mercy, to let Kylo come back a whole man. Hux, having always been a loyal and devout follower, trusted in his Gods, but still could not rid himself of the fear – the crippling, suffocating fear – of never having his Crow back in his arms again.

If Kylo came back broken, Hux would tear the world apart as punishment for how it had treated him. He would show them all just how far he would go to protect this frail, complex, brilliant young man that had so completely changed his life. They would all learn the price of harming
those who belonged to Braith Hux, and he would not stop until they had all paid it.

With that last vow on his lips, he succumbed to another night of fitful, broken sleep – Kylo’s scent lingering like the memory of summers long past in the air around him.

Chapter End Notes

Heh, so this chapter turned a little heavy. Apologies for the lack of Rey/Finn/Poe and more Kylo in this chapter, but I decided it would be a bit too much. Also, we seem to have a Maul with us in the fic now, too. He may come off as a bit ooc, but I'm not overly concerned with that, tbh. Haven't watched TPM in literal years, so I'm working with my sketchy memory of how I felt about his character back then. So yeah, if there's ooc'ness on his part - just ignore it, please. He's a cool guy, let's keep it there^^

This chapter is also the reason for the tags Protective Hux & Hux will kill you if you touch his Ren. Because, yes. He will. Han is realizing this very quickly, and knows that if he doesn't find a way to defuse this whole situation, there's be a war like nothing they've ever seen.

I'll get started on the next installment tomorrow, so hopefully it won't be too long before you have another update! :)  

Until next time, my lovelies!
Ren was glad to find that he at least did not have to stay in the dungeons anymore now. His Knights had finally been given rooms in the Centre Nest, the building around which the entire complex was built, and where the Hall of Visions, the great hall, and the council room were located. By tradition, the Knights of Ren had their quarters in the high Eastern Tower, with its winding and seemingly never-ending staircase, and the single floor at the top of it where the Knights could go about their tasks undisturbed by the ordinary Crows. During a rare thunder storm, lightning had struck the tower, causing a fire to break out, and it had been undergoing major renovations for well over two years – the Crows were nothing if not meticulous, and the Tower was important.

Moving through the masses of reverently bowed heads and curious yet intimidated hatchlings, Ren made sure to put on his most regal and authoritarian display. It helped with his anxiety, to see the way they all melted out of the way for him, seemingly afraid to even get in the way of the hems of his sweeping cloak. He knew he looked majestic, with his height and expensive garments – the silver brooch holding his cloak together glistened like a star from the compact black fur around it – and he made use of it. The Master of the Knights of Ren was in some ways even superior to the Elders, second only to the Raven – it was very good armour. If they did not dare come too close, then they could not see any of his weaknesses. When he’d finally made it past all the other Crows and closed the doors to the tower behind him, he let out a sigh of relief before removing his helmet and beginning his climb up the stairs. Fifty-five steps, steep and narrow, and bare walls painted white to help whatever light that managed to shine through the small apertures illuminate the space. Ren counted every one silently to himself, glad he was already used to climbing stairs on a daily basis, or this could have been very bothering after a while.

The Knights’ living quarters was a large, open and octagonal space, with each of their beds placed in alcoves around the walls, and a massive fireplace taking up the eighth wall. A few comfortable chairs and recliners were placed around it, and bookshelves and working tables took up the space between the beds. Thick rugs and furs of the local white bears covered the stone floor, and a large round table sat in the middle under a heavy iron chandelier. In front of both beds and the windows hung thick drapes, a deep red colour, embroidered with various floral and animal related patterns, which along with the dark rugs on the floor helped give the room a warm and homely feel.

As he sat down on his own bed, the one on the opposite side of the fireplace from the stairs he’d just climbed, he looked around the room, letting himself be calmed by the familiar sight of his Knights’ sleeping spaces. Silass obviously owned the bed next to his, if the pile of books and robes on the floor was anything to go by. Then it was probably Avi’s bed next – the drapes to their bed closed and a note to ‘stay away’ pinned to them, and Ren couldn’t help but chuckle at the youngest Knight’s blunt way of asserting their privacy. The bed next in line after Avi’s had to be Gaius’ – he was taller than even Ren, and almost every single bed they’d ever slept in was usually too small for him. The way the drape was pulled away slightly from one end of the bed to allow room for his feet to stick out was such a nostalgic, endearing feeling it made Ren’s heart ache a little. Vilya and Erris’ alcoves were identically and neatly organized, drapes pulled open, and beds properly made – there was no mistaking the twins’ mark on their surroundings; both of them were near compulsive in their need for order and cleanliness. And closest to the stairs was Chava’s bed. It was, unsurprisingly, a complete mess. The sheets, furs, and pillows occupied more of the floor than the actual bed. Her sleep shirt was flung over the rod holding the drapes up, and there were books and little trinkets
and things thrown about everywhere. At least now, Ren mused, they wouldn’t have to risk stepping on any of it when they had to leave the room.

In the distance, voices could be heard, followed by thundering footsteps, and then they were all there – six pairs of arms encircling him, and the loneliness festering in his heart lessened its grip some. It felt so good to know that they had missed him, their excited cheers of ‘welcome back, master!’ seemed to warm him up almost as much as the fireplace did. Managing to calm them down some, he took his time to greet them properly – forehead against forehead – letting the Force brush gently against their minds in a soothing, caring gesture. Their master was home now, it said, their master was with them again – at least for a while.

“We missed you, brother,” Avi sighed as they curled up on the floor next to him, resting their head in his lap. Ren stroked their perpetually tangled blonde hair, causing Avi to give delighted little noises. “I’m so glad you’re here again.”

“I’ve missed you too, my little sibling,” Ren smiled. “I’ve missed all of you.”

Silass sat down next to him, a slender hand on his shoulder as she stroked Avi’s cheek with the other.

“You must’ve ridden hard to get here so soon,” she said. “I hope you didn’t exhaust yourself or Askr.”

“Askr was as anxious as I was to avoid any delays,” Ren said. “As for me…” He sighed. “I’m very tired, but for other reasons than travel.”

“Your warchief,” Vilya nodded, playing with a corner of her cowl. “We’ve felt your love for him through the Force. He must be a good man, but-”

“-a little while ago,” Erris continued, staying her sister’s hands before she managed to destroy the fabric. “We felt fear. You worried for him.”

“Now, now,” Gaius interrupted, noticing the pain flashing across Ren’s face. “Master Kylo only just arrived back. He’s tired and worn out – let him at least settle before you start asking him these things!”

“Thank you, brother,” Ren smiled. “But how many times must I remind you all to call me ‘brother’? Avi’s the only one who’s listened, it seems. And yes, there’ll be plenty of time for questions yet, but for now I just want to enjoy having you all by my side again. We’ll need our bond strong for the days to come.”

“I sent for some food,” Chava said, ever the practical one. “We’ll eat first, and catch up after that. By the Gods, and with all due respect, you’re a mess. When was the last time you ate?”

“Yesterday,” Ren admitted, running a hand over his face tiredly. “This morning was… difficult.”

Chava nodded in understanding, her dark eyes shining with that fierce compassion she only ever displayed to them.

“We’re here now, my dear brother,” she smiled. “We’re with you. Don’t worry.”

~*~*~

That morning, Hux declared himself recovered enough to leave the cane behind, and informed Phasma over breakfast that he intended to start training again soon. If she doubted his readiness she
didn’t show it, instead she nodded and promised to make time for them in the training hall. It was too cold for sparring outside now, and it was unnecessary to irritate his healing body further by forcing his muscles into action in such cold weather. And it certainly had begun to be very cold now – each day coming in with more frost covering the ground, and fewer hours of warmth in the air around the castle. As far north as Skye Castle was located, the autumns were short and the winters always came quick and harsh – soon the frost would simply cease to melt under the sun, and from there it was never very long until the first flakes of snow would come dancing down from the sky above them. Already, Hux and the members of his court were bringing out the thicker woollen jackets and tunics, replacing the lighter footwear for the higher and sturdier winter boots. The servants were bringing out the tall braziers, to place them in strategic positions all around the castle to ensure that the cold would not creep in through the thick stonewalls, and changing drapes and curtains to heavier materials to further insulate the rooms against the brutal climate.

When he came down to the Great Hall, comfortably dressed in his favourite dark blue jacket with fur trimmings around its neck, sleeves and bottom hem, and his hair pulled back into a loose braid at his neck, he felt slightly more content than he had since Kylo left. He’d awoken with a feeling of safety, familiarity, and he guessed it meant that Kylo had arrived safely at the House. It was a very reassuring feeling, allowing him to let go of some of the tension that had built up over the past weeks. Kylo was safe for now, and that was all that mattered.

There was a messenger waiting for him, a crow perched on her arm. It had a letter secured to its body, and was looking at him expectantly. The little ring around its left foot indicated it had come from a garrison down at the Southern border – the same garrison from whence Han Solo had been sent to the castle. This was strange. Maybe this was the bird that guard had been talking about – the one they’d supposedly sent to inform him of the man’s impending arrival. But it made no sense for it to look so pleased with itself, then. The birds never did when they were late, or when they’d lost their messages. If anything, they were small embodiments of shame and guilt that needed huge amounts of comforting before they would be sent back to their posts. This one looked smug, like it had delivered faster than usual, and Hux – of course – humoured it by scratching it gently on the chest before removing the letter. With a short order to the messenger to make sure it was given proper treats while he read the contents of the letter, he made his way to his throne and took a seat.

The message from the captain of the garrison was short, to the point, and somewhat exasperated. There was another trio of Southern idiots at the garrison, demanding permission to come see the Crow. A girl, or a very young woman, two slightly older men – nobility, from the looks of them. Were they allowed to let them pass, or should they send them back south again? They had been meaning to send a bird last time, but for some reason this had not been done, and the captain took full responsibility.

More Southerners? What in the Gods names was going on here? Hux sighed deeply – he was decidedly not in the mood for this, but alas, it was his duty. He handed the letter over to Mitaka, who had just entered the hall. The scribe quickly read the message and looked at Hux’ tired face.

“What should I write, my lord?” he asked. “It’s only three of them, and with winter coming, it will be a dangerous journey back South. The passes will be starting to freeze now, and if the snow starts falling, they might get caught in an avalanche down in clan Vyris’ land. If they are nobility, that would be very serious.”

Hux nodded.

“Tell them to send them up here – with guards,” he said. “I don’t like the smell of all this, but for now it seems we have no choice. Just tell them not to let them out of their sight. We know better than to trust the good intentions of Southerners – even if they are younglings.”
Mitaka nodded and got to work. It was one of many things Hux really appreciated with him – his efficiency. Mitaka had a brilliant mind, and made sure to use it well. Even though he wasn’t a warrior, Hux considered him one of the finest men in the clan.

It didn’t take long for Mitaka to finish the message and send the crow back to the border, and just as the messenger exited the great hall, Han and Chewie entered it. The two Southerners approached his chair cautiously, as if they expected him to lash out at them at the blink of an eye. Oh, Hux was tempted, certainly – try as he may, he did not have much good to say either to or about them, and he was glad that they seemed to understand that too. Hux motioned for them to take a seat on one of the benches in front of the fireplace closest to the dais, and sat down on the bench next to them. They were quiet for a while, Hux trying to gather his thoughts and wrap a tight leash around his emotions, while Han and Chewie seemed unwilling to speak before being spoken to – something which Hux appreciated. He knew not all Southern folk understood that the warchiefs were the Northern equivalent of kings and queens, and therefore often failed spectacularly to conduct themselves appropriately – something they would usually learn in the most painful way. The Northern rulers had no patience for impertinence, and they tended to make certain that it was made abundantly clear. In a land as harsh as theirs, there was little room for softness and forgiveness – it was simply the way it was.

Some servants arrived with three goblets of mulled wine for them, along with a low table and a plate of nuts and dried fruit. Hux nodded in thanks, and exhaled slowly before glancing at his guests.

“I just received a message,” he said, watching their expressions closely. “Apparently, a young woman, accompanied by two men, have arrived at our South border – to the very same garrison from whence you were sent up here. They, too, are claiming a very dire need to speak to my Crow. Would you happen to know anything about this? If so, it’s in your best interest to speak up now, and be honest. I don’t trust you Southerners, and I’d rather not have any uncomfortable surprises when they arrive here.”

Han’s eyebrows had shot straight up and he looked about ready to fall off the bench, and Chewie had choked on the wine he was drinking, causing him to cough and sputter. Hux patiently waited for them to collect themselves, lips pursed as he gauged their reactions. They seemed genuine enough, but Hux knew better than to trust anything at first glance.

“I hope to the Gods that it isn’t who I think it is,” Han croaked. “But if it is, then you have little to fear, lord Hux.”

“Oh, how so?” Hux did not bother to hide his distrust in the slightest. “Who exactly do you believe it is?”

“My daughter, Rey.” Han still looked like he could no more believe this news than Hux had. “She is only eighteen winters old, a gentle soul – very kind, a little naïve, but a good person.”

“Your daughter Rey, as in the heir to the throne of D’Qar? Crown Princess Rey of house Organa?”

Han nodded sheepishly.

“She took the news about Be- Kylo’s existence and fate very badly. She, uhm, she was practically inconsolable for days, and she refused to speak to either me or her mother. I guess I should have known she might try something like this.”

Hux could practically feel his inner temperature rising steadily, anger slowly bubbling towards the surface, and he bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself from simply smacking the man across the face. While it seemed fairly believable that Han was as unprepared for this as he was, Hux
admitted to himself that he was more than happy to take every last little inch of anger he’d built up over the last weeks out on this—this utter buffoon of a royal lover that had caused so much grief already. This was bad—really bad. The Crown Princess of one of the most powerful Core Kingdoms, with no proper escort, in his castle. Wars had been declared over less than this, and if there was one thing the North knew of queen Leia, it was that she craved war like others craved wealth or food. This could be all the excuse she needed to march north and force them all into battle much too soon. It would end in disaster, he knew it. While he also knew his warriors, and knew that they could probably still walk away victorious, the costs would be far too high—it would take them years to recover, and during that time they would be weakened. He had to find a way out of the situation, and he knew one way that might work—unless it was already far too late.

“When that girl of yours arrive here,” he said sternly. “She and her little… friends, will be given a few days of rest—same as you, and then I am shipping her back South again. I don’t care why she’s here, how good intentions she has—her presence here puts my entire people at risk of an invasion from that woman of yours. I expect you to make sure she obeys. I don’t have the time nor the patience to cater to the whims of children.”

Han paled, but nodded.

“I’ll try.”

“Try?” Hux snarled. “I’m afraid that’s not good enough, Solo. Not even remotely good enough. You will see to it that she steps aboard that ship without any protests, or we will have a problem. She presents a danger to my entire people, and I will not hesitate to sail her back down south in chains if I have to. She cannot stay here, and that is final.”

~*~*~

Ren woke up some time after dawn, feeling a little disorientated, but more rested than he’d been in weeks. Silass had more or less force fed him one of her strongest sleeping potions the night before—one that came with a guarantee of dreamless sleep—and Ren had, for once, not had the energy to put up even a fake protest. He did not want to face another night of fragmented visions, memories, and nightmares. He couldn’t, not without Braith there to help him though it—and Silass was right, he’d need to be rested and at full strength when whatever hell this turned out to be inevitably broke loose.

As soon as he moved slightly, trying to turn over on his side, he became aware of a small but solid source of warmth next to him, coiling around him like some giant leech. Looking down, Avi’s small, lanky form was wrapped around his midsection—still sleeping, and drooling a little on Ren’s tunic. Smiling despite himself, Ren gently dislodged his sleeping sibling from himself and chuckled when they immediately curled right up against his side, a small hand gripping his tunic so tightly their knuckles whitened. How could he have forgotten about this? Avi detested sleeping alone, and only did so when no one else would allow them to share their bed—and more than anything they loved curling up next to either Ren or Gaius for warmth. Their two older brothers pretended they minded, but in reality Avi could get away with a lot worse things than seeking warmth and security—being the baby of the bunch did come with a lot of advantages, even though none of the Knights would admit to it even under torture.

It was easy to underestimate Avi, and many people did, because of their youthful appearance and childlike personality—but it was a mistake people would often soon regret. Avi was a Knight for a reason—their ability to access the most primal and chaotic sources of the Force was second only to Ren’s own, and they could most likely beat any one of clan Hux’ warriors with ease. Most often though, they preferred not to. Avi had a talent for strategy, and Ren had never had reason to worry
about any plan that had come from his strange little sibling’s mind.
Managing somehow to extract himself from the little nest of blankets and furs, Ren pulled the
drapes apart and got out of the bed. Silass was the only one present still, sitting at the table and
combing her long black hair before pulling it into a tight braid. He usually sharp features softened
as she smiled at him when he slowly got in his trousers.

“You’ve gotten lazy about covering up,” she said, a teasing glint in her eyes. “I am absolutely
scandalized, brother, that I could see your naked legs!”

Ren raised a brow, but chuckled as he pulled his outer robes on, making sure he was properly
covered before wrapping his broad belt around his waist and putting his boots on.

“Did you know, dear sister, that it is custom in my clan to sleep naked?” he said. “You just be glad
I remembered to keep my tunic on last night.”

It was so good to hear her laugh. Silass had a sense of humour as dry and sharp as a dagger’s edge,
but making her even chuckle was quite the accomplishment. He had a feeling none of them would
be doing much laughing in the weeks to come, and he was grateful for this small blessing.

“Where are the others?” he asked. “Training?”

Silass nodded.

“Gaius and Chava are sparring down in our new training room, down by the baths. Vilya and Erris
are helping out with the little hatchlings’ first archery lessons.”

“Lucky day for the hatchlings,” Ren commented, running his hands through his hair. It was getting
very long now – already well past his shoulders. Silass sighed.

“Stop that,” she said, using the Force to gently tug at him until he came over and sat down in the
chair next to her. “Let me do it. Nothing too intricate, I promise. But we can’t have our master
looking like a bird’s nest when we go out among the others.” Ren didn’t try to protest, knowing
she was right. “You should wear that chain on the outside, though,” she said. “Your warchief gave
it to you, didn’t he?”

“Yes. It was a… a courting gift. It’s a King’s chain, he has an identical one – it signifies his rank.”

“And he gave one to you.” Silass sounded impressed. “I want to meet this warchief. It seems there
is finally a man in this world who understands your worth, even when you don’t yourself.”

Ren blushed slightly at that, but he didn’t even try to admonish her. Silass was never anything but
honest and frank about things when they were amongst themselves, and that frankness had helped
keep his chaotic mind just on the right side of sanity for almost a decade now, ever since they were
mere hatchlings trying to overcome their troubled pasts. In public, she was never anything less than
his perfect second in command – unwavering in both resolve and loyalty – and in private her snark
and wit and fierce protectiveness had gotten them all through some very difficult times. He could
let her get away with these little bouts of attitude, because when it came down to it, she would
obey his every command without question, just like she always had.

“You would approve of him, sister,” he said with a small smile. “I have no doubt about that. Let us
hope you can all come visit me at Skye Castle someday soon.”

Before Silass could respond, whimpering and muttering from Ren’s bed signalled that the youngest
Knight had woken up, and was now attempting to extract themselves from the blankets. Both Ren
and Silass knew better than to try and engage in a conversation with Avi before they had had their
breakfast, so they simply observed as their blonde little sibling staggered over to their own bed, got dressed, and stumbled over to the stairs – no doubt to go raid the main kitchen for all the left overs of the hatchlings’ breakfast. Silass finished Ren’s braid, and excused herself to go join Gaius and Chava – she had merely needed a few moments alone with her ‘favourite brother’, as she jokingly called him. Ren lingered in the tower for a little while after she’d gone. It was a strange feeling, being back here like this. The tower was beautiful, truly a worthy home to the Knights, it wasn’t that. No, it was that nagging, prickling sensation somewhere in the far back of his mind that told him that something had changed here during his time away. Something wasn’t the same, wasn’t right. There was a feeling in the Force, very subtle, well hidden in the deeper layers of the flow, and it felt like… poison. Like a disease. Like something infecting them all, slowly and silently spreading, festering, growing. Madness. It felt like madness, and it permeated every last little inch of the Force flow at the House. A shudder ran through him as he probed the flow gently with his mind. No, this was not right. He would have to bring this up with his Knights later. If they hadn’t felt it, it would be a major cause for concern – with how close to the Force they all lived, it should stand out every bit as clearly to them as to him.

In an attempt to distract himself, he did as Silass had suggested, and brought the King’s chain out from underneath his robes so it was visible even with his cowl draped over his shoulders and covering most of his hair. Daring a glance in the mirror, he had to admit it looked very good – regal almost. The thick silver chain and its red stone contrasting sharply against the dark of his robes, only adding to the air of superiority. Tired and worried as he was, no one who looked at him could possibly see him as anything less than the first among the Crows, the Master of the Knights. Silass had done a good job with his hair; two smaller braids ran from his temples where they joined together with the rest of his hair in a loose but still neat braid. Grateful that his ears were still largely hidden, he had to admit to himself that the look did suit him – even if it was something he wasn’t very used to.

“Vanity, my hatchling? I never expected that from you.” Maul’s deep voice startled him out of his reverie, and he turned around to see his old master cross the floor to pull him into a tight embrace. He held Ren tight for a while, and the younger man swore he could feel the tension in his body dissipating. “It’s good to see you again. I worried.”

Maul let go of him enough to have a good look at him – touching his hair, straightening his robes, and inspecting the King’s chain. It was a ritual of his, and Ren found it both soothing and anchoring; if there was one thing they could always count on with Maul, it was that he saw them, saw every little nuance and flicker of thought and emotions, and he accepted it. There was no Crow dead or alive whom Maul had ever feared or given any sign of disliking – he simply acknowledged every aspect at all times. This was, of course, part of the reason why some Crows feared him nearly as much as they feared Ren. It was also the reason why Ren always felt safe and comfortable around him. Maul did not judge, he only cared, comforted, guided, taught – judgment was for others, he always said. If the Force had chosen someone, then they had no right to pass judgment – it wasn’t their place.

“It’s so good to see you, too, master,” Ren smiled, putting a hand on his shoulder and giving it a light squeeze. “I am in dire need of your guidance.”

Maul nodded, pulling his cowl up over his tattooed head.

“I sensed that you were,” he said. “Come, I think better when I’m outside, and I know you do too. The rose garden should be empty now that they’re all withered. We can speak in peace there.”

Ren nodded, pulling his hood up as well, and pulling on his gloves before following Maul down the many steps and out into the maze of buildings, gardens, training grounds, and other spaces that
made up the House of Night.

~*~*~

Rey had been driving Finn and Poe nearly up the walls of their little room with her restless pacing, her nail biting, and the incessant repetition of 'what if'. They had reached a point where they were seriously considering simply tying her to a chair and gagging her, when a knock came from the door, and one of the border guards stepped in. She looked at the trio with that same unimpressed bordering on bored gaze all Northerners seemed to reserve for Southern folks.

“Pack your things,” she said, not even bothering with any greetings. “You’re going to be escorted to Skye Castle first thing in the morning, and it would be in your best interest not to keep the warchief waiting. Be ready outside at dawn.”

With that, she left again, not waiting for a reply, not even looking at them. By now, none of the three really expected any differently. After three days in this little inn, listening to the conversations of the other patrons, the songs sung at night after a few tankards, and having had the large and beautifully embroidered tapestries explained to them by the inn-keeper herself – it had become clear as day why the Northerners disliked everything connected to the South. They could hardly be blamed for holding a grudge after so many different Southern rulers had tried to conquer them, tried to force them away from their Gods, killed their Crows, and tried to make them ashamed of their culture and heritage. Finn, Rey, and Poe had been quite shaken by the tales they’d heard – it wasn’t something they had even been taught during their years of schooling, at least not such a grim version of it. The way they had been taught, the invasions had been righteous missions carried out by faithful servants of the God of Mornings, to try and bring light and civilisation to these savages and their dark lands. It was quite the shock to realize how little the South really know of the North – how incredibly complex a culture they had, and how deep and true the bonds were between the Gods of the First Order and the people who worshipped them.

Starting tomorrow, they would travel even further into this strange but beautiful land, to the legendary Skye Castle, the throne of the North, and meet an actual Northern warchief. Even given the grave circumstances that had led them here, they couldn’t help but feel a great deal of excitement. So many things had already turned out to be very far from what they had thought, and they were eager to find out if the same could be said for the notorious warchief of clan Hux. Rey, of course, was even more anxious to finally go to the castle. It felt like forever now, since they left D’Qar behind, and now – finally – only a few days remained until she would get to see the brother that had been kept from her all these years. She could only hope that they weren’t too late to stop her father from carrying out that heinous order. Rey didn’t speak of it much, but it ate at her to know what her mother had done – and how quickly she had decided to do it again. Maybe it was true what they said about Rey when they thought she didn’t hear, that she was too naïve, too kind, too soft – not queen material – but she would rather go to history as the queen who cared for and protected those who needed it, than the queen who killed her own child.

A year ago she would never had thought in this way about herself or her mother – if anything she would have rallied to her mother’s defence if someone had dared speak about this. That was naïve of her, she could admit that much – but after hearing Leia tell the story herself… Something inside Rey had broken that day, something had died, and now there was something else growing there instead – a resolve, a deep and unshakeable determination never to be like her mother.

It was the role of a ruler to protect their people, and protect them she would – starting with her brother.

Chapter End Notes
Uni turned out to be a lot more intense this semester than it has been in a long time. So, sorry about the delay - I've been trying to sort out a lesser mountain of administrative and bureaucratic issues. Updates will continue in this slow manner for a while, and I'm sorry for the inconvenience!

The Knights love each other dearly - they're family. And Maul is awesome. Yes.

Hux, that poor man, is so royally done with everything that honestly fear for his blood pressure. Han tries, but it's not always easy trying to placate an angry Hux.

And our Southern trio are slowly starting to move again^^

I don't really have much more to say about this chapter. If you have any questions, thoughts, theories, needs to yell at me, or anything else, do feel free to pop over to tumblr and drop me a message. My ask is always open, though currently not allowing anonymous asks.

Your comments mean everything to me, and each and every single one of the puts the biggest smile on my face, so do take a minute to tell me what you think of the chapter before you go, yeah?

Until next time, lovelies!
As there were a few Crows still on their way, the first gathering was scheduled to take place the next day at noon, Maul informed Ren as they made their way towards the rose garden. Ren was glad for it. He needed this day to try and gather his thoughts, to make sense of all these strange sensations and the putrid smell of fear that permeated the air of the House in a way he had never before experienced. It was very cold outside, frost covered every surface, and their breaths came out as glittering clouds, and Ren felt even more grateful than before for the thick cloak Hux had given him. Summer was brief but lovely at the House, but the winters were brutal, and he wasn’t looking forward to spending any extended amount of time here at this time of year. There were plenty of scars and old injuries that would make their presence known to him when subjected to lower temperatures, and there were memories attached to them that he’d rather not ever face again.

They walked in silence most of the way – Maul never was one for small talk, and Ren took after him in that regard. They both found comfort in silence, could navigate it and find answers in it in ways others struggled to comprehend. Hatchlings and adult Crows alike scampered out of their way as they moved through the complex, no one wanted to get in the way of either of them – their titles and reputations always going ahead of them – their titles and reputations always going ahead of them to secure clear paths. They had nothing to prove to anyone; they had earned their ranks, and to get in their way would be a terrible insult. The Crows took insults very seriously, and no one wished to be at the receiving end of the punishment that would follow such a transgression.

The rose garden, a sight to behold when at its peak, was now mostly a series of little walks, wilted bushes, and empty trellises, with wooden and stone benches scattered about – all of it divided over three different levels. While designed to aid in the healing of tired spirits, at this time of the year it had rather the opposite effect – a perfect image as it was of the process of death and decay. A part of Ren found it very fitting, while another part desperately wished it had been summer now so that he could have spent some time getting lost in the sweet scents and bright colours instead of this muddy and gloomy space. Maul sensed his unease – as he always did – and placed a hand on his shoulder in comfort as they made their way to a bench on the uppermost level. Wrapping themselves tight in their cloaks, they sat down to look out at the rest of the compounds for a moment.

“So,” Maul said eventually, his gentle voice as always such a contradiction to his grim appearance. “Talk to me, my little hatchling. It saddens me to see you so distressed.”

Ren swallowed hard. He knew he could tell Maul anything – or, at least he used to. Suddenly, he wasn’t so sure, and he hated himself for doubting his old master. Maul, ever the observant one, raised a brow before putting and arm around his shoulder and letting Ren rest his head on his shoulder. He always did this when Ren struggled with words. It was a simple acknowledgement of his predicament, a quiet permission to remain silent for as long as he needed to. Maul would wait, he always did.

“There are disturbances,” he said, golden eyes distant and… worried? “Great disturbances in the Force. I know you must have felt them, little one. Everything feels broken, fragmented. But there is more to it than that. There is madness lurking in the deeper flows, disease.” He sighed. “These are dark times. Darker than anything we’ve faced in centuries. And nothing pains me more than knowing that you’ve been placed in the middle of it all with all your power and all your torment.”
“Will you be by my side, master?” Ren finally asked, voice shaking despite his attempts at keeping it level. “I know how you detest power struggles and politics, but I fear I must ask you. I don’t know what will happen, but I can’t help but feel that whatever it is, it will change everything we’ve ever known about ourselves. I don’t want to fight you, master. Out of all the Crows, you are the only one who never treated me as anything other than a person. You are the first one who ever truly saw me. I can’t bear the thought of not having you with me through this ordeal – whatever it turns out to be.”

Maul sighed deeply, shifting to take Ren’s face between his gloved hands – keeping their gazes locked to one another.

“From the moment I found you laying in the snow, bleeding half to death, clutching Eira to your chest to protect her, I have vowed every day of my life to stay by your side, to guide and support you for as long as you will allow me to do so. It is true that I very much detest the petty power struggles of mortals who put their own agendas before those of the Gods we serve – but there are times when silence and refusal to take sides becomes in itself a crime. This, I believe, is such a time. I would give my life to keep you safe, little hatchling. It saddens me to know you have felt uncertain about this.” He brought their foreheads together, and Ren felt the gentle presence of him in his mind – a sign of trust on Maul’s part, to open himself up to Ren in such a way. It was a rare thing, indeed, and spoke volumes of how seriously the older Crow took this whole situation. “I invite you to see for yourself, my hatchling, where your old master’s loyalties lie. These are secrets I guard closely, and have shed blood to keep. I trust you to keep them, as I will always keep yours – whatever they may be.”

Ren took a deep breath, then reached out, allowing himself to be submerged in the vast inner world of his master’s mind. He had never seen so deeply before, had never quite understood the vast oceans of knowledge, emotions, memories, and thoughts that made up the strange man Ren had always considered the closest thing to a father he would ever have. Maul’s mind was a beautiful, dark, chaotic, frightfully complex place, and he laid it all out in plain sight for Ren to see. The younger Crow felt his breath hitch and his eyes burning with tears from the sheer honour he felt at being allowed to see it all. Maul’s eyes were glassy as well as he studied Ren’s memories and experiences from the months they’d been apart. Eventually, they withdrew from each other’s minds, coming back into awareness of the world around them, of the cold, the bite of the wind against their cheeks, of the ever present noise and movements that filled the space at the House.

“Forgive me, master,” Ren managed. “For ever doubting you. There is no excuse, I just… These last few months have been so overwhelming, I- I simply didn’t know if there was anyone here I could trust. I am so sorry.”

“It’s always wise to be careful when it comes to trust,” Maul soothed. “And you do not need to apologize to me. I am not mad. There is so much weight resting on your young shoulders – far too much, but I know that you will rise to this task as you have with every other. I will be there with you – as will your knights.” He smiled. “Now tell me more about this warchief of yours. He seems to be quite the extraordinary man, and I am most intrigued.”

~*~*~

Ren and Maul spent most of the morning strolling around the vast compound. Even though they’d only been apart for a few months, they still had a lot of things to catch up on. Maul, ever the teacher, was very interested in his progress and what new insights he’d acquired since last they spoke. He listened patiently to his former hatchling’s little tales, offering advice here and there, a few questions, and some much welcome assurances when Ren admitted doubts about certain issues. Their craft was a difficult one, and seeking advice from each other was as vital a part of
their practice as vision seeking or wound care – but not everyone had the immense privilege of having someone as knowledgeable in the ways of the Force as Maul at their disposal. Though he had seemed mildly amused by the process of Ren and Hux’ courting, he’d been very supportive and, much to Ren relief, genuinely happy for them both, and even expressed a wish to come visit Skye Castle so that he could meet Hux in person.

A little before noon, Avi and Chava managed to track them down, and they engaged in an animated discussion about the advantages of using obsidian blades instead of steel when performing surgical procedures. Chava was experimenting with different types of stone, as well as different designs for the surgical blades in order to see if they could be improved, and she had made some very interesting progress with some of them. Maul was very intrigued, and Chava had to promise him a demonstration. Avi cheerfully admitted that they really couldn’t tell any difference – but then again, surgery wasn’t their strong suit. It had never been. Maul was good at cutting things into little pieces, yes – but they never had any patience for putting them back together again. No, as long as Avi had their sword and their poisons, they were content. Ren affectionately admonished them for their violent tendencies, causing Avi to point out that their master, with the amount of blood he had spilt in his days, most certainly could not claim any sort of moral high-ground in that regard. Maul and Chava simply shook their heads in fond exasperation; it was nearly impossible to be mad at Avi. They had this remarkable ability to take things in stride in a way the other Knights often struggled with or simply lacked. It had become a saying among them that as long as Avi was still smiling, there was nothing to worry about. When they did stop smiling, though… It was a sight that would have seasoned warriors huddling together for protection against the on-coming storm that was Avi’s rage.

As they made their way to the great hall to have their mid-day meal, the other Knights joined them. Maul thanked Ren for a pleasant and much needed morning of conversation, and headed off towards his own seat among the higher ranking Crows. In a few years he’d be eligible to take up a position among the Elders and sit by the table of honour together with his peers and the Knights, but for now, he was assigned to one of the tables closest to it. Maul didn’t mind – he preferred to take his meals in relative peace and quiet, and had praised the day he’d been excused from the duty of overseeing the hatchlings’ tables.

Ren and the others took their respective seats and watched as the other Crows filed into the hall. He had never seen this many Crows gathered in the hall before in all his years; extra tables had been brought in, and even then it was crowded – a sea of black and grey, and the occasional white in the coats of the resident little magpies. Aya and the rest of the Hux clan’s Crows had been moved to a table close to Ren’s, he noticed with some satisfaction – a token of respect for him and his clan, no doubt. Any Crows serving under a Knight of Ren automatically gained a higher standing within the order, even if it wasn’t an official one. He nodded in greeting, pleased to see that they, too, looked rested and less haunted than when they’d arrived the day before. Making a mental note to seek them out and make sure that they were settling in properly, Ren waited until all the Crows and hatchlings were seated, before rising to his feet and leading them in a short prayer as they waited for the food to be brought in – a duty which rotated between the selected few allowed to sit at the table of honour. He had missed certain parts of the daily routine at the House, and while his heart warmed at the familiar sight of older hatchlings guiding their younger siblings through the prayer with varying degrees of patience while the older Crows sat with their heads bowed and eyes closed in reverence as the sacred words spilled from their lips in the old, melodious chant, he found himself missing the loud and boisterous affairs that were the daily meals at Skye Castle. The longing was so strong that he nearly lost track of the words as he was singing them – his heart ached, heavy with the desperate desire to be at home with his warchief again. Home. He realized that the castle had become more of a home to him in the short time he’d been there than the House had ever been. It was a strange realization, and one that came with a
heavy air of guilt. The order had never been anything less than a family to him, and yet all he wanted to do in that moment was to get Askr saddled and head back south as fast as they could go without dropping from exhaustion. It was something he’d never thought he’d feel, and yet here he was – the highest ranking Crow in the North, second only to the Raven himself – and all he wished was to be far away from it all, safe and surrounded by common mortals.

“Don’t worry so much, brother,” came Gaius’ voice in his mind as he sat back down. “There’s no shame in having found the place where you belong. It’s a blessing. No one here will think less of you for missing your beloved and your home.”

Ren helped himself to the rich vegetable stew before answering, wanting the people in the hall to focus on their meals instead of the conversations of their superiors.

“I know,” he said aloud. “But I still can’t help it, brother. This is all so new to me, and I’m afraid it will take some time getting used to. I’m the master of the Knights, it seems so strange that I should consider another place home instead of the House.”

“You can have more than one home, brother,” Erris said. “I’ve always thought home is more of a feeling than a place.”

“We’re not Doves,” Vilya smiled cheekily. “We don’t have to deprive ourselves of our sense of home and belonging if we don’t want to. You can have as many homes as you wish to.”

Ren chuckled.

“You’re right,” he smiled. “I will get there eventually, sister, but for now I’ll have to ask you to be patient with me. These have been a few very strange months.”

The Knights all nodded their heartfelt agreement to that.

~*~*~

The council room – though the name failed to capture the grandeur, the sheer vastness of the space – sat in the very core of the Centre Nest. A total of sixteen large doors admitted entry into it; eight on ground level, and eight one floor below, at the first dungeon level. Both walls and furniture was richly decorated with detailed carvings, thick tapestries and other such decorations – a far cry from the ascetic image they presented in public, but they had their reasons. Council meetings often dragged on for hours – if not days – and they had long since overcome any scruples regarding comfort and distractions. The seating arrangements consisted of a semi-circular stand were some five hundreds of seats were divided over ten rows of high-backed chairs as old as time itself. One, they had all been fitted with cushions, but it was long ago, and now the seats were the same dark wood as the rest of the structure. In the middle of the very first row were seven chairs, separated from the others by intricately carved bars on three sides – decidedly more comfortable than the rest – these were the Knights’ assigned seats. The rest of the front row on each side was reserved for the Elders. Some ten more rows of low benches had been placed on the floor in the centre of the semi-circle to allow as many Crows as possible a place to sit, but there would still be a large number of them that would simply have to stand. Large chandeliers stood placed around the room, and several impressive windows had been built into the roof to allow more light inside. All the seats faced a low dais, upon which a wide copper brazier was placed. It had been prepared the night before, and required only to be lit and supplied with the a few drops of blood from the Knights and the Elders in order to summon to them the smoke-shape of their Raven.

Contrary to the belief of the common mortals, the Raven did not, in fact, reside at the House. The actual location of the Order’s leader had been a closely guarded secret for the past three centuries,
after an incident where Southern invading forces had come far too close to actually capturing and killing the Raven in charge at the time. Ever since, only a select few of the Elders knew how to find the Raven, and even they were strictly forbidden to travel there under any circumstances other than their leader’s impending death. Not even the Knights were privy to this secret, as it was generally considered a wiser move to balance the factors of power out between groups instead of giving it all to the already mind-bogglingly powerful Knights. It also provided a sense of security, in case of internal conflict, that Knights and Raven were kept separate – because too much power too close to each other was never a good thing. The Crows knew their history, and they had all learned the signs well.

All the other Crows had already gathered when Ren lead his Knights to their seat, followed by the large group of Elders. The reverence was thick in the air as the Crows watched their highest ranking siblings stride proudly across the large room, backs straight and heads held high, before taking their seats. One of the Elders, an impossibly small, scraggly-looking man, carried with him a goblet and a small knife. One by one, all the occupants of the first row cut the skin of their forearms to allow a few little droplets to fall into the waiting goblet, and once he’d secured all their contributions, he shuffled over to the dais to light the fire and pour the blood onto the awaiting herbs. They all bowed their heads in the deepest respect as the rising smoke took on the shape of the Raven, his figure towering over all of them, almost reaching the high ceiling.

Now, finally, they would all be given the explanation they had been so desperate for. Finally, the answers would be given. The Raven was wise – he would lead them through this.

~*~*~

There hadn’t been much time over the last few days to stop and enjoy the view, as the guards had lead the way for Rey, Finn and Poe. They rode hard, only stopping when necessary, and didn’t engage much in conversation with their charges. Instead, they kept their distance, sitting and sleeping on the opposite side of the campfire – talking amongst themselves in their own strange, melodic tongue. The three Southerners understood perfectly well that to them, this was not a very appreciated task to have been given, and they had a feeling the guards considered them something along the lines of spoiled children being sent home to their father for a telling off. Not even Finn and Poe, being experienced soldiers, managed to win any approval. The guards had inspected their armour before they began their journey – taking all their weapons away – and had been sighing and shaking their heads the entire time. Southern armour and weapons quite clearly failed to meet Northern standards, but Poe and Finn were wise enough not to be insulted by it. From what they had seen so far, they knew the Northerners took their weapons and martial arts very seriously, and that they really shouldn’t expect too much positivity from them.

The guard had chuckled, though, and patted them on the shoulder, when two days ago Rey had first spotted Mount Starkiller on the horizon and loudly expressed her delight at the sight of it. Now they understood why. They had had the mountain and a few of its surrounding lower peaks in sight since then, and though it had definitely become larger and larger against the surrounding landscape, they didn’t seem to be getting any closer. How was it possible for such an enormous thing to exist? Now they were coming over the top of a hill, and Rey, Poe, and Finn almost fell off their horses from the impact of Mount Starkiller rising from the vale beneath, the river running through it glittering in the late autumn sun, and the leaves still remaining on the trees shining in vibrant shades of red and gold against the darker backdrop of pines and fir trees.

“Is- is that Skye Castle,” Rey managed, and pointed. “There, at the foot of the mountain?”

One of the guards chuckled, and nodded.
“It sure is, little girl,” she said. “the Throne of the North. Home of clan Hux for twenty generations now.” Something cruel played at the corners of her mouth. “Many a Southern army have faced their demise trying to breach those walls. You tread carefully once we reach it – the North has a very long memory, and our warchiefs most of all.”

Rey swallowed hard.

“How long until we reach it?”

“We should be there in half a day if we get a move on – and we will. There are many a beast in these parts who’d like nothing more than to fill their bellies with human flesh.”

With that, the guards spurred their horses on and set off down into the vale, the three Southerners following close behind.

The guard certainly didn’t lie, and the sun had already set by the time they crossed the bridge and arrived at Sky Castle. The courtyard was well-lit with the help of dozens of torches, and the inhabitants of the vast complex were going about their business without paying much attention to them or the guards. There were children of different ages involved in different games or what looked like sparring, but might have been play as well. Large hounds, larger than anything Rey had ever seen before, walked around freely – receiving scratches behind their ears, or little treats, before going up to the massive doors of what Rey guessed was the main building and were let in by the guards. It seemed very peaceful here – just ordinary, everyday life. She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting, but it was something more sinister than this – that much was certain – and she felt ashamed of herself now.

As they dismounted, a few servants appeared to take their luggage, and shortly after that a man stepped out of the main building – a Southerner too, by the looks of him – and approached the trio. He nodded a thanks to the guards, and said something to them in the Northern tongue. They looked pleased with whatever he’d said, and simply left. The man himself took a good look at them, lips pursed, and a small frown forming.

“I’m Mitaka,” he said with a small bow. “Lord Hux’ scribe and advisor. You have just missed dinner, I’m afraid, but I’ve arranged for food to be sent to your rooms. Now, if you would please follow me, I’ve sent for clean clothes for you all, but I’m afraid you’ll need a bath before you put them on.” He motioned for them to follow, and headed across the courtyard to another building, from whose roof several chimneys rose – smoke, or was it steam? – billowing out of all of them. As they entered, he pointed to two separate doors. “Here in the North, we don’t much care about nudity,” he said. “People of all genders usually bathe together – but as far as I remember, the South thinks differently, and far be it from us to insult the Crown Princess of D’Qar by asking her to bathe unchaperoned in the company of two young men. So, if you please, little princess – the door to the left is yours. You two will share the bath to the right. Servants will be by to help you with what you need.” He bowed again, and left.

They didn’t get a chance to question how he knew who she was, before the servants showed up and ushered them into their respective rooms. Once they’d been deemed clean enough, they were given their new clothes, and escorted back to the main hall, where Mitaka was waiting just inside the large doors. He inspected them thoroughly, before nodding in approval to the servants and taking over again and leading the youngsters down a corridor.

“How do you know who I am?” Rey couldn’t stop herself from asking. Mitaka gave her a small smile.

“The North is not cut off from the rest of the world, little princess,” he said. “We keep track of the
other royal houses too. Besides, your father informed us that the strange young girl nagging our poor border garrison for entry into the land would most likely be you.”

“Father is here?” Rey could scarcely believe it. “Where is he? Can I see him?”

“He is currently discussing political matters with lord Hux,” Mitaka said. “He and your… uncle, have been given a room close to yours. You will see them once they return here.” He stopped in front of a door. “This here is your room, princess. Your father’s is across the hall here. You two younglings are in this room.” He pointed to the door next to Rey’s. “The two rooms are connected via a door, so you may come and go as you please between them without bothering anyone else by running back and forth in the corridor.” His soft face took on a harsh look. “In fact, for the time being I’m afraid you are confined to these rooms. You need permission from the warchief to move about here, and I must inform you that your presence in the castle is something of a diplomatic nightmare. War has been waged over lesser things than a foreign princess turning up without proper escort at a Northern court, and your mother has rather a bloody reputation of her own. Please do not make the situation worse than it is. Lord Hux is a good man, though not necessarily a kind one. He will not put his clan at risk for the sake of the whims of a little girl. You’d do well to keep that in mind.”

With a final nod, he turned and headed back down the corridor. The trio looked at each other – the severity of the situation beginning to dawn on them. Of course this was serious, and of course Finn and Poe weren’t enough of an escort to make this not a very difficult situation for all involved parties. Rey could only hope her mother wouldn’t catch wind of it. If she did, then their God help them all.

They headed into Rey’s room, drawn there by the smell of food that came from the other side of the door. It wasn’t the largest room, by any means, but it had a very comfortable looking bed, a small recliner, and a table with four chairs just by the window overlooking a smaller courtyard, where a group of young clanspeople were sparring. Across from the courtyard was the great hall – there was no mistaking it; throne rooms and main halls looked much the same no matter where you went. Here, though, Rey was intrigued to see so many birds flying in and out through the windows just beneath the roof. She could see enormous ravens, some grey and black crows, quick little magpies darting about along with what she guessed were rooks. There were so many! Rey had never seen so many bird of these kinds in all her life, much less all of them in one place. She had thought the birds would make the castle appear more dark and gloomy, given their colourless coats and haunting caws, but that was most certainly not the case.

Their food had been put on the table for them, kept warm under large ceramic covers, and they abandoned the view in favour of sitting down to eat. It had been a long day, and they hadn’t eaten for hours and hours. The food turned out to be a steak of some kind, with roasted root-vegetables, and a gravy that smelled heavily of herbs and spices. They had also been given a large pitcher of red wine to drink with it, and by the time they were finished, both the wine and food were all gone, and the trio felt more full than what was reasonable. The food was a lot heavier up here in the North – but it was also very tasty, and they had come to the joint conclusion that they didn’t mind the heaviness at all. A few hours of slight uneasiness were well worth it.

Finn and Poe’s room had one large bed, another recliner, and a small stand with a wash basin and mirror for their shaving needs. Poe blushed bright red at the realization why they’d been given the larger bed, and Finn smiled widely. It had been quite some times since they got to share a bed, and especially one as comfortable looking as this one. How in the world they’d figured out that they were lovers was beyond both Poe and Finn, but they were thankful, none the less. A knock was heard at Rey’s door, and she barely managed to open it, before Han was in the room – scooping her up in a tight hug, lifting her clean off the floor as he held her close. Chewie was close behind, and gave the two stunned young men a big hug as well, before patting Han on the shoulder and signing that he should probably put his daughter down now.
“Do you have any idea,” Han said as he put Rey down and they all took a seat where they could. “What a mess you might have created by running off like that?” His voice was trembling from all the emotions running through it. “Lord Hux is not happy with this situation, and he’s made it very clear that you can’t stay here a second longer than absolutely necessary. Your mother might go to war to get you back, Rey. War. And if she does… Hux will more than happily slaughter his way through her army, and any other army she takes with her, to keep his clan safe. Do you understand me? He is the most dangerous man I’ve ever met, and he will stop at nothing to protect those he cares about. Your little stunt might have brought death and ruin to the entire South if we don’t find some way to stop this.”

Rey felt tears burning in her eyes, her chin beginning to tremble just a little as she bowed her head in shame.

“B-but surely my brother-”

“He’s not here, Rey,” Han sighed, taking pity on her and pulling her close again. “Kylo is not here, and Hux is not happy about it. I don’t know what’s going on, my girl, but whatever it is, it’s not good. I’m sorry, but no one knows when Kylo will be back.”

“What…” Rey’s voice was so small. “H-how can he- he not be here? He was supposed to be here, I- I needed to see him. Needed to- to know what he looks like, hear his voice. I just… I just need to know my brother!” Her voice broke at the last word, the tension built up over the past few weeks completely overwhelming her as the realization hit that their journey had been for nothing.

Han cradled her to his chest and rocked her gently, kissing her hair.

“I know, sweetness,” he soothed. “I know.”

~*~*~

“…ething’s wrong!”

The voice cut through Hux’ thoughts, and startled him back to reality. He’d gotten lost inside his own mind again there for a while, trying to make sense of the whole mess they were all in. for ten years, there’d been relative peace and quiet around his land – the occasional conflict here and there, certainly, but nothing major – and now he had been through a clan war, conquered three new territories, lost a Crow, gained a Crow, gained a lover, had his lover stolen away, and found himself with both the paramour and the only child of the most bloodthirsty queen in the entire South in his castle. All of this, in half a year.

Looking over at Eira, he noticed her distress easily. She had fluffed up – her feathers sticking out like white spikes in all directions – and she was pacing restlessly back and forth on the window seat, twitching her head this way and that, flapping her wings angrily. When she saw that Hux was looking at her she cawed, and he heard it again.

"Something’s wrong! human! Listen to me!"

"E-Eira?” he sputtered in disbelief. "I-is that you, girl?"

She darted over to his lap, fixing him with her most urging glare.

"Yes, you daft human!” She bit him in the arm, and Hux yelped in surprise. "Something is all wrong!”

“Something’s wrong with what? Kylo?”
“Yes! It’s all gone wrong! He’s scared, human! Can’t you feel it?”

Hux swallowed a few times, trying to breathe deeply and ground himself the way Kylo had been teaching him to do. It took him quite a while, and having Eira’s panicked voice in his mind as well didn’t exactly help him focus. But eventually, he felt their bond surface above the rest, and he tried to make himself follow it, connect with it, let it lead him to Kylo. It was so difficult, and he felt the sweat breaking out all over his skin, heart beating heavily in his chest, and breaths coming out more like short gasps than anything else. How Kylo did this on a daily basis was beyond him. He lost focus and had to start all over several times, and it frustrated him to the point where he wanted to smash something to pieces.

Then suddenly, he felt it. Fear. It hit him like an avalanche, leaving a sour taste in his mouth, making his gut tighten and his skin prickle. Kylo was in a state of absolute terror, but as Hux tried to reach out, tried to call on his attention, the connection broke. Hux was tossed violently back into himself, having to catch himself in order to avoid falling out of the chair. He let out a string of profanities in every language he knew, getting up and furiously pacing the room. Though he wanted nothing more than to try again, he knew Kylo has said it would be more or less impossible for him to be able to reach him over such a distance with the amount of training he’d been given. He felt wetness covering his upper lip, and when he brought a hand up to wipe at it, his fingers were coated in red. He hurried to find a piece of cloth to press against his nose, and tore the door open – causing the guard outside to flinch.

“Get Phasma, Mitaka, and Mai up here, right this instant!” he barked. “I don’t care what they’re doing, just get them up here!”

“Y-yes, my lord!” the guard squeaked, and hurried down the stairs.

~*~*~

The entire council room was dead silent as the smoke-shape of the Raven dissolved. They could not believe what they had just been told, and the Crows looked frantically around, trying to find some comfort in the eyes of each other, only to be met with equal confusion. One by one, the gazes wandered to the Knights on the first row, and eventually the entire room were staring at Kylo and his Knights – looking to them for guidance, as always.

Kylo’s entire soul was in turmoil, the King’s chain burning through the fabric of his clothes, his robes suddenly feeling too tight, the air in the room too stale. This was madness. He could feel the conflict brewing in the Force already, the crack in their united order, the chaos seeping through. He felt cold spread through his blood at the realization that he’d found the disease – and it was nothing like what he had thought it would be. Everything he thought he’d known about his order, about his Raven, about his fellow Crows… it was all coming apart in this very moment, crumbling down so easily, like a child’s carefully built sand-castles under the force of the tides. He was trapped. The Raven had lured him here, and now he was trapped in a house full of Crows that would not be as loyal to him as he had been trained to believe. He could feel it already, the poison in their minds spreading, the Crows silently picking sides in a conflict they could all sense, but still couldn’t name. They wouldn’t, until Kylo gave them the answer they all sought from him.

“We’re with you, master,” came the voices of his six siblings in his mind. “Whatever you do. We’re with you.”

“And here is you greatest trial, hatchling,” Maul whispered, his voice full of sorrow, even through their mind connection. “There is no going back now. You must fight this battle. Just know that you are not alone. I am with you. I believe in you.”

He felt the anger taking hold of him, the cold fury at the thought that the Raven dared ask that of
him, that he dared ask Kylo to! No, he couldn’t even think the thought – it alone felt like treason, like the worst form of betrayal. Kylo Ren had been raised, trained, groomed into the perfect weapon – obedience had always come as naturally to him as breathing, and he had always followed orders without hesitation. He was ruthless, merciless, a true son of Death, and disobedience had never been a notion he would ever entertain. But now…

“‘I will not.’

He didn’t raise his voice; he didn’t have to. A hair could fall in the dead silence and they would all hear it. He got to his feet, his Knights following so closely behind it almost looked synchronised. Turning to look at the room, he saw the full scale of the conflict. Some faces looked as if he’d gone mad, some looked like they wished to strike him dead right then and there, some looked lost and desperate, and some of them – not many – nodded their support.

There would be blood spilled, he knew it. So many of these faces would soon cease to exist, and Kylo mourned them all. There was a time when he wouldn’t – but that was also a time when he would have done what the Raven told him, without question, without hesitation, and certainly without remorse.

He refused to become that creature again. Would rather go mad with pain and grief over his lost siblings, his lost family, than let Snoke rob him of the heart Braith had given him. This was lunacy, and Kylo refused to be a part of it any longer. The Raven no longer spoke for the Gods, only for himself, and as the master of the Knights of Ren, it was his sacred duty to kill anyone who threatened or brought dishonour upon their names – no matter who it was. He would not lay his own life in ruins on the orders of a madman. The resolve took shape inside him, settled and hardened with every face he met that no longer looked like family, and in that moment Kylo Ren made a choice he knew could damn them all, as he raised his chin in defiance and said:

“I will not kill my warchief.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm so terribly sorry for the delay! This semester has been horrible, and I've been having more spoon related issues than usual. Updates will continue to be slow for a while yet, and again, I'm really sorry about this. I hate not being able to stick to my usual update schedule.

So, how's that for a plot revelation, hm?^^

Also, I love Maul. And Gaius. Eira is my most precious.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter, and as always, I adore every single one of you who comments, so do take a moment to tell me what you think, yeah? Also, if you want to yell at me some more, I'm always available on tumblr, under the same url as usual :)}
The silence in the council room was sharp, the shock having frozen everyone in their places – except, it turned out, from that scraggy little elder whose name Kylo had never managed to learn. He was back by the brazier, his arm open and bleeding over the herbs before anyone could stop him. The Knights looked to their master in question, and Kylo drew a breath to steady himself. He knew where this would lead, and though it was a price he would gladly pay himself, he’d rather not see anyone else hurt.

“Get yourselves and my Crows out of here,” he ordered, not leaving any room for them to object.

“Maul too – we need him. Get to the horses and go south. Go to my clan, tell Hux what happened, and protect him with your lives. Let Askr loose outside the walls. He can manage on his own.”

“What about you?” Chava’s voice was heavy with pain.

“There is nothing he can do to me that will hurt me. Not anymore. Protect Hux. That is all I need. Protect him – forever if you need to.” He gave them all one final look, then a short nod. “Go!”

Suddenly the room erupted into chaos, as the Knights moved to follow their master’s orders, and other Crows climbed over each other to either get out of the room or get their hands on the silent, majestic figure of Kylo Ren standing as still as a statue in the middle of the floor – chin still defiantly raised as he watched them scramble.

From the brazier behind them, Snoke’s smoke-shape once again formed, and Kylo allowed himself to be grabbed and forced to his knees in front of it. He could feel the presence of his Knights and subordinate Crows leaving the vicinity of the chamber – Maul’s presence leading them – and he turned his focus to his own situation, trying to ignore the sounds of shouting and fighting in the hallways outside. The disease, it appeared, had broken out full force, and its vile smell was spreading like wildfire through the House. Madness. This was all madness. Putting everything he had into maintaining control of his emotions and Force presence, he raised his head to meet the Raven’s gaze.

“What is the meaning of this?” the Raven demanded. “Why have you summoned me? Did you not understand my orders? Master Ren, explain yourself!”

“Master Ren is refusing to follow your orders, master,” the little scraggy man informed him. “He’s defying you.”

Snoke fixed Kylo with a glare that a few weeks earlier would have had him cowering. But now, with his warchief and beloved threatened, Kylo did not yield an inch.
“Is this true?”

“Yes.” Kylo calmly met his gaze, refused to let it so much as flicker. “Your orders are madness. I will not do it.”

“Oh?” That oily voice of Snoke’s sounded amused, but there was a not to it; something dangerous, like a predator lying in wait in tall grass - counting on one wrong move, one stumbling step. “And you think you’re strong enough to resist me? You will follow my orders, Ren. I am your master, you are my weapon. You do as you are told.”

“I refuse.”

Kylo faced the glare head on, and braced himself upon seeing the gesture that meant a world of pain was coming his way. Clenching his jaw shut, he barely had time to draw a deep breath before that sickening feeling, that pain that was beyond pain, tore through his body and mind – so overwhelming that for a moment he couldn’t see, couldn’t hear, couldn’t think. Everything was fire and ice and agony. Then the brutal entering of Snoke’s mind into his own, looking for weakness, for advantage, for a leash to grasp so he could pull Kylo back in line – as if he was some disobedient dog. Kylo kept his mind as empty as he could, letting it linger only on images of the frozen tundra around the House, of starry night skies, of nonsensical little things that filled the space but gave nothing to the Raven to use. He would not endanger his Knights, his Crows, his beloved; refused to be the cause of their suffering.

This only angered the Raven more, and another wave of that sickening torment invaded his every fibre, but Kylo focused on keeping his mouth shut, letting the pain in – letting what hurt to simply hurt, to be only something done to his body and not to him. Pain was nothing new – over the years, Kylo had known every type of pain there was, with few exceptions, and he forced himself to remember that this was familiar, this was something he knew. Pain was just pain – it touched his body, but not him. His mind and his soul were his own, and far beyond the reach of anything Snoke could put him through – Braith had made sure of that during their final night together; there was nothing left in him for Snoke to violate. Everything that was Kylo Ren was safely hidden away in the mind and heart of the most fearsome warchief in all the world. The Raven could put hurt on him forever – Kylo would not yield to him. Not any longer.

Hours, or maybe just moments, later, Snoke let the pain go, and Kylo was hauled back onto his knees from where he’d been lying face down on the floor. He could feel the sweat pouring off him, every muscle and joint in his body screaming in agony, but he refused to let it show. He raised his chin, making it clear that his spirit was far from broken.

“I refuse,” he repeated, voice cracked and hoarse, but unwavering.

Snoke made a clicking sound at the back of his throat, then gestured to the Crows gathered around.

“Seize him,” he ordered. “Take him to the dungeons and strip him bare. Chain him up properly, or he’ll only break free. It seems the good master Ren must be disciplined.” He looked thoughtful for a moment, gaze roaming Kylo’s form as if it was a piece of meat at the butcher’s. “Fifty lashes, to start with. Give him to drink, but no food. In the morning, give him a cold bath. Then summon me again for further instructions.”

~*~*~

Hux hadn’t stopped pacing for a moment since Phasma, Mitaka, and Mai joined him in the tower – and that was never a good sign. Mai had tried to have a look at his nose, but only received a snarl in response. Hux had removed the rag and thrown it in a corner, but rusty flakes of dried blood were
still caked around his nostrils and in his beard. His red hair was hanging free, a tousled mess from where he kept running his hand through it, tearing at it as he attempted to gather himself enough to inform them of the situation. Eira was in a similar way; an angry, spiky ball of white feathers chattering angrily over on the window sill, her red eyes promising brutal murder. Whatever it was that had happened, they knew it had to be bad.

“Braith, for the love of the Gods,” Mai said eventually. “Just tell us what’s wrong!”

Their warchief stopped, taking several deep breaths, jaw clenched.

“Something’s wrong with Kylo,” he gritted out. “I don’t know what, but something terrible is happening up there, and we need to prepare ourselves for any possible outcome.” He looked at them, green eyes full of a pain they hadn’t seen since his second wife and child died during birth. “He was scared,” he whispered. “Scared out of his mind.”

“What do you need us to do?” Mai asked, ready to obey, as always.

“We need to prepare,” Hux said as he finally came over to sit down on the recliner. Eira practically leaped over to sit on his lap, burying her face against his chest. “Kylo does not frighten easily, we all know this. But now…” He sighed. “I can’t shake the feeling that we might need to go to war against more than the Southerners. Phasma, I will need you to start preparing the troops – send the order to have everyone in arms and ready to march as soon as I give word. Tell them… Tell them the Crows might have abandoned us, and that until further notice, no midnight child is to be allowed entry into any fort or castle before they have received clearance from me.”

“Y-you think the Crows are-” Phasma looked like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “You think they’re going to attack us?”

“I don’t know,” Hux said, grimly. “But we can’t be too careful. Kylo had all sorts of horrible feelings and visions before he left – and I’m not stupid enough to trust someone simply for wearing midnight robes, but I do trust him. If he is afraid, it is because he has reasons to be. I don’t trust the Raven – not after what I’ve come to understand about him – and I’d rather come off as overly cautious than lose my life and my clan to the whims of some mad creature.” He looked at Mitaka. “The Southerners have to go, right away. They cannot be here to see how many troops we have. Send a letter to my mother and tell her to prepare a ship, then have them escorted to the coast to board it as soon as you possibly can. Mai, I hate to ask this of you, but I trust you more than anyone – I need you to lead the escort. As soon as the ship has sailed, however, you must return as quickly as the horse can carry you.”

Mai nodded, and Mitaka quickly began scribbling down a list of things to be done over the next few days. Phasma looked at her cousin, putting a hand on his shoulder.

“You should rest, cousin,” she said. “You look like death.”

Hux grimaced.

“Sleep is… difficult,” he admitted. “I can’t seem to stop worrying, and it’s driving me mad.” She nodded.

“I know. But your clan need you rested and your mind as clear as it can be if this is going to work. I can give the order to put everyone in arms – but only you can lead them to the battlefield.”

Hux nodded. She was right, of course. He really should try to rest – there were still some lingering fatigue clinging to him from his injuries, and there were so many things he needed to tend to all at
once, and it hardly helped the situation if he did it all while deprived of sleep. But the bed had not gotten any less cold and empty, and the darkness felt less safe and soothing with each passing day. He feared the day he’d go to bed and discovered that none of it smelled like Kylo anymore. A silly sentiment, perhaps, but one he couldn’t keep out of his head in the wee hours of the mornings when he was forced out of it due to his mind conjuring up ever new scenarios where he would end up having to face the rest of his life without the man he’d come to consider a part of his soul. He couldn’t bear the thought of Kylo’s scent not being there, because he knew that once it was gone, it might not ever come back – reduced only to another torturous memory he’d never speak of but never stop hurting from.

~*~*~

“What’s this shiny thing here, hm?” one of the other Crows crooned as they more or less tore Kylo’s robes off of his body so they could chain him to the large wooden cross attached to the wall nearby. She held his King’s chain between thumb and forefinger, clearly enjoying the way the silver reflected what little light there was in there. “A King’s chain?” They laughed, and Kylo forced himself to keep his face blank, staring into nothing. “No wonder you went and got all cocky!” She gripped his jaw tightly, pale eyes staring into his – the malice radiating off her. He knew there had always been many of them who were just looking for a chance, who wanted power more than they wanted to serve. This was apparently one of them – which didn’t surprise him; the birds they were named after were opportunists, after all. “You may sit on your warchief’s lap and be doted on like some prized whore back South,” she spat. “But now, ‘master’ Ren, you’re just another dog in need of a good beating.” She pulled a little on the chain, and once she realized it wasn’t going to come off anytime soon, she spared a glance at her peers. “This is mine if we get to kill him.”

It took every ounce of self-control Kylo possessed not to rise to her obvious bait. It wasn’t a hard guess that the chain was his most precious possession, that it meant a lot more than just any piece of jewellery, so it was of course a quick way to get a rise out of him. But he refused to play her game. Kylo was not a good man; he was a Crow, and he had been doing this and worse to people for eleven years now. If they thought anything they said or did would scare or break him, he’d show them the full force of his resilience. There was no alternative, no other way he would even allow himself to think about thinking of. Death had come for him many times already, and he was still here. If she came again, he would fight her. They would see. They had put him in a situation where he had his back against the wall, and everything to lose. It was their own damned fault for not understanding that it was the single biggest mistake they could have ever made.

They chained him to the cross, making sure he had no room to even squirm – back bare and completely defenceless as the lashes started to rain over him. Fifty lashes with the Crows’ signature nine-tailed whip was enough to break even hardened warriors, and Kylo himself had delivered even worse punishments than that – he knew exactly how horrendous the damage could be – and they weren’t going easy on him. He knew, also, that fifty lashes might have sounded lenient, but that it was anything but a good sign. A cold bath in the morning; being forced into a large tub of cold, bordering on frozen, water, with his back half shredded to pieces? It could kill him, and it would inevitably severely weaken him. They wanted him broken, defenceless, pliant – and he knew enough to expect this to go on for as long as he refused, or simply as long as they still found it entertaining. Crows were not good people – and those who broke the rules had to pay the price. Kylo’s only chance at escape, his only chance of ever seeing Braith again, was to endure. Somehow, he had to stay alive until they grew bored of the torture and either tried to kill him or threw him out onto the tundra to be ripped apart by whatever predator that might be wandering by. In the worst-case scenario, he’d be crucified.
But he had survived worse than this, he told himself as he focused on breathing through each lash of the whip – not screaming even though it took all his energy and strength to hold back – he had survived so much already. This was just another fight, just another test of his will to live, and Kylo Ren was nothing if not determined. He’d survive this, too.

He had to.

~*~*~

The group of Southerners currently occupying the guest rooms at Skye Castle found themselves having a collective bad feeling. Something had obviously happened, and they weren’t sure they wanted to know what it was. For the better part of that morning they had been undergoing a thorough and quick education on proper dining and feasting etiquette at Northern courts under Mitaka’s firm but gentle hand. The scribe took his work very seriously, and he would not tolerate any goofing about or laziness, but they all agreed that he was a very good teacher. The fact that he still spoke three different Southern accents fluently helped a lot – the language barrier would hardly help the already tense situation, and no one wanted to be the one to accidentally breach etiquette now that they were being allowed for the first time to dine with the clan. It had been a bit of a shock to them, learning how Mitaka had ended up with clan Hux – and a little unexpected that he rejected outright any possibility of returning to the South. His home was here; clan Hux was his family, and lord Hux not only his ruler but also his friend – he would not trade this for anything.

Despite their efforts, he had refused to share more than little grains of information about Kylo. It had frustrated Han, who had apparently been trying to make the man talk more about the Crow since his arrival, but Mitaka explained that this was another part of both religious life and social etiquette here. The Crows were fiercely private creatures, half mortal, half gods; they were sacred, and their lives and secrets were their own until permission was given to share. Kylo was a holy man, a man not like any other, and they had to respect that this was a very serious matter in the North. He shared with them the thing already regarded as ‘common knowledge’ – that Kylo was powerful, highly respected, and revered, both for his supernatural powers and his unparalleled skill in battle. He was well liked for his gentleness and success as a healer, and he judged fairly in all moral and spiritual matters. Moreover, the clanspeople agreed that his loyalty and devotion to his clan was beyond any question, and that his subordinate Crows had grown immensely in both power and spiritual maturity since coming under his command. He was, to put it bluntly, considered the single most treasured individual of the clan – sans, naturally, lord Hux himself. But any other information regarding his personality and relations to the clanspeople, his birds, or the warchief was only for the clan to know. It was for reasons of safety; many a Crow in the old days had been targeted by attacks and attempts at both abduction and murder, made possible by someone’s loose tongue about their personality and habits. The North learned quickly, and – as they had better pray they never had to experience – it took pride in never making a mistake twice.

It had been a rather pleasant time, all things considered, and they had all been a bit startled when suddenly a guard had barged right into the room, whispering something very urgently to Mitaka, making his face turn harsh and serious. He’d excused himself with only the most basic of courtesy and hurried to follow the guard. That was hours ago – their midday meal having come and gone, along with some tea and some heavy but delectable sweets – and now they were starting to become genuinely concerned. But it was hardly as if they could find someone to ask. So far, Mitaka was the only one who didn’t seem to mind their company; the rest of the clan still regarded them with open and deep suspicion.

Eventually, however, the door to Rey’s room – where they had all been gathered since that morning – was opened, only to reveal a grim looking Mitaka. He motioned for them all to sit down, but did not join them.
“I’m afraid you will not be joining the clan for tonight’s dinner,” he said. “You will be served your meal here, and then you are strongly advised to make it an early night. You are leaving tomorrow, at first light.”

“What?” The word left Han’s lips in a volume loud enough to almost rattle the windows. “Lord Hux said the younglings were going to be given a few days to rest first! You can’t do this. What in the seven hells is going on here? I demand to see the warchief! He gave his word!”

“Get a hold of yourself, captain Solo,” Mitaka replied coldly. “I do not appreciate being yelled at.” He kept his gaze fixed on Han until the other man had sunken back into his seat. “You will not be seeing lord Hux, and I cannot share the reasons with you, as they are a matter of the utmost urgency and secrecy at this point. What I can tell you, is that you will be escorted to the coast by an outfit of our most respected guards and warriors, and once there you will board a ship back to D’Qar. It should be clear to you all that you are expected to comply with these orders, but that even if you fail to do so you will still go to the coast. Do not test my lord’s patience; he will drag you there in chains should he have to.”

“…You’re going to war,” Poe breathed, horror blooming on his features as the realization struck him. “Something’s happened and now you’re going to war, and you need us gone by the time it breaks out.”

They stared at him in shock, then. Slowly, their heads turned back to Mitaka’s stern figure.

“It is not my place to either confirm or deny such theories, commander Dameron,” Mitaka said – and that was all the answer they needed. “Princess Rey,” he said instead. “Your presence here is a threat to our entire people. You must return to your mother’s court post haste, and it is vital – do you understand? – that you see to it that she knows you have not been kept prisoners here, and that no one has laid a single finger on you. For the sake of all the North and South, you must not give her reason to assemble her forces. If she does, we are all doomed.”

“What has happened?” Han pleaded. “Has it to with my son? Tell me! Is Kylo in danger? Please, if he is, you must let me help!”

“Pack your things,” was all Mitaka offered in reply. “It’s a two-day journey to the coast along the shortest way – and you will be riding as fast as the horses can manage.”

The sound of the door closing behind him felt more like a strike of thunder than wood closing against stone – it was the sound of imminent doom, and though they did not say it aloud, they all felt the cold spread through their bones.
All they wanted was to see Kylo, to know he was alive and well. To tell him that he was loved and missed. And now they were to hurry back South before they had even fully recovered from the journey, as the sound of war was beginning to echo in the air around them.

How could everything have gone so wrong?

~*~*~

It was a battle of will taking place in the lower dungeons; Kylo knew he had to keep silent, had to keep his face from betraying him by giving even the slightest hint of how much it hurt – but he had trained the Crow currently doing her best to sever flesh from bones all over his back. She knew all the tricks, all the little secrets Crows had of taking their minds elsewhere while their bodies suffered, and she knew better than to let him have that respite. If he managed to separate himself from what was happening, then this exercise would be pointless; he was supposed to suffer. Even in this dire situation, Kylo had to give it to her, she had truly taken his training to heart – and had
he not been the one under the whip, he would have praised her. As it stood now, however, all he
could do was reminding himself to breathe and stay quiet.

There was more to it than just punishment. He was the Master of the Knights of Ren – or, at least
he had been up until now; his status was no longer clear – and any chance he had of swaying the
loyalty of the Crows back to him instead of the Raven was directly and intimately related to how
strong they perceived him to be, how deserving of their respect he was. If he broke too soon, he’d
be considered weak, a coward, unworthy of both title and respect, and he would have lost any
chance at support from anyone who didn’t already pledge their allegiance to him. Having been
appointed Master of the Knights without deserving to be was not a small transgression – his death
would not be a kind one. The Crows did not tolerate weakness among those that lead them, they
made sure to cut any weak link off like they would with a rotting limb – all to ensure the survival
of their order.

When the final lash had made impact with the bleeding mess that was his back and thighs, they
dumped a bucket of water over him. It wasn’t a kindness – they merely wanted a better look at the
result of their handiwork, he knew. It stung like a thousand little lightning bolts as the water made
its way over than through the gashes made, and he knew they studied him closely for any sign of
weakness. He refused to give it – fixing his gaze stubbornly on the stone wall in front of him. The
joints in his shoulders and elbows ached like all hells, an icy, sharp sort of pain, only surpassed by
the burning, searing, prickling pain of the metal cuffs digging into his wrists where too much of his
weight was supported solely by them. His hips, knees and ankles fared better, though it was still far
from comfortable to be spread out like he was – and it made it so much more difficult to spare his
arms and upper body from the weight of the rest of him. The feeling of the water mixed with his
blood and the other liquids from his wounds felt disgusting as it ran in streams and rivulets down
over his body, pooling around his feet. It would serve its own purpose – having to stand in wetness
like that for hours would do quite the number on his feet, making it even more difficult for him to
use them should he try to get away. The slightest little nick could be infected, and he knew that
they knew – it was probably why they did it. But, truly, he expected no less. They were trained by
him, after all.

As they left the dungeons, leaving him in complete darkness, he allowed himself to sag for a
moment, the tiniest hint of a whimper escaping him when even that little movement sent a shock-
wave of pain through his body, and for a moment, he blanked out completely.

~*~*~

"Where to now, sister Silass?" one of Kylo’s subordinate Crows asked, as they had managed to
find a quiet corner to catch their breaths – bodies and blood splatter a left a grim trail in their wake.
Aya, Silass thought her name was, Kylo’s closest ranking Crow back South. "Are we really leaving
him behind?"

"We have to," she replied. "Those were his orders. We must protect your clan. That means getting
out of here by any means – even if we have to slaughter our way through this entire order."

The Hux clan’s Crows looked at each other, then grasped their weapons tighter, and the Knights
were impressed by the fire in their eyes as they nodded as one.

"Lead the way," Aya said, and the Knights did.

The dark corridors and stairs of the House was a study in madness and carnage – Crows were
fighting, dying, fleeing in every direction – the air heavy with the stench of blood and sickness; the
ever present shadow of battle. The furious screeching and cawing of the birds outside could be
heard even this far into the main building, and though it was certainly not a good sign, it was one
they could not afford to linger on until they got there. Gaius took the lead, his giant bulk an effective shield, and Avi and Silass followed closely behind him. Making sure to keep the Hux Crows safe in the middle, the twins and Chava brought up the rear as they fought their way towards the nearest exit. Maul had gone ahead to seek out the safest path possible, his Force presence threat enough even in this madness to give him a better chance at making it through the maze-like complex without being cut down at the first corner.

Though it broke all their hearts to kill their own kind – people they had grown up with, trained with, suffered with – they put it out of their minds as best they could. Now was the time for them all to prove where their loyalties lay, and for the Knights there was no higher authority in this world or the next than their master. Wherever Kylo sent them, they would go. If he asked them to burn the world down for him, they would – no Gods, no Raven, not even the Goddess of Death herself, would ever stand in the way of them obeying their master and brother. There had been a time when they had spoken about it, worried that they were being treacherous, disloyal – but now, they knew it had been the only right choice. Kylo Ren served the Gods, and he was prepared to defy the Raven, and even die, for them – he was the only one worthy of their loyalty.

The pain would come later, as would the grief, but for now none of that mattered. They had their orders, and they would follow them.

~*~*~

“….Braith…”

The warchief bolted upright in bed as Kylo’s voice broke through the last veils of sleep and allowed him to hear.

“Kylo!” his thought was loud even in his own mind, the alarm at the brokenness radiating from Kylo’s mind rendering him momentarily unable to control himself. “Kylo, my love, what’s happening? Are you hurt?”

“…the Raven…” Kylo’s voice felt blurred, weak, as if he was barely clinging to consciousness. “He betrayed us all… My Knights…they will protect you. They’re coming… Trust—trust no one else.”

“The Raven betrayed us? I… I don’t understand. What did he do, Kylo? What did he do to you?”

“I can’t—So tired… my Crows will explain. They will keep—keep you safe… I love you. I need…”

“What do you need, love? Tell me. I’d give you the world, you know it.”

“I need you to tell me—” The pain had Hux in tears, and it frightened him like nothing else to know that whatever Kylo felt was even worse. It didn’t seem to be a physical pain as much as an emotional, even spiritual one. His Crow sounded tired, worn, decades older than he should ever have to feel. “I need you to tell me to— to live. To come back. I can’t— I have to— I have to hold on to something, everything is… slipping. I’m scared.”

Hux felt the tears streaming down his face. The fact that Kylo couldn’t even tell him what was happening, that all he had to go by was all this terrible pain, scared him more than anything he had even experienced in all his years. Kylo wasn’t afraid of death, Hux knew that, but it broke his heart to realize Kylo needed him to tell him to live, because Kylo did not value his own life enough to fight for it for himself. He needed Hux to give him a reason, needed Hux to be his reason.

“Kylo,” he managed, vaguely aware he was speaking both in his mind and aloud – his voice
shattering the suffocating silence of the tower. “I forbid you from giving up. Do you hear me? I forbid you. I am your warchief and your bonded life partner. You are not allowed to go where I cannot follow you. You are not allowed to die from anything but old age, or die anywhere but in my arms. We go together, Kylo. You will survive this, my love. That is an order. You survive, and you come back to me. There are many more years left for us both, and I will not let you rob me of a single one! Fight, Kylo. Kill them all, and then come home!”

There were no more words spoken from Kylo, but Hux could still feel – even as his beloved’s presence slipped away from him again – that Kylo would do as he was told. He would come back, but Hux could only pray that the man who returned would be the same man as he had held in his arms that last night, whose dark hazel eyes had swum with tears from the love he’d felt for Hux.

He prayed.

But he knew better than to hope.

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry for the long wait! I have no excuses at all - life just roundhouse kicked me in the face, and left my energy levels so low it's not even funny. This chapter was also very difficult to write, due to the hefty amount of angst in it. Usually it's not a problem for me, but when I'm really stressed out, my ability to shield myself from the heavier stuff is really weakened, so I made myself sad a lot. Don't get me wrong; it's worth it - it just makes everything take so much longer.

Also, as I have been getting a few questions over at Tumblr, let me take the opportunity to tell those of you who are also following Lullabies not to worry. The fic is not abandoned. I have a plan for it, and it will be finished, but for now I have to prioritize in order to remain sane. But if you like modern au's, you can always hop on over to Empire State of Mind, which is a lovely, fluffy little thing I'm working on together with the absolutely brilliant @thegoodlannister. It's updated on a fairly regular basis, and if you like sweet love stories with a dash of angst, then I think you'll like that one.

Until next time, you are as always more than welcome to come over to tumblr and yell at me about the fic, life, the universe, or whatever else you want to chat about :)

And, as always, your comments are the fuel that keeps my writing going, so do take a minute to tell me what you thought, yeah?

See you next update, lovelies!
“But you can’t do this!” Rey protested, as they were herded out to the main courtyard to saddle up. Dawn had barely even begun tearing open the dark veil of the night sky, and the cold was brutal against their faces as they stepped out of the warmth of the great hall. “Please, lord Hux! He’s my brother – my only brother! Please, I… I don’t want him harmed, I swear! I just need to see him! Please! Will you not listen?”

Lord Hux, however, seemed utterly unmoved by her pleas as he followed closely behind the guards as they more or less dragged her towards the horses. The warchief looked worn, ragged, as if the weight of this world and the next had somehow come to fall on his shoulders alone, and there was a darkness in his green eyes that made Rey feel a kind of deep-rooted, instinctual fear the like of which she’d never even thought existed. He looked more demon than man, had it not been for the tinge of unspeakable sorrow hanging around his silhouette.

“Listen?” he scoffed. “To a spoiled girl, barely old enough to have her bleedings? A princess without knowledge or experience of the world outside the rose-tinted bubble of her mother’s court?” He fixed that powerful gaze on hers, and Rey had never felt more like a prey caught in a predator’s line of sight. “You may have caused a war by means of your unparalleled stupidity alone, and there are far worse things in this world, you silly girl, than your mother and her unrestrained bloodlust. What you want, and what you think you – or anyone else – needs, is worth less than a spot of mud on my boots. You want to help? You want your brother unharmed? Then be a good, obedient, proper princess, and go home to your mother and make sure her armies never set foot outside your borders. The amount of blood you will otherwise have on your hands will be too much for any god – yours or ours – to ever look past.” He finally let his gaze move on, and she sagged slightly. “We all have duties, princess. You will return to yours, or so help me, I will have you dragged back there chained and gagged. I will not allow my people to suffer due to the whims of one stupid, spoiled, child.”

With that, he turned to her father, who looked as pale as Rey felt, but who seemed at least able to maintain a semblance of calm. The two men looked at each other in silence for a long time – the entire courtyard, even the birds – dead silent, too frightened to break it.

“I will protect my Crow against anyone who dares threaten him,” lord Hux said, tone suggesting that they had spoken on this subject before. “And I will slay the Gods themselves if I need to. Unlike you, I will not abandon him even in death. Do not stand in our way, Han Solo, and do not
let that queen of yours attempt it either. She has threatened one we hold sacred, and there is not a warchief in these lands who wouldn’t take her head off on my behalf – and I’d reward them handsomely for it too, you mark my words. Do not think I’m the only one you have to worry about.”

Han nodded, and Rey could see that he fully believed every word. Coming from any other man, she would probably have thought it boasting, empty threats to throw at them in hopes of avoiding confrontation – but here and now, with the look in lord Hux’ eyes, and the chilling emptiness of his voice? Rey did not doubt for a moment that he was capable and willing of everything he’d said, and more.

“I’ll do my best to make her see reason, lord Hux,” Han said. “But I can make no promises. She is the queen, and I’m merely her paramour. My word only carries what weight she allows it to.” He sighed, frowning. “But I must ask you, lord Hux – if Kylo returns, please tell him we were here. Tell him I regret nothing in my life more than what I did to him, and that he is loved. If he can’t- If he can’t forgive me, I will understand.”

Lord Hux nodded, and then he simply turned on his heel and returned inside. The Southerners were helped into the saddles, and the assigned guards – a good twenty of them – formed a wall around them as they nudged their horses into a light trot. As soon as they had crossed the bridge, they set off in a gallop that had Rey clinging on for dear life to her horse. She wasn’t at all used to these enormous, powerful beasts the Northerners called horses, and it felt like having a thunderstorm barely contained underneath her. Skye Castle was rapidly disappearing behind them, and some part of Rey was glad for it; the North was indeed a harsh land with an even harsher people – but another part of her dreaded seeing the familiar shores of D’Qar again.

Though her stay in the North had been brief – cut short far sooner than she’d thought or hoped it would – she came away with so much more knowledge, so many insights, shocks, and realizations it sent her head spinning. The Northerners had turned out to be a far cry from the brutish, violent heathens she’d read about growing up. Certainly, their culture was like nothing she’d ever experienced before, but it was hardly a negative thing. Over all, they were a harsh people, yes, but they also filled their lives with so much colour, music, joy, complex philosophical and ethical teachings, and a raw acceptance of whatever life brought their way that she envied. D’Qar felt like the height of shallowness and arrogance in comparison – all its riches merely for bragging, its philosophy and creeds only tools to re-establish the already rock solid belief of themselves as the superior people.

The Northerners did indeed hate the South with a passion that could burn the mountains – that part was most definitely true – but the reason… Oh, the reason was one Rey couldn’t fault – not when she’d had even that tiny little sip of it during their journey. How could they not hate those who seek to extinguish their entire way of life, those who had already tried several times in the past, those who had come marching to burn villages and steal children from their parents and make them choose slavery or death? How could one not hate those who came to kill the Gods they loved? While the North had blood on its own collective hands, a fact they never either denied or bragged about – merely stated it as fact, with a shrug and a moment of silence for those who had fallen – Rey struggled to remember learning about any major military campaigns from the North towards the South where similar measures had been taken. She couldn’t see how the God of Mornings could condone such things – had always believed her mother when she’d said Rey would understand when she was older – but now she wasn’t so sure.

Her mind was in turmoil as her entire view of it, everything she’d ever held as truth and fact was crumbling and re-shaping – all because of this one journey. How was she ever going to be able to face her mother like this? How could she face her queen with such doubt in her heart?
The royal city of D’Qar was a flurry of activity as the royal army began preparing for a campaign the like of which had not been seen in history. They were marching for the North – tasked to claim all land between D’Qar and the great Northern Glaciers for their Queen and country – with winter approaching quicker each day, and an army consisting mostly of people who had never even seen snow. But if anyone had their doubts, they kept them to themselves, careful not to even whisper a word of it. The Queen had ears and eyes everywhere, and she did not take well to people questioning her decisions. The high command merely wished they knew why they were doing this; it was hard to face their legions and raise that necessary conquering spirit without some noble goal other than ‘march until you find the glaciers, and kill everyone on the way’. The North had been mostly keeping to themselves for decades now, showing no interest in Southerners or their affairs, apart from the occasional traders and sailors, or the few who had arrived in D’Qar after having married someone of Southern birth.

What matter could there be that was pressing enough that they could not wait until spring?

Queen Leia herself was currently sitting on her private patio, biting the nail of her thumb – an anxious habit she’d picked up in childhood and then never managed to fully get rid of. It had already been so many weeks now, since she’d last heard from Han – his last message had been sent from the last garrison before the Middle Lands, and since then there had been nothing but silence. No birds, no couriers, nothing. She tried reminding herself that this was Han; he’d been lost without a trace for months and months many times before, and always came back to her – smiling, apologizing for taking so long, and offering her gifts to placate her. He could fend for himself, and so could Chewie, and together they had had a good chance at making it through almost anything. She could only hope that ‘almost anything’ also included her treacherous bastard son. Who knew what that Crow could do to them? He’d slaughtered over a dozen when he was a wee boy – there was no telling what he would be capable of now that he was a grown man, trained by those midnight-clad monsters.

But her worry about her lover was nothing at all compared to the worry she felt about her daughter. Leia could scarcely believe Rey capable of such stupidity, but the short note left on her bedside table proved beyond any doubt that the girl had let her emotions get the better of her, and she had actually run away to ‘go find her brother’. As if there was anything to find! Had she not listened to a word her teachers had told her over the years? How could she possibly think she could go in search of a Crow – a child killer – and come away from it with her life? Not to mention all the horrid things the ordinary Northerners could do to her if they found out who she was! A Southern princess travelling without her guard? It was like serving herself up on a plate to those savages. In the end, Leia couldn’t risk it. Marching for the North in the winter was terribly dangerous, but she had faith in her army, and having her heir presumably captured in strange land was valid enough reason for her to begin the campaign she’d already been planning. Regardless of whether they found Rey or not, the North would fall, and their filthy, primitive way of life stamped out of history once and for all. Leia would see to it that she went down in history as the woman who finally brought the Great Northern Realm to its knees before her. If nothing else, she’d make sure any last scratch on her daughter’s skin was avenged a hundred times over. They would be made to regret it if they laid so much as a finger on the Crown Princess of House Organa.

Dawn greeted the Knights of Ren and their companions several leagues away from the House of Night, as they were cleaning their swords and got back in their saddles for Gods alone knew what time in a row. The Crows were leaving the House like plague stricken rats abandoning a sinking ship to spread their vile disease everywhere they went – and the Knights, along with master Maul, and the Hux Crows were fair game; their siding with the treacherous bastard of a master they had
meant a bountiful reward to whoever claimed their heads. The trail of corpses left in their wake
began broader with each passing league, but so far they’d all escaped without so much as a
scratch. The Knights didn’t need their weapons to kill, and a large flock of birds had broken free
from the Mother-flock to follow them, and their attacks were nothing if not vicious.
The Hux Crows had everything to lose, and they fought with a ferocity and ruthlessness that
impressed even Maul, despite the fact that a few of them were well past their sixtieth winter. They
would not show mercy to anyone who dared threaten their clan, and they would not bring shame
upon master Ren by not fighting with every last bit of strength they had. He had done so
much for them, and they would see to it that they paid him back in kind – at least they would not
break the sacred traditions. They would honour their warchief’s Crow, or die trying.

By the time they had finally gotten their horses saddled and made sure Askr could run free, even
they – hardened and experienced warriors that they were – had begun flinching at the slightest
movement in the shadows. There had been too many sudden glints of sharp blades going for their
chests, bellies, throats – coming seemingly out of nowhere, as if the shadows themselves had come
to life. In this fight, everyone was reduced to prey, and their clothes were so thoroughly soaked in
blood and other bodily fluids by the time they reached the stable that not only were their own
horses reluctant to allow them close enough to saddle them, but the fabric of their robes was so
heavy it was difficult to move. As the blood started to coagulate and freeze in the blistering cold of
the night it only became more so, and they knew they had no room for delays – they had to make it
through the gates as soon as possible, before anyone caught up with them.

Skye Castle was many days of hard riding away, and they had to make certain that they’d reach it
alive. They were under order to protect lord Hux at any cost, and they had to push any other
thought, any fears, any bad feelings away – keeping their gazes fixed at the horizon, and praying
that if the Gods would show them this one kindness, to allow them to carry out their master’s
orders. They knew only too well that those may well have been the last orders he’d ever give them,
and the thought was anything but comforting as they drove the horses on as hard as they dared.
Hope was for children, and they had all left such silly notions behind many years ago. Hope had no
place in a heart clad in midnight; the Crows saw the world for what it was, no more, no less. And
in this moment, it was all coming apart, cowering under force of an oncoming storm, and
defenceless against it if the Knights failed in protecting the one man whom their master trusted to
keep them all safe. If master Kylo believed in lord Hux, then so did they, and the world could end
before they’d ever fail their master.

Then, a hidden root under the snow, and Aya’s horse went tumbling – sending her flying to the
ground, landing hard. Gaius jumped off his own horse, picked her up and put her in his saddle, as
Vilya went over to the still form of Aya’s chestnut coloured horse. She put a gentle hand on its
side, closed her eyes for a moment, then sighed and shook her head.

“I’m sorry, sister,” she said. “She’s dead. Her neck snapped.”

Aya, pale from pain and fear, nodded but said nothing. She had an ugly bruise forming on the right
side of her face, and she was nursing her left arm. Chava brought her horse closer so she could
have a look – but it hardly took a master healer to tell it was broken, or at least badly dislocated.
There were probably other injuries as well, but they would require a closer inspection they simply
did not have time for at that moment.

“Broken,” she informed the others. “One less sword-hand. We’ll have to be more careful now.”

“And two people on one horse will be slower, no matter how we look at it,” Erris frowned. “But
perhaps, brother, if you can help her over onto Avi’s horse it might be a little easier on the poor
animal than if she shares yours.”
Gaius shared a look with Maul, then shook his head and grabbed his signature quarter-staff from its hooks on his saddle.

“Someone take her reins,” he said. “As long as she can hold on, she’ll be able to keep up.”

“I can help tie her to the saddle,” Vilya nodded. “It’ll be risky in case we get attacked again, but at least she won’t be in danger of falling off in the event of her passing out.” She bit her lip, worry making her forehead crease as she got to work securing the older Crow to the saddle. “But what about you, brother?” she asked. “You’re a good runner, but not that good.”

“Gaius Ren,” Silass growled – always the quickest one to read her older brother’s intentions. “You had better not be thinking what I think you’re thinking!”

“I’m going back,” he confirmed. “I know we have our orders, but he is my little brother, and he can be as angry with me as he wishes – later. But I cannot live with myself if I don’t at least try to free him.” He looked at the gathered Crows. “And let’s face it, I’m the largest and strongest one of us, and I’m a good healer. If anyone has a chance of actually getting him to Skye Castle alive and in one piece, it’s me. I can carry him all the way there, should I need to.” He nodded to Maul. “I know you’ve been thinking the same, master,” he said. “But I must respectfully ask you to let me be the one to save him from the cold this time. They need you to lead them now. And I think lord Hux needs your advice more than anyone’s. Please.”

Maul nodded, a shadow of a smile tugging at his lips before it disappeared again.

“I trust you, my hatchling,” he said. “But if either one, or both of you dies, I will personally descend through the seven hells and drag you by your braids back up here. Do you understand? We cannot lose Kylo or you. You must both come back to us.”

Gaius bowed his head, and without waiting for a response, Maul took the reins to his horse and motioned for them to take off. Farewells weren’t necessary, and it wasn’t their way. Such phrases meant little to those who could still speak while in opposite ends of the world. No one said it aloud, or even in thought, but they were all secretly relieved that someone was going back to retrieve Kylo. If something were to befall him, they all knew they would never be able to live with the knowledge that they left him behind. Gaius was right; he could be mad at them later, when this was all over and they were once again sitting safely by a fire, drinking tea and gossiping. For now, he’d have to forgive them their disobedience.

Alone, Gaius turned and headed back towards the house. It was a long walk by foot, and he could only pray that when he did arrive his little brother would still be alive. It was a small blessing to him, that out of the seven Knights, he had always been the most talented at cloaking his presence; hopefully, he’d make it back without too many incidents. He did not worry too much about his own safety – not many Crows ever dared to go up against him even before he took the trials and joined the Knights – but he was sick with worry about Kylo. By now, he had most certainly already begun to be tortured; it was their ways, after all, and the longer they continued, the less chance he would have of making it even a league away from the House before the cold or his injuries finally claimed his life. If they had decided to execute him… No, Gaius refused to even think it. His brother would not be helped by him succumbing to despair. Until he saw otherwise with his own two eyes, Kylo was alive. He had to be.

The Gods could not abandon their child. Not this child. Not like this.

If they did, Gaius thought, they were no Gods of his.

~*~*~
The cold water was the single most painful thing Kylo had ever felt as he was carelessly thrown into the large wooden tub, and held under until he came dangerously close to losing consciousness. They wouldn’t allow him that respite, though. Throughout the night, they’d come around his cell to poke and prod at him, poke at his wounds with fingers dipped in salt – little acts of cruelty made to ensure he found no rest and no time to recover. They pulled him up by the hair, allowed a few gulping breaths, then shoved him back under, making him swallow water and cough on it. The panic rose hot in his blood, and he had to use whatever self-discipline he might still possess to avoid giving into it. If he did, he would drown for certain. Once they were satisfied with their little game, his tormentors hauled him out, laid him flat on his belly and forced the water out of him. They weren’t planning to stop yet, that much was clear – if they had been, they would have let him drown. But then he remembered; the Raven had ordered them to keep him alive until he said otherwise, and as they bound his hands behind his back again, half-dragging him by his upper arms up the stairs from the dungeons, he knew it could still get far worse than this. Snoke had never been known for his forgiving nature, and while Kylo would have labelled him strict but fair a year ago, he had no such illusions now. There was nothing fair about this – this was petty revenge, this was kicking a dog for barking at thunder, this was just… cruelty.

They hadn’t even given him a cloth to wrap around himself to protect his modesty – instead they dragged him the long way around to the Hall of Visions, his naked body on full display for anyone to see. It was humiliating, and fully intentional, he knew that. The great master of the Knights of Ren, naked and bloody, dragged through the filth and piles of corpses – reduced to nothing more than a creature, a disobedient pet. Kylo could do little but try to keep himself from throwing up at the sight and stench of all the dead bodies – this wasn’t even mayhem this was… He had no words for the horrifying sight of the mangled remains, the heaps of bones, muscles, entrails, and dark fabrics that had once been his family. Crow were terrifying warriors, yes – but they fought with grace, their forms elegant and dance-like. This was just… savage. His tormentors paid it no attention, and that only made it worse. Instead they amused themselves with poking and prodding at him, commenting on everything from the size of his nipples to the small growth of hair covering his crotch, making crude jokes, and speculating about how often his warchief used his body, and if he even needed preparatons anymore or if he’d gotten as loose and easily claimed down there as he obviously had when it came to his loyalty. Lord Hux must be very well equipped if all it took for the great master Ren to become as soft as a spoiled concubine was a few months of spreading his legs for that man.

Kylo fought the anger rising in him at their jabs; he couldn’t afford to let it take over, not with how weakened he already was. He needed his strength to face the Raven, and there were bigger things at stake than his own reputation and respectability. If they wanted to believe that Hux used him as a glorified pleasure slave at all hours of the day, then he would let them. It wasn’t worth wasting precious energy on, and though it was humiliating to have his body so invaded – with hands touching and groping in places they had no right to touch, places even Hux was careful about caressing – he reminded himself that he’d survived worse. His body was just a body, just a tool, a thing – a shell. It wasn’t him, and their tainted touches would never manage to stain even one inch of him. By their behaviour, they proved his superiority, his purity, his worthiness. They were insects, he told himself. Nothing more. Stupid, shallow, unworthy. The Gods would punish them all; they always did, and when that day came, Kylo would be there to witness their demise – he’d make sure of it.

The smoke-shape of Snoke was already there when they arrived, Kylo carelessly thrown to the floor in front of the looming figure. With his hands tied behind his back the way they were, with his body so weak from the abuse it had already suffered, Kylo did not even attempt to rise to his knees, to move even an inch. He lay there, waiting – it was as much defiance as he could display for now. Snoke took his time, Kylo could feel his gaze burn against his skin, and when he finally spoke, the amusement at Kylo’s debasement was evident in his oily voice.
“Get him to his knees,” he ordered the others. One of them, the woman coveting his King’s chain, hurried to do as she was told, and Kylo finally met his former master’s eerie dark eyes. “It pains me, truly, to see you reduced to such a state,” he said, though the smile tugging at his thin lips belied the sentiment entirely. “If you have one flaw, my hatchling, it is your pride. I thought I had beaten it out of you, but it seems to rear its head at the most inconvenient times.” He reached out, the smoke-shape hand strangely cold and slimy against Kylo’s skin, and he shivered with disgust. Snoke chuckled darkly. “Even though you’ve disappointed me greatly, my precious pet, I am willing to be… lenient with you if you cease this childish behaviour. Now, will you do as you are told, or shall I have to be rough with you after all?”

“I refuse,” Kylo said, voice ragged and broken, but not defeated. He spat at the floor – the bloody glob landing right in front of Snoke’s shadowy feet.

Being prepared for the pain did nothing at all to lessen the impact of it, and this time not even Kylo’s immense self-control could stop the scream from echoing off the walls in the enormous room. The air crackled and spark like lightning around him, burning and ice cold at the same time as it assaulted every fibre of his body, making his heart constrict in a way that had him almost sure he’d die right then and there. Then, it stopped, and Kylo could do nothing but lie there, flat on his face, panting like a fish on dry land.

“Will you obey?”

“No.”

He more breathed the word than spoke it, but the new wave of agony that seized him told him they’d heard it well enough. Everything became a blur, the echoes of his own screams and Snoke’s amused chuckles sounding as if they came from somewhere else, somewhere far away, and he couldn’t think for the pain – it felt like ice shards and red-hot iron rushing through his blood, his muscles, and weakened as he was, he was powerless against it. Every now and then, the agony would stop, and Snoke would repeat his question. Kylo refused him each time, and the torture began once more. He would not give in! Would not let himself be broken by this foul demon who dared call himself their leader. Even if he’d wanted to give in, even if the temptation had been there, he still would not do it. Because somewhere outside the House were his family, his Knights, his mentor, and he knew that for every moment he kept Snoke’s attention on himself they had another moment to get themselves as far away from this godsforsaken tundra. The more distance they could cover before Snoke realized where they were headed, the better their chances at making it. If Kylo had to die here, naked and humiliated, covered in his own vomit from when the pain had gripped his belly and forced it to turn on itself, then so be it. He made this sacrifice of his own free will, and he would go to the halls of his ancestors without shame as long as he knew that he’d kept his loved ones safe.

And so he focused on the one thing he could still do, put every last ounce of will and strength into it as he met every last order to obey with the one word he could still manage to speak.

“Obey!” Snoke demanded.

And Kylo said no.

Chapter End Notes

This fic is like playing a strategy game; so many things need to come together at the
exact right moment in order to progress and win. But hey, at least the pieces are
starting to move around the gameboard! That's always something, right?

I know many of you are probably wondering why there was such a tiny amount of
Hux in this chapter, and all I can say about that is: plot reasons - and yes, I know that
that is a very frustrating answer^^

And Kylo is not in a good place at all right now, but at least big brother Gaius is
coming to rescue him.

Anyway, I hope all of you lovelies will have a very nice New Year's, and that 2017
will be a better year for all of us.

But before you go, do take a moment to tell me what you think. Your comments are
the fuel that keeps this fic going, and I adore you all for sending them. As always, my
askbox on tumbrl is open should you have any questions, further comments, or just
feel the need to yell at me a bit. But please, don't yell too much - I am smol and
frighten easily.

See you next year!
Hours had passed. The world had shrunk down into an endless pattern of pain-demands-refusal-pain, and Kylo was struggling to cling to his consciousness. It was no longer just those sickening waves of agony – those Kylo knew would have looked like streaks of lightning in the gloom of the hall had Snoke been here in person – though they were almost too much on their own, weakened and exhausted as he was. Snoke’s mind was like a battering ram, pounding against his own, trying to find a crack, a way in, trying to tear through it like he had done many times before. Well rested and at full health, it would not have been difficult to resist it now that he knew he should, but at his present state he knew it was only a matter of time before he broke through, forced himself into Kylo’s head, where he would undoubtedly be able to find the means to reach Maul, the Knights, and – Gods forbid – Braith. There was no telling what he’d do to them, what he could do to them. Snoke’s power had been the stuff of legends even before he was made Raven; once the Master of the Knights himself, he’d been one of the most powerful Crows in history – and who knew how much more powerful he could have gotten now, after decades and decades of uninterrupted studying and practicing the ways of the Force? Kylo had to keep him out. Not forever, because he knew he would never be able to, but for as long as possible – to give them as much time as he could.

And he knew, though he would never have told any of them – not even Braith – that his chances of surviving this were very slim. He had meted out enough punishments on Snoke’s behalf to know just how merciless this… this creature was. Nature was cruel, the Gods equally so, and the Crows had always followed their example with the utmost devotion. A part of him regretted reaching for Braith, regretted asking him to give Kylo a reason to hold on. It had been a moment of incredible weakness, and now he had made a promise he knew he would be unable to keep. It had been a selfish request, but in the end he could not make himself truly regret it. That promise was currently all that stood between him and a violation of a degree there were not words to describe. Not just of his soul, but the souls of all those whom he cared about. He could not let it happen!

“Look at you,” Snoke spat, his patience obviously having worn thin at last, as he ceased the torment. It was only for a moment, and they both knew. “Kylo Ren. No. Just Kylo. The name of Ren is an honour you are no longer worthy of. A filthy, weak traitor of the Gods – that is all you are. To think I had such hopes for you. Look at you now.”
Kylo knew how he must look. Blood flowing from his nose and ears, sickness staining the skin around his mouth, clinging to his body in disgusting yellowish stains that stung almost as bad as Snoke’s punishment. He was glad he had at least not had enough water during the last day, or he would have pissed himself too by now. His dark hair was stained just as bad as the rest of him was, caked with blood and vomit, slick against his face and neck, tousled from where it had rubbed against the floor in his spasms. The tears had irritated his eyes to the point where he could barely pry them open anymore, and his fingertips were bloody, open wounds from scraping and scratching against the hard stones of the floor.

Snoke made a clicking noise at the back of his throat, and Kylo’s heart skipped a beat. He knew all too well that that sound meant the Raven had just managed to put him in the exact place he wanted him – exhausted, weakened, vulnerable.

His time had just run out.

“I grow weary of your incessant disobedience,” Snoke said, leaning closer, until his shrunken, disfigured face was inches away from Kylo’s. “You are, despite your betrayal, a Crow. Your life belongs to me, to this order. As long as you draw breath, you are bound by oath to obey me. Perhaps your own life matters little to you, but what about the lives of your Knights? Your birds? Your beloved warchief? You can’t resist me forever, Kylo. I will find my way into your soul, and I will find them through your bond. If you do not obey me, I will slaughter them, one by one, until you do as you are told.” A smile spread over that horrid mimicry of a face, and Kylo’s blood turned to ice. “The only way for you to break free from your vow of servitude is death. And if you give in, if you let the Goddess come for you… who, then, will protect them? The choice is simple, Kylo. Either you yield to me – losing a warchief, but gaining more power than you ever thought possible – and keep your Knights and your birds safe. Or you die, and gain your freedom, but sign their death sentences. Powerful they may be, your Knights, but not powerful enough. You know this. You know they will not survive without you. Life or death, Kylo. The choice is yours.”

Kylo was pulled to his knees, gaze still held firmly locked to Snoke’s. Something was laced in his hands, his fingers wrapping around a familiar shape. His ceremonial knife. The tool he had used to sacrifice more people than he could recount since he took the midnight all those years ago. His own knife.

He should feel terrified, angry, desperate – he knew that. But all he felt as he gripped the knife as tight as he could, was peace, calm, triumph. Snoke had not realized the full extent of his Knights’ powers. He thought them weak, thought they would not manage without Kylo there to guide them. He thought them puppets, mindless soldiers – useless without a firm commander leading the way. How could he have been so blind? He was the Raven, how was it possible that he had underestimated them so? They were all fairly young, yes, and it had been centuries since all of the Knights of Ren had been so close in age to one another – but Snoke should know better than to equate youth with weakness. After all, he had sought Kylo out when he was too young to even speak properly – drawn, he had said, by his power.

The Knights would live – Kylo knew it down to his very core. They would live, and they would fight – and Gods help anyone who stood in their way, because he knew that his Knights could tear the world apart if they wished it. And if Kylo died, they might just do that. It was Braith that worried him. His beloved warchief, the missing part of his soul, his home… He would survive, and he would not go down without a fight. No matter how much he would wish to follow Kylo into the seven hells, his sense of duty towards his clan and his children would keep him alive. He would never forgive his Crow for going where he could not follow, but they were facing something far greater than themselves, and sacrifices had to be made. If Kylo’s death could save them, or at least buy them some time, then he had a duty to ensure that they were given that time. All he could hope
for was that one day, Braith would understand. That one day, Braith would be happy again.

But how he wished he could have seen him, one last time. Wished he could have one last night, one last kiss, one last moment. But fate had decided otherwise, and Kylo knew better than to hold on to wishes that could never come true. Too weak to speak aloud now, he sent his words out through the Force, loud enough for everyone in the room to hear as he gripped the knife harder.

“I refuse.”

Summoning the last bit of strength in his dying body, Kylo took aim, eyes fixed on his former master. His knife was sharp enough to cut through stone – Kylo had always taken good care of his tools – and it slid effortlessly through skin and muscles, embedding itself into his heart. Kylo’s eyes fell shut, and his hands fell away from the handle as he collapsed to his side.

… And then there was only darkness.

~*~*~

A few leagues away, a sudden wave of pain sent Gaius to his knees. Something inside his soul snapped, and he was powerless to stop the scream from ripping through him – tearing the quiet air apart.

Forcing himself back onto his feet, he started running – faster than he had ever run before.

~*~*~

At Skye Castle, the birds had been restless for several days. The air was positively crackling with the force of their anxiousness. Then, just as the sun began to set, they erupted in a scream of such primal agony it shattered windows and glass goblets, forcing the humans of the castle to drop anything in their hands to cover their ears in hopes to keep their hearing. The birds screamed, and screamed, and screamed.

And then silence fell.

~*~*~

In the Crow’s tower, warchief Hux suddenly clutched at his heart, going deathly pale before collapsing on the floor – a cry of his beloved’s name escaping him before his consciousness fled him.

~*~*~

Many leagues away from Skye Castle, the group of Southerners and their guards were just sitting back up in the saddles, having finished a quick meal at the inn of one of the many small villages that lay scattered about the landscape. The horses they’d arrived here on would stay here, and while the group had been occupied with eating new horses had been brought out and saddled for them. No one had thought it strange when Lady Mai had demanded new horses, and Rey could only assume this was a normal occurrence here. It made sense, she supposed, seeing as the Hux clan’s territory spanned over such huge distances. Travelling across it would take far too long if one stuck to one horse, but with the option to change horses in every new village the journey would be much quicker. And Lady Mai had left absolutely no room to doubt that this was, indeed, a journey to be completed as fast as possible.

She was so tired it was difficult to even sit up straight in the saddle, but her inquiry about stopping to sleep for a few hours had been met with nothing but a raised eyebrow and a snort. They could
rest when they were safely aboard the ship, she’d been informed. Lord Hux had said ‘as fast as the horses could carry them’, and they would obey. If the Southerners had a problem with that, it was their own problem. With that, they had been ushered into the saddles, and then lead off in a thunderous gallop almost before they’d had a chance to properly grip the reins. Han and Chewie were the only ones out of their little group who seemed unperturbed by the haste – they merely glanced at each other, shrugged, and got in their saddles. But then again, they had been on journey like this one – and certainly worse ones, too – since long before Rey, Poe, or Finn had even been born.

The prospect of being able to visit an actual Northern city was, she had to admit to herself, rather exciting, and Rey focused on that thought to get her through the following hours. Of course, there had to be cities even in the North, but so far, she had no idea what they might look like. They did not quite seem to categorize them the same way as the South did. What was here referred to simply as ‘villages’ would have been labelled towns, or – in some cases – as garrisons. They were all encircled by either thick stonewalls, or menacing palisades, and though they were larger in size than what Rey thought fitting for something labelled a ‘village’, they were also very densely built-up – as if the houses huddled together for protection against whatever evils roamed outside the walls. Whitehaven was, as far as she had understood, a merchant city, which should suggest that its inhabitants were used to the presence of foreigners and she wished they had more time so she could have had an opportunity to explore it. The guards had talked amongst themselves, and she’d heard a mention of a ‘Lady Hux’, but it had been impossible to tell if the lady in question was a relative of Lord Hux – a sister perhaps, or an aunt – or if it was his wife. But nothing Han had told her had indicated that the warchief was married, and she was glad. It would have been too cruel of him to bind her brother to him if he still had a wife. But the way they spoke about the woman told Rey that, whoever she was, she was highly respected – revered, even. Maybe, if there was time, she could offer them some insights into the mind of Lord Hux – something that would make Rey’s task so much easier. Convincing her mother of anything was difficult even at the best of times, and during times like this it was likely less challenging to turn the tides than make the queen change her mind. Rey needed any last little speck of advantage she could gain.

She did not doubt that she could have learn many helpful things, given a little time – but, as fate would have it, time was the one thing they no longer had.

~*~*~

It was only Maul’s rock solid grip on their wills and their promise to their master that kept the Knights and the Hux Crows on their path. The pain had nearly thrown them off of their horses, Avi was crying themselves into utter exhaustion – having had to be transferred over to Erris’ horse in order to stay in the saddle at all – and the others were not much better off. Chava raged and fought against Maul’s hold on her until he had smacked her hard enough across the cheek to shock her into silence and compliance. At least she would acknowledge and handle it in a healthy way – unlike her siblings, Chava usually reacted strongly at first, then settled. The same could not be said for the rest of them.

Silass and Vilya both looked for all like they had been turned to stone, staring blankly into nothing, not seeming to notice the presence of anyone around them. They would come out of it soon, but in their own ways. Silass would pretend nothing was wrong, carrying her grief deep inside her, only bringing it out when she thought no one saw. Vilya would turn destructive, taking her pain out on anything and anyone unfortunate enough to stand in her way. Erris cried silent tears into Avi’s white hair, focusing on comforting his distraught sibling instead of on his own grief – he would break later, Maul knew. He always did.
Erris and Gaius both tended to ignore their own pain until they were certain that their siblings were alright, and only then would they allow themselves to grieve. Gaius usually went on a journey, preferring to vent his emotions in peace. Erris, on the other hand, would shut himself away with only hard liquor for company for a good week, until he had hit some form of bottom from which he could begin to climb back up. They would have to watch him closely – Erris was not a friendly drunk, and Kylo was his master and hero. This could go all sorts of wrong, especially with how upset Avi was. There was something there; Maul could feel it – some sort of bond, tension, between Erris and Avi that was different from their bond of Knighthood. He would have to make further inquiries later, but this was obviously something Kylo had allowed to grow, and so it must have some good to it. Avi had their face buried against Erris’ chest, clinging on to him like some overgrown teasel – too engulfed in their grief to form words. Maul had never seen the youngest Knight this upset, so he had no idea of how to handle them, but he made a note to himself to watch them closely none the less.

The Hux Crows were no match for his strong grip on the Force, and they sat like a collection of dolls in their saddles, eyes on the horizon, blindly following his lead. Though he felt unease at the thought of having to do this to Kylo’s Crows, he also knew there was no other way – they were too distraught to be trusted with the control of their own bodies at the moment. It was better to let their souls process in the safety of a blank mind than to risk them doing something foolish. He might not be able to keep as firm a hold on the Knights as he would have wanted, but these Crows would not be thinking a single thought of their own until he felt they were ready for it.

But it was not without tears of his own that he led the group further south. Kylo had been his hatchling to a far deeper level than he had ever been anyone else’s – Maul could even admit that over the years he had come to view the younger Crow less like an apprentice and more like his own son. It wasn’t allowed, he knew that, but it was the truth. It mattered little to him what anyone thought of it, Kylo was his child, and Maul was his father – if the Gods had disapproved of it, they would have made it known long ago – and to feel his Force presence fade, then completely disappear in one sharp cut through his soul, had hurt more than anything Maul had ever felt in all his long years. His mind rebelled against the thought of Kylo no longer being among them, refused to entertain the notion that his child was dead, alone, left behind among the heaps of corpses as if he was mere garbage. It could not be. It simply could not be. Kylo would not let that happen. There had to be something else going on, something too deep in the web of the Force for even him to access.

Kylo Ren could not be dead. If he was, then the Gods had failed him, and if the Gods had failed him, then they were no Gods of Maul’s. But still, as frantically as he searched the Force for a sign – any sign – the place in his soul that had always held that fiery, beautiful presence remained cold and empty. As far as the Force seemed concerned, Kylo Ren, master of the Knights of Ren, child of Death, and the strongest Crow to walk the world in generations, was dead.

Nothing good could come of this.

~*~*~

It was night again, when Gaius finally made it back to the House of Night – no moon or stars to light his way, only clouds and shadows. There were still Crows leaving, though not as many as there must have been in the first hours after the Raven had delivered his order, but he still had to be very careful as he found his way into the complex. There were corpses everywhere, the birds happily picking away at them – their caws and the flapping of their wings sounding more ominous than Gaius ever thought it could. Their bond to the order no longer extended to its dead, and the Knight wondered briefly if it was the same for the living now. The few of them that remained, that was. But they paid him no mind, feeding instincts overpowering any hint of curiosity they might
otherwise have shown him. He could only hope this would not be how he would find Kylo. That would be too cruel.

The stench was almost overpowering as he opened a door to the main building, and he had to fight the urge to vomit. Instead, he pulled his cowl tighter around his face and took care to breathe through his mouth instead of his nose before stepping inside. At least it wasn’t summer, which was a small blessing, but he knew this smell would haunt him forever. The Force was in turmoil here, the sickness still permeating every swirl of it he could feel against his mind, and it made his skin crawl with the intensity of it but he pressed on. He needed to find Kylo’s body. Needed to get him home to his warchief, so that he could at least have a proper burial. So that he could at least go to the halls of the Ancestors in a manner befitting his station, instead of rotting away here with the rest of the Order. And he knew both the warchief and his siblings needed it too: to have some closure, some way to say their final goodbyes. He was lucky it was winter, he really was. Transporting the body that far south during summer would have been almost impossible. But now, he would be able to bring him home before his body started to rot – the cold would see to it that he remained in good condition until the pyre turned him to ash.

Heading first for the dungeons, Gaius felt some lingering traces of his presence, some images and emotions flashing through his mind. They had tortured him – that much was clear. Kylo must have known it would happen, must have known all of this would happen. If he had not, they would never have managed to get him anywhere near these rooms. He would have torn them all apart before they could so much as come within three steps of him. The thought was sickening. If Kylo had known, that meant he had sent them all away for a purpose other than simply keeping his beloved safe. He had sent them away to keep them from having to face the same fate. He had sacrificed himself, the damned fool! Had given up the life he had never quite managed to see any worth in, had allowed himself to be tortured for the sake of saving the lives that did matter to him; his Knights, his Crows, and his warchief – they were his world, and Gaius cursed himself for not realizing this might happen. He had always been able to read Kylo’s moods and thoughts much easier than anyone else, but even he had missed whatever thought process that had led to him making the decision to sacrifice himself for them.

He found Kylo’s robes, or what was left of them, on the floor in one of the torture chambers. They were torn to shreds, covered in filth, and stinking of piss. So, the vile bastards that had done this to Kylo hadn’t stopped at tormenting him? They had to act like immature children and even soil his clothes? Disgusting. At least Kylo had not worn his beautiful cloak to the meeting – a small blessing, but Gaius would have made sure it took the people responsible at least two days longer to die if they had done this to it. Kylo loved that cloak, and had been so proud of it – something they rarely saw from him, and he had smiled so brightly when Silass had complimented on it. Dropping the clothes back on the floor, Gaius continued his search. He would have to find new clothes to dress the body in anyway, and he could not risk lingering anywhere for too long; the Gods alone knew how many Crows were still around. The torture chambers and prison cells were all empty, and the traces of Kylo’s Force presence had been much more prominent on the ground floor, so Gaius returned there to try and pick up the trail again. It took some searching; the traces seemed to run through several different corridors, almost as if… as if they had paraded him around. For their sake, Gaius hoped not. He could feel the wrath rising in him with every breath, tinting his vision red at the edges, making his blood run scorching hot.

Eventually, he found himself in front of the doors to the Hall of Visions. The air was sharp with the remnants of Kylo’s torment, and Gaius had to lean against the door for a little, raise his mental shields as best he could to keep the images and emotions from driving him mad. Oh, how his brother had suffered in here! How alone he had been. He could have been standing there a few moments, or a few hours, he did not know – but eventually, he took a deep breath to steady himself, and pushed open the doors. Nothing in his whole, blood-stained life could have prepared
him for what he saw.

Kylo’s lifeless body lay on its side, just in front of the low dais on top of which the brazier used for summoning the Raven was placed. His beautiful face was stained with blood and vomit – a pool of it gathering under his pale cheek. His back was in shreds, so badly whipped that one could not even make out the shapes of his large tattoos, and his thighs had fared only slightly better. He was completely naked, pale skin a network of welts and those strange patterns left when someone had summoned lightning against them. Blood had run from his nose, mouth, ears, and… his eyes? What in the world had they done to his eyes? They couldn’t possibly have… taken them out? It was not their custom, but Gaius knew better than to trust anyone who could put a whip to the Master of the Knights of Ren to stay true to their customs. If they had, they would never have touched him to begin with. The sight of the knife had him crying out in pain. He knew it was one of Kylo’s own ceremonial knives – he had been there when they were given to him – and for them to use it to take his life… No. No, it was too cruel. Before he could stop to think, he was hurrying towards his brother’s body, only to find himself running head first into a Force barrier of some sort. It could not be! How could they be so vile, so cruel, so monstrous that they would not even allow for his body to be collected? Who could do such a thing? Death was sacred to them! She was their mother, and burials were one of their most important rituals! A Crow must go to their ancestor through fire – they were to be placed on the pyre and honoured by mortals and birds alike. They weren’t supposed to be left like… like this.

The anger consumed him, and he threw himself at the barrier, body and mind, but it would not yield to him. He pounded at it with his fists, hacked at it with his sword, threw the full force of his anger and power at it, but it remained solid and unaffected. With a cry of despair, he sank to his knees, unable to keep himself from breaking down in a heap of deep, gut-wrenching sobs, tears falling from his eyes like twin waterfalls. He cried for hours, not caring if anyone heard him, too lost in his pain to pay any heed to his surroundings. Then, he felt it; a caress, a feeling of a presence inside his mind, and a sense of gentle, ghostlike fingers cupping his cheek – a mother’s touch. He felt rather than heard it, a voice he knew well, one he had known his whole life – a voice whose presence could be found anywhere and everywhere where there was life and death.

Do not despair, little Crow it said. I have not abandoned my child. Now rest, my little one. He is safe here, as are you. I have need of you both in the times to come. Rest. You will need your strength soon enough. I will watch over you. I always watch over you.

Gaius felt his limbs go heavy and limp, then his eyes seemed to close of their own accord. He was asleep before he hit the floor.

Chapter End Notes

I am so very sorry. I know you all probably hate me right about now, but this had to happen. It is vital for the story that this happens. And, in case you were wondering why this update has taken so long, it was because I’ve been dreading this chapter for about six updates now. I made myself very sad while writing it.

If you want/need to yell at me, I'm available on tumblr, as always. Sometimes my blog is apparently hard to find, but I promise you I'm there - under the same name as here. Just, uhm, please don't yell too loudly - I am smol and easily frightened.

I will try to get the next chapter up as soon as possible, but it might still be slow. I just
started on my master's thesis, and I don't know yet how demanding it's going to be. But
don't worry - updates will keep coming! This story is my baby, and I will finish it if it's
the last thing I ever do!
As they approached Whitehaven, it became more and more obvious by each passing moment that lord Hux’ plans to have them board a ship and sail as soon as they arrived at the docks would not be carried out. The closer they came to the coast, the more the winds seemed to pick up – a sharp, biting sort of wind that came barrelling across the landscape and chilled them to the bone, despite their many layers of clothing. With the wind came icy cold rain mixed with little flakes of snow, and it felt like claws against their unprotected faces, making it difficult to keep their eyes open as the wind and rain made them fill with tears. Rey thanked her God that the guards at least still appeared to know where they were going, because she could barely make out the road in front of her. But perhaps they were used to it, she thought, since they seemed to have made this journey many times before. Coastal weather was unpredictable at the best of times – as Rey knew well from her life in D’Qar, where storms were a common occurrence – and she supposed the Northerners treated it with the same equanimity as they did with everything else. When the city was only just visible as a towering black silhouette through the steadily thickening blankets of sleet, a group of soldiers came to meet them – their captain greeting Lady Mai with a respectful bow in his saddle.

“Lady Mai,” he acknowledged – the wind blowing so loudly around them that he had to shout to make himself heard. “Lady Hux sends her regards, and has asked us to escort you and the Southerners to the castle. We closed the harbour earlier today – no ships will be leaving Whitehaven before this storm passes!”

“Thank you, captain!” Lady Mai said. “Lead the way! I reckon the Southerners will turn to ice if they don’t get inside soon!”

The new group of soldiers quickly joined the formation, and they set off toward the city. Rey wished the weather had been better, as they thundered through the enormous city gates. The wall surrounding Whitehaven was high enough that she couldn’t see the parapet through the sleek, and it was thick enough that light could not reach the middle of the tunnel between the two massive sets of doors they had to pass to reach the actual city. Perhaps, she mused, the Northerners were grateful for the weather conditions. Now, their guests had no way of learning anything useful about the city’s defences – it was all a blur, as they were lead through cobbled streets between rows of houses that were huddled together, growing steadily larger and more luxurious the closer they came to the castle. It took a good while to get there; Whitehaven was, indeed, a very large city, and even in this foul weather its streets were swarming with activity. She could make out a slew of Southern accents in conversations as they passed brightly coloured market stalls and little shops, and there were more different Northern dialects here than she’d thought existed – all of them easily recognizable by their melodic sound. Guards in shining armour, wrapped in thick woollen cloaks to protect them from the worst of the wind, moved about in close formations or guarded the corners of larger buildings.

Apart from the architectural differences, it didn’t look so much different from D’Qar, and she found herself overcome with that wish again; to explore all these winding streets and little alleyways, to visit the market place and the little shops, and – more than anything – she wished to find some nice, quiet corner from which she could look at the sea. Whitehaven was located high on the cliffs, if the steady climb on the slippery, muddy road they had had to undertake to reach it was anything to go by. The view had to be magnificent! She tried to imagine the sun rising and setting...
over the horizon from here, how the golden light she loved so much would look when caressing
the surface of these dark, wilder waters. Would the surface lie there, peaceful and waiting, as it did
outside the breakwaters in D’Qar? Or would it rise up to meet it, dance under it, refusing to let
itself be touched without first having displayed its strength, its freedom from any shackles? They
had a God of the Seas here, Rey knew – a wild, vicious God, whose name was spoken only in the
most hushed whispers, who was given his due sacrifice – only the fattest sheep, and the finest food
and wine – before any ship would dare leave this coast. Was the sea as wild as him? She did not
know, but she found herself wanting to find out. These lands, she thought, had stolen her heart in a
way no mortal man or woman could ever come close to, and she found herself mourning the loss of
her chance to see all of it, to wander its coast and its endless fields, to explore its deep forests of
pines and oaks, to swim in its sparkling rivers – to be just another wanderer, another mortal, and
not a person whose entire life had been carved in stone long before she was old enough to even
know.

But life had not seen it fit to award her such a chance, and she forced herself to abandon the
thoughts for now, coming back to herself just in time to see the gate of the castle swing open to
allow them entry. While not nearly as enormous as Skye Castle, the castle at Whitehaven was an
impressive complex of buildings in its own right – that much was evident even with the limited
scope of vision caused by the weather. Just as they were dismounting, the doors to the main
building itself opened, and a woman stepped out onto the stone steps, surrounded by guards. She
was tall and slender, her bright red hair shone like a beacon through the sleet, the deep emerald of
her dress and cloak seemed almost dull in comparison. Her posture was regal, proud, but there was
that same hint of danger to it that she had seen in another person here, and not that long ago. The
way she held her head high, unaffected by the howling winds as the guards led them closer to
where she stood, spoke of nobility, of enough victories and tragedies behind her to have little left to
prove to anyone. Her hair was braided, and coiled around her head like a crown – making her seem
more the Queen than anyone Rey had ever seen. Though obviously not a young woman, she had a
fierce beauty to her that a quick glance at her companions told Rey had not gone unnoticed by
either her father and uncle or Finn and Poe. They seemed unsure where to look, in a way Rey had
previously only seen in men coming face to face with Queen Leia for the first time – and Rey did
not need an introduction to guess that this was the mysterious Lady Hux.

Lady Mai and her guards bowed in utmost reverence, and the lady gave a surprisingly warm smile
that made her seem so much younger. She motioned for them to stand up straight as she hurried
over to pull Lady Mai into a tight embrace.

“Mai,” she greeted. “My dearest friend, welcome. Come now, let us get you all indoors before the
lot of your freeze solid right here in the courtyard.”

“Lady Bríghid,” Mai smiled. “Are you sure you don’t want to be introduced to our guests first? I’m
certain protocol states that-”

Lady Hux silenced her with a little wave.

“We both know I am not as fond of protocol as my son is,” she said, turning around to head back
inside. “And my position affords me the luxury of ignoring it as I see fit. Come now, I’ve had a
meal prepared. Business can wait until you lot have thawed a little.”

The Southerners shared a surprised look as the guards ushered them inside, none of them quite
knowing how to react to this new situation. It seemed that out of all the scenarios they had
envisioned, nothing had prepared them for what would actually happen. Lady Hux led them
through well-lit corridors, decorated by the finest tapestries and giant paintings, to a drawing room
somewhere deep inside the maze of the building. This seemed to be a fundamental aspect of
Northern architecture, Rey mused; all their buildings seemed so much larger on the inside, with never-ending corridors twisting and turning in all directions until visitors couldn’t even be sure where they came from.

The room seemed to have been designed for the sole purpose of entertaining the residents of the castle and their guests. A fireplace large enough for Chewie to stand upright dominated one wall, with a large, round table in front of it, and several comfortable looking sofas placed in a semi-circle around it. A few other, smaller tables, with chairs were scattered about the space – one with decks of cards on it, another with a Dejarik board carved into the surface, and a some of them that seemed simply meant for sharing a meal at. Large bookshelves, more intricate tapestries, and some decoratively hung weapons and old shields took up most of the walls. The large windows had been covered by sturdy looking shutters, though the force of the sleet hitting it could still be heard, even through the thick wooden panels – but the room was far from dark. Several massive chandeliers hung by heavy chains from the ceiling, and smaller ones were placed on shelves and tables around the room, bathing it in soft, bright light.

The warmth was soothing and very welcome, and when Lady Bríghid bade them to sit down by the fireplace, they did not need to be told twice. Servants appeared out of nowhere, bringing a soup tureen large enough to require two people to carry it, an enormous basket full of freshly baked bread, and several bottles of wine. Whatever the soup tureen contained, Rey knew she could not wait to have it – and she was relieved to find that her own stomach was not the only one making that wish obvious. Once they had had their fill, Lady Bríghid finally complied with Lady Mai’s request to introduce everyone. She had spent most of the meal calmly observing them, her piercing green eyes not seeming to miss even the slightest little flicker of their gazes.

“You are a strange lot,” she said, shaking her head. “A princess, two scoundrels, and two poor guards just along for the journey. But I fully understand why Braith would want you away from our lands as soon as possible. That Queen of yours is bad enough to deal with as it is – I’d rather not see her when her only daughter is stuck at his court without even a proper escort.”

“Uhm,” Han began. “My lady, my apologies if I sound rude, but who exactly are you?”

“I thought that would be rather obvious,” Lady Bríghid snorted, then smiled. “But it seems I was mistaken. I’m Bríghid, daughter of Diana – and you will address me as Lady Hux. Braith Hux is my son. Our personalities are quite different, I know, but I really thought the hair and eyes would give it away – it usually does. His father always hated how much we looked alike, but at least with my blood in him, Braith won’t grow fat and bald before his fortieth winter. The Gods know it’s more than they blessed his father with, the despicable pig that he was.” She sighed. “Apologies,” she said. “Bitterness is a difficult cloak to cast off, even after many years. Now, perhaps it would be appropriate to discuss the business at hand. You’ve understood by now, I hope, that you will not be sailing South for a little while yet. Though unfortunate, storms are common as dirt around here in the winter. For the time being, you are confined to the castle – and there are rules to follow here. Understood?”

“Let me guess,” he said. “We are to remain indoors, and not go wandering unattended?”

“Precisely,” lady Bríghid nodded. “Unlike my son, I prefer to treat people as guests until they behave in a way that suggest I shouldn’t, but even so, I am still the one who raised him, and I do not tolerate nonsense any more than he does.”

She proceeded to lay down a strict set of rules, a firmness to her tone that left no room to argue, before bidding them a good night and taking Mai with her to discuss matters not intended for their ears. Eventually, servants came to escort them first to the baths, and then to their assigned rooms.
The journey had taken its toll on Rey, and with her belly full of good food and wine, and her body finally warm again, it did not take long for her to fall into a deep, dreamless sleep while the storm raged outside her windows.

~*~*~

Night had come and gone twice since Gaius had found his brother’s body. After waking at dawn – having slept all through the night – he had left the Hall of Visions only to search for provisions, and to retrieve clean clothes to dress Kylo in when, if, the Goddess would let him near his body. The Force barrier was as solid as it had been when he first arrived, and it was now not only keeping him from reaching Kylo, but from seeing him as well. He knew the body was there, of course, but there was something in that barrier – something the Goddess had done – that made his mind unable to see through it. Whenever he tried, it was much the same as attempting to see to the other end of a pitch-black room; nothing was visible at all on the other side. It was as if his mind could not register that that half of the room existed – whenever he looked over, he would find his vision slipping and his thoughts going blank, and then he would find himself looking at some other part of the room instead. It frightened him, but he forced himself to trust in the Goddess, to trust that she had a good reason for all of this. She had to; even she could not be so cruel as to keep one of her children from giving another a proper burial, could she? Gaius was not so certain of it anymore, but he was nothing if not obedient, and if the Goddess demanded he stay and keep his silent vigil until she said otherwise, then so he would.

There were others – whether Crows, or animals drawn by the smell of dead bodies and an easy meal – and Gaius had barricaded himself in the Hall to the best of his ability. Whoever it was that roamed the halls, caused those eerie, shuffling, dragging noises, he would rather not meet them. The benches and large candelabras he had used to bar the doors would certainly not hold forever if someone decided to try their luck in here, but it would at least provide him with fair warning – and Gaius was not a Knight for nothing; he hardly needed a weapon to kill anyone with, and though he usually preferred not to use the Force in combat, this situation more than merited an exception to his habit.

Sitting with his back to one of the stone walls, where he had full sight of both the doors and the part of the room where his brother lay, Gaius watched, and waited. He would not leave his brother’s side. Not for anything. The world could end for all he cared – if it did, he would meet it right there, next to his brother and master. He had sworn to always follow, into hell itself if needed, and Gaius Ren always kept his oaths.

~*~*~

The Hux that had woken up the morning after collapsing mid-sentence the previous evening had not been the same man as the one who collapsed. When his eyes had finally fluttered open – puffy and red-rimmed from the tears he had spilled before finally succumbing to unconsciousness – both Phasma and Mitaka had been taken aback by the look of them. They were cold, dark… empty. The fire that had always burned so brightly behind his emerald irises had been extinguished – replaced with something they could not name, but that made every hair on their bodies stand on end. The demon of the North, indeed. He finally looked the part.

He had refused to tell them anything of what had happened, had only given orders to double the efforts to prepare their armies for the long march ahead. Then he had dragged Phasma and a few of her closest men down to one of the training rooms and sparred with them until they had nearly fainted from exhaustion. Hux himself had only stopped when Mitaka had brought a very distressed Eira down to him, begging him to try and comfort her – she had not eaten since the day before, and she refused outright to let go of the cowl she was currently wrapped in. Maybe Hux could help
Since then, Eira went with him everywhere – wrapped in Kylo’s cowl, and held close to his chest when he walked, and sat on his lap whenever he sat down – and she was now the only one he bothered speaking kindly to. For the rest of the clan, he was a creature of little more than ice and stone; he cared about nothing sans the coming march on the South, and refused to listen to any complaints regarding his orders – no matter how much his officers tried, Hux’ reply was always ‘no’. But as soon as he returned to his rooms, not having so much set foot on the stairs to the Crow’s tower since he’d left it that first morning, he reached for his tankard and made sure to drink enough from the barrel of ale he stored in his sitting area that he could barely even make it to bed. The hangovers made his mood even fouler, and the Great Hall was now as silent as a tomb whenever he was present – the clan knew better than to test his patience when he had had too much to drink the night before, but they were all starting to worry about this sudden change in his demeanour. If this became a habit, the Gods alone knew how it would end.

On the seventh day, Phasma finally had enough, and dragged him by his jacket back to his rooms, and shoved him into a chair. After carefully placing Eira back in his lap, she dragged another chair over, and sat down so close that their knees were almost touching – staring him in the eyes, daring him to try and move. He did not, but instead only met her gaze – the lifelessness of his eyes, only betrayed by a glint of something predator-like, made her skin crawl, but she did not look away.

“Braith,” she said, more steel in her voice than she felt in her heart. “Enough of this now. You need to tell me what in the seven hells is going on with you, because this is madness. First you collapse, and then when you wake up it’s like you were replaced by some demonic entity! I know you, I can see that something is hurting you – and hurting you badly – but I cannot help you unless you tell me what it is. And you cannot lead this clan if you keep this behaviour up!” He snorted, and she grabbed him by the shoulders, hard. “I am serious!” she snarled. “Don’t try me, Braith – I will beat the sense back into you if you don’t come to it yourself! You have never acted like this before! Not when you lost two wives, not when you buried your firstborn, and-…. Braith, you are frightening everyone! So, we are not leaving this room until you tell me what is wrong. Mitaka will take care of the clan, but you are not going anywhere until I’m sure you’re actually my cousin, and not some demonic impostor!”

Hux kept looking her in the eyes for several more moments, until he finally let out a deep sigh, turning his gaze to his lap – holding Eira closer, gently stroking her feathered little cheek. Defeat hung around his shoulders like a funeral shroud, almost palpable in its intensity.

“He’s gone, Phasma,” he whispered, voice more tired and broken than anything she’d ever heard. “Kylo is gone. I can’t- I can’t feel him anymore. He’s never coming back to me – I know it. He’s gone.” Looking up at her, his eyes were glassy with tears that remained unshed – she suspected – by sheer force of will. “I should never have let him go. I should have taken the clan with me, gone up North with him, and… and been the life companion I should be, that I swore to be. I should have protected him, and instead I failed him. I failed him, just like everyone else in his life has failed him, and I can’t stand it, Phasma! My Kylo is dead, and I can’t stand the thought! I just… ” He swallowed hard, tears finally spilling over, and he did nothing to hide them or attempt to wipe them away. “All I can do now, is to avenge him. I can never have him back, but at least I can take our armies South, and I can show them what happens to those who harm our sacred ones. I can raze D’Qar to the ground, I can have that Queen of theirs one head shorter, I can make Kylo’s crimes seem like child’s play. I can kill every single midnight-clad person we encounter who claims loyalty to that… creature they call the Raven. So that is what I will do. And should I die trying, then I welcome it – because I can no longer bear a life where he is not by my side. I cannot, and I will not.”
Phasma, daughter of Isolde, Commander of the High Guard of Skye Castle, had been in many dire situations. She had seen things no one should ever have to see, had come out alive of situations that still plagued her dreams. But she failed to remember a time in her life when fear had ever gripped her heart this tight.

Their Crow was dead.

…Gods help them all.

~*~*~

The sound of giggles brought Rey out of sleep. Children giggling. Where in the world did the sound come from? As she fought to clear her mind of the soft, foggy sensation of sleep, and convince her eyes to open, she heard it again – but followed by voices this time.

“…She’s so small! Almost as small as you, you twig!” one voice said, laughter still clinging to the edges of it.

It came from somewhere very close, and Rey renewed her efforts to make her body cooperate with her. Damn these beds and how comfortable they were! She had never struggled with getting up in the mornings before she came to the North.

“We’re the same size, you walnut!” another voice protested. This one sounded almost identical as the first, only a tiny bit lower in pitch – barely noticeable.

“No, we’re not!” the first voice snorted. “I’ve got more muscles than you!” There was pride and smugness in that voice to rival most adults.

“Only ‘cause you keep picking fights with everyone! And get knocked on your arse in the mud every time!”

“I do not! You’re lying, and- Oh! She’s waking up!”

Rey had finally managed to turn over and sit up, only to be faced with two children – nearly identical looking – with impossibly red hair, pulled back in a tight braid at the side of their neck, and the same piercing green eyes as both Lady Hux and her son. They sat on opposite sides of her bed, just by her knees, crouching like a pair of little cat-like creatures, and they were shamelessly studying her. They wore grey tunics, and the same loose trousers as all adult Northerners Rey had seen. Both of them also carried a dagger each, kept in tastefully decorated leather sheaths by their hips.

“Grandmother says you’re a princess,” the child to Rey’s right said. “I don’t believe her. You don’t look like you can even lift a sword. How are you supposed to lead any armies if you can’t lift a sword, huh? Even I can do that, and I’m only nine.”

“You only lifted a sword once, Mara,” the child to Rey’s left snorted. “And then you dropped it on Captain Eldrid’s foot.”

“Still more than you did, Caélin,” the first child, Mara, shot back, reaching across to shove at them.

“Because I’m smart enough to listen to our teachers. Like Father told us to, remember?”

“Who are you?” Rey cut in, deciding that enough was enough, and it was far too early for all of this. “And what in God’s name are you doing in my bedroom?”
They looked at her, their heads quirked to the side in exactly the same way, before they started giggling again. Before they had any chance to reply, however, there was the sound of knocking at her door, followed by a servant – a very imposing woman, with steely grey hair, and steelier gaze – who promptly marched up to the bed and picked both children up, tucking one under each arm.

“There you are, you little hell-spawns! I am terribly sorry, little Princess,” she said. “The twins get bored easily, and despite our best efforts, they have yet to understand the meaning of the word privacy. I hope they did not disturb you too much?”

“Not at all!” Rey hurried to assure her. “I just wasn’t expecting—… well, I didn’t know there were children here. It was just a little bit surprising.”

The servant nodded, bid her good morning, and carried the two violently protesting children out of the room – leaving Rey in a state of utter confusion at the complete lack of explanation as to who those children were, and why no one had mentioned them before. But she was too awake now to have any chance at more sleep, so instead Rey changed into the clothes provided upon their arrival, and headed for the drawing room – four of the castle’s guards escorting her through the winding halls.

They had been here for a good week now, and the storm still raged outside. While it did calm somewhat occasionally, it never took more than a few hours before it came back full force, and therefore it was still much too risky to even think of attempting sending a ship out to sea until they had had at least a full day without these brutal winds. The waters here were treacherous, Lady Hux had said. The ship would sink as soon as they left the harbour, and she would not ask that of any of her captains. It was a frustrating wait – the knowledge of all the things that could go so very wrong became a heavier burden on her shoulders with each passing day – but they had managed to develop some sort of routine, which helped her keep her impatience from getting the better of her.

In the morning, they would all gather in the drawing room, and spend the day playing Dejarik, or any of the dozens of card games Han and Chewie had learnt over the years. Lady Hux would join them when she could, politely answering most of their questions, while equally politely avoiding answering certain others, and in the evenings, they would sit by the fire and talk about this strange, beautiful land, and it’s strange, magnificent people. It would have been the best time Rey had ever spent with her father, if not for the knowledge weighing heavy on their hearts that this peace would not last. The second they set foot back in D’Qar, all of their energy must be spent preventing a war that could easily devastate half the continent. None of them spoke about it, a silent agreement having been made to try and make the most of this respite while it lasted.

The drums of war were already sounding, and blood would be shed in the year to come. All they could do was hope that when the last drop had been spilt the world was still standing.

But it did not look hopeful.

~*_~*_~

The Knights of Ren drew a collective breath of relief when they finally caught sight of the first banner carrying the Hux clan’s symbol; the red and black standing out against the colourless landscape surrounding it from where it hung on the high palisade from a garrison they passed. Not long now, until they would see Mount Starkiller on the horizon, it’s majestic peaks touching the clear Northern skies and leading them safely the rest of the way.

They could only hope that when they arrived, there would still be a warchief waiting for them, that the Flock would still be nesting in the high towers of Skye Castle, and that Eira would be there to help show the clanspeople that they – for once in their lives – came in peace.
Maul’s grip on the minds of the Hux Crows had not lessened the slightest, and he still drove them on as persistently as he had when they first left the House. It worried him that they had not yet heard from Gaius, but as much as he loathed to admit it, there was nothing to be done about that until they were safely inside Kylo’s castle and had gotten a chance to rest. They were all so worn, so tired, and hurting so badly from what had transpired, and any attempts to find Gaius through the Force would put them all at risk of being found by other Crows.

He vowed silently to himself, in the innermost, secret part of his soul, that he would see to it that it would take the Raven one day for every hour of torment Kylo had suffered to die. He would see to it, if it was the last thing he ever did. One day for every hour of torment, and he still found himself feeling far too lenient in his desire for punishment than what Snoke’s crimes merited. Maul was not a good man. He was a Crow, through and through, and Crows always gave back tenfold for every hurt inflicted upon them.

Maul would tear the Raven apart, and he would *relish* it.

---

Chapter End Notes

Hello there! Another one of those ridiculously long waits again, sorry! Life threw a madness parade around here - fingers crossed that it will calm down a little now.

Things are still not looking too great for our different little groups, are they? But hey, at least we got a pair of tiny Huxes! They may be small, but they’ve sure got spirit! And, in case you're wondering, people up in the North dress all the kids the same way, until they express a wish to dress differently. They get the same tunic and trousers as most of the adults wear - because children play around a lot, so it's always a smart thing to dress them in things that won't hinder them. And, since we know that long hair is the standard around there as well, they tend to have much the same hair-styles too. Poor Rey can't tell them apart. Which is hardly a problem, since they're, you know, kids - and gender roles isn't really a big thing in the 'verse. Lady Hux wears dresses because she likes them. I'm willing to bet she still carries at least a dozen knives on her at all times. She seems like that type of person.

Also, on a more serious note here. I have been getting a few asks over on Tumblr about why I don't reply to comments, but still ask for them. Here's the thing: I'm a spoonie. I don't have much energy to do things with at the best of times, and days of fatigue and brain-fog happens every week. I struggle with interactions a lot due to some particular parts of my gang of annoying psychiatric disorders, and I get stressed out very easily even from interacting with people I know. Replying to roughly ten comments per chapter, most of which show up within the same 24hr period, is something that is difficult for me because it takes a lot of energy for me to process each comment, then try and think of how to respond, then writing the response etc. I also have some bad experiences in the past where people have been very angry with me for replying to some comments but not all of them, which has now landed me in a place where I feel pressured to reply every single comment in hopes of avoiding accidentally upsetting someone. I'm a full-time student, I have a lot of stuff outside fandom, outside school, too that needs doing, and I can't prioritize replies to comments over those things. So, instead I've chosen not to reply to comments at all, in the hope of maintaining some control over my spoon count.

Why do I still ask for them? Because your comments provide vital feedback that helps
me a ton in my writing process. Your reactions to the chapters tell me things I need to know about the directions the fic is going, if a certain plot point came across properly, or your comments makes me think of things from a new angle, or helps me come up with a new thing, or a better way to put another thing. There is a reason I've called the comments "the fuel that keeps this fic going" - because to me, they are invaluable.

I ask you to send your questions to me on tumblr, because it feels less stressful to me to know that I only need to focus on this specific question that this specific person sent me, and that I have time to think about it, to maybe write a draft for the reply, and edit it as many times as I need to in order to give the best reply I can.

If I have ever come off as arrogant, or greedy, or selfish, then I sincerely apologize, because that has never been my intention. I love every single comment on this fic, and I am incredibly grateful that you are even reading it to begin with. This is not about me wanting praise; this is all about me trying to find ways to be available for you to ask things, without sacrificing my mental health in the process.

With that said, I hope you have enjoyed the chapter, and I will try to have the next one up as soon as I can.
He was sinking. Slowly, almost as if through dark waters.

Deeper and deeper.

There was no pain. No sound. No warmth or cold.

There was… nothing.

He was nothing.

He? Yes, he’d been a man. Before.

Everything was slipping away from him – sensations, emotions, memories.


Moments could have passed. Or centuries. Time… time did not fit here.

Images flashed before him – he regarded them without feeling, until they came upon a memory of a man with red hair.

Hair like fire. Eyes like the hills in summer.

He was smiling.

It hurt. A pain as sharp as the dagger through his heart. This man, he was important. He could be felt, even here. Even through the void.

…Hux.

Braith Hux. That was his name.

Suddenly, the sinking felt wrong. Like he should not be here. Like the void was dragging him away from where he was supposed to be.

The peace he had felt, the detachment, was slowly being replaced by a sense of wrongness.

Regret?

Desperation.

No. No, he could not keep sinking! Could not give in!

That man… he needed him. He needed to be by his side. He needed… whatever it was that man could give him.

“Child of mine,” more a feeling, a presence, than a voice. It sounded like dark winter skies, like crackling flames, like a final breath. “Listen to me.”

“…Mother?” He was unsure if he had spoken it, thought it, or simply felt it – everything was so…
strange here.

“Kylo, my brave child.” The feeling of being held close spread through him, though he was not entirely certain he was in a form that could be held. It felt safe, none the less. “My strong little hatchling. It’s not your time yet, my little one. Not your time to join me. You have many years before you yet, and I have need of you.”

“I don’t… understand…?”

“You have seen it yourself, child. Don’t you remember?”

The visions came, one after the other – so clear, so vivid, that Kylo could very well have been standing in the middle of them, alive again.


“Do you remember now, my little one?”

“I… yes. I remember.” It felt as if he was gently rocked back and forth. The sense of safety becoming clearer. “What is your wish, Mother? What are your orders?”

It felt like a laughter – the darkness deepening, then letting up a little again.

“You died, child,” the voice said. “You are no longer bound by your oath. I cannot order you to do anything anymore. But that is a good thing, child, because what I need from you will come at a great cost for you. A heavy burden will be placed upon your shoulders, and you must choose it for yourself.”

“Anything, mother. Anything you need. I am still your servant, no matter my oaths.”

The presence felt… apprehensive for a moment – or a lifetime, it was hard to tell here.

“My siblings and I are displeased with your former master, the one you call Snoke. He has been blinded by desire for power, and he acts not according to our wishes but his own. He must be stopped, but this cannot be done by just anyone – not even a Knight. He has lived so long, and he has gathered power and knowledge far beyond what he has shown you and your siblings. You must destroy him, child. Tear him apart, body and mind – it is the only way.”

“But… how? How can I…? He- he did this to me. How can I possibly defeat him?”

“The man you think of as father – Maul – he once made this same sacrifice. He has powers beyond what other Crows can dream of. You know this, don’t you? You have felt it.”

“Yes. But I didn’t know-”

“How he got them? No, it was not for him to tell. I will give you the power you need. You will use it to destroy Snoke – and any Crow loyal to him – and then you will use it to restore the order of the Crows in accordance with our wishes. Keep Maul close to you. You need him.” A hint of sadness filled the void. “It will hurt, child. While I can take away the wound that killed you, your powers will come to you in pain. There will be changes. Irrevocable changes. As much as I wish I could take the pain for you, I cannot. You must bear it, it’s the condition for being granted them. But since you are my precious child, and I hate to see you hurt, I will grant you one wish. What do you
desire, child? Tell me, and it will be yours. But only if you let me bring you back to life to carry out the will of your gods.”

“I will obey, mother. I will. I would burn the whole world down for you – you know this.”

“I know, child. Now, tell me, what is it your heart desires more than anything?”

“Him. The warchief… B-Braith Hux. I want to be by his side, always.”

“Then you shall have it.” The feeling of being held tightened, then he felt determination around him. “Now, Kylo, my child – are you ready?”

“Yes.”

Darkness consumed him once more. It felt like fire, like ice, like the pressure of a thousand rocks bearing down on him. It felt like being torn to pieces, like being turned inside out and then back again. It was excruciating, it was beyond words, and he did not know if it lasted mere moments, or if it lasted a lifetime.

Then… the feeling of flying. Steadily upward, upward, upward.

The darkness slowly giving way to light, as if he was rising from the bottom of a deep, dark well. Coming back into his body felt like being pressed into a suit of armour several sizes too small – it felt heavy, restricting, cold, and he realized he was too weak still to move. The pain was still overwhelming, paralyzing in its intensity, and he could not even open his mouth to scream. Not a muscle would obey him – he could not even open his eyes.

All he could do was lie there, bearing the pain his goddess was giving him, hoping that his body would be able to endure it.

~*~*~

Ever since Phasma had knocked some sense back into him, Hux had been slightly more approachable. Mitaka and Phasma had, however, conspired against him, and taken all his wine and ale – even his liquor – away from him, with sharp orders to the servants not to let him have any, no matter what he said. This did not help his mood much, but Phasma had put it in her usual blunt way that the clan much preferred him when he was just grouchy and irritable, rather than when he was two breaths away from murdering the lot of them due to his hangovers. She was right to deny him the drink, he knew that. After all, she had been there when he lost his first wife and child to complications during birth, and then when his second wife had died in battle, leaving him alone with two children only three winters old. Both of those times, he had taken to drinking as a way to cope with his pain, and he knew it would not solve anything. But, by the Gods, that pain was a gentle breeze in comparison to this… hell.

Sleep still eluded him most nights, unless he had managed to wear himself out as much as he possibly could, just before going to bed. Phasma, his blessing of a cousin, seemed to understand this, and she made certain to drive him to a point of utter exhaustion as often as she could. He needed to bring himself back into shape after his injuries, and he had led enough campaigns to know that if one did not head out with a body if peak fighting condition, one would not last long. The long marches, the constant stress, the lack of sleep – all of it took a great toll on a body, and it could wear the troops out long before they ever saw a battle. No, Hux needed to bring himself back into his best condition. There were many a long month ahead of him that would be spent more or less constantly in armour, with his sword at his hip, and a shield on his arm. He could not afford to go easy on himself – especially since they were going to march for the South long before spring.
The cold would not be more forgiving than the warmth of summer, he knew that very well.

Eira still clung to Kylo’s old cowl, refusing to allow anyone near her, sans Hux, Phasma, and Mitaka. He carried her with him wherever he went, kept her warm, and fed her only the finest pieces from his own plate in hopes that she would regain her appetite. She had not taken flight once since Kylo died, and though the birds from the Flock often flew in to see her, she remained inconsolable – to the point where the other birds now came to groom her snowy coat for her, as she was too listless to do so herself. Hux worried about her. Kylo’s words echoed in his mind, about how she thought of him as her own hatchling, her own family. This, Hux had realized, was a mother’s grief for her child – and Hux’ heart broke for her. No parent should have to bury their children, he knew that far too well. The pain never went away; it sat there in the heart, like a thorn, and never let itself be ignored or forgotten – no matter how many years passed, or how many more children one had.

They were currently in the great hall, having just finished their midday meal, and while the servants cleared the large table so that Hux and his officers could go back to discussing strategy, Phasma had pulled him aside. She seemed to have something on her mind that she did not quite know how to say, and Hux could only hope it was not a bad thing. They had enough of those already.

“I asked Mitaka to marry me,” she said finally, glancing at him. “He accepted.”

“I’m very happy for you,” Hux smiled, putting his hand on her shoulder in an affectionate gesture. “Having seen you two together, I have no doubt that he’ll be a good husband to you.”

“Thank you.” Phasma hesitated again, and Hux was starting to worry about the whole thing. It was not like her to act like this.

“Phasma,” he said, as gently as he could manage. “What’s wrong? You seem awfully gloomy for a woman who just got herself a betrothed.”

She was silent for a good while, worrying her lip between her teeth, before heaving a deep sigh.

“I want the wedding to happen before we march,” she said. “We’ve both seen enough wars to know the outcome is never given. I want to know that he is mine and I am his – properly so – before we head out. I want there to be a chance of…. It’s silly, I know, but I just need to know that we’re married. That, no matter what happens, we will be together through this. To know that we-…. She looked angry with herself, and Hux wondered what could possibly upset her this much about the thought of not being married to Mitaka in time. “I want to stop taking my potions, alright?” she finally hissed out, keeping her voice low so no one else could hear. “I want there to be a chance of a child. I- I’ve always wanted my firstborn conceived the way you and I were conceived. I want it conceived a warrior. But you know the law – I won’t be allowed to have Mitaka share my tent unless we’re married. If- if there should be a child, it would not be good for either of our reputations, and I don’t want our marriage to be about saving face.”

Hux was taken aback for a moment, but it did make sense. For the commoners, having children out of wedlock was nothing particularly odd or scandalous – but different rules applied to the high nobility, and Phasma was the first cousin of the clan’s warchief and the commander of his high guard. She was expected to conform to a certain standard, to display her discipline and self-control in all aspects of her life. For her to have a child conceived out of wedlock would be devastating. For Mitaka it would be absolutely disastrous – his standing would most likely be irrevocably damaged, and he would run the risk of not being able to show his face in public. The people here valued their self-control, and a man who caused his partner to conceive due to him not being able to control himself enough not to spill into their womb was a permitted target of ridicule and contempt. Hells,
Hux himself would have been in a world of trouble if he had ever caused such a thing to happen. For how could any clan be expected to respect and follow a man who could not even keep his manhood in his trousers? While they could certainly marry to save face, it would still be too late. The child would not be treated differently than any other, but the parents would never regain their good reputations. Everything would always be tarnished by what had happened.

But Hux had an idea of why she had been hesitant to bring the subject to his attention. It was normally the Crow who officiated weddings. Their Crow was dead, though so far only Phasma and Hux knew about it. There would be questions, they both knew that, and he was not sure what to answer. The clan loved Kylo more than Hux had imagined possible, and not a day went by that they did not talk amongst themselves of how much they missed him, and how they hoped that he would come back home soon. How could Hux tell them all that their Crow was not coming back? That he was lying dead somewhere far up north, and that no new Crow would ever come to Skye Castle.

“Phasma,” he said. “I understand. I truly do. But we- we have no one to perform the ritual.”

Phasma glared at him, her pale blue eyes as cold as the winter outside.

“We’re at war. We might not have marched out yet, but we are at war. In such times, the warchief is authorized to perform marriage rituals. You know that just as well as I do, so don’t you try to deny it. Please. I don’t ask you for many things. Don’t tell me you’ll refuse me this, Braith.”

“I-” Hux began, but had to stop to swallow hard. He knew the laws – of course he did. Phasma was correct; marriage and burial rites were within his realm of duty in times of war, in case the Crow was unavailable, and he felt his heart clench at the realization of why he hesitated. If Hux married Phasma and Mitaka, it would be a confirmation that Kylo was gone, a confirmation that he was not coming back. It would make it oh so very real, and Hux would give anything in the world for it not to be. But he had also seen the way Phasma and Mitaka looked at each other, knew that they both wished for children, and that they were already unusually old for first time parents. Phasma would not make such request, knowing what it would cost him, if it was not of the most profound importance to her.

Sighing, he put a hand on her shoulder.

“Begin your preparations,” he said, finally. “You’ll be married before we march out, but I can’t promise it will happen before we move the troops to the gathering spot. That’s the best I can do.”

Phasma hugged him tighter than she had in years – their armour made it rather uncomfortable, but he treasured Phasma’s every display of affection, knowing she was not usually the type of person to show it in public.

“Thank you, cousin,” she said – voice trembling with emotion. “Thank you. I know how hard this must be for you. Please, don’t ever doubt my gratitude for this. Thank you.”

“You’re my family, Phasma,” he assured her. “For your happiness, I’ll do anything – and you do seem very happy with Mitaka.”

“I am. I truly am. He’s a good man, and he loves me. I could not be happier.”

~*~*~

Maul could scarcely remember a time in his life when he had been more relieved than he was now – Mount Starkiller and Skye Castle rising in all their majestic splendour in front of them. It was a
beautiful winter day; the sky was a brilliant blue, not a cloud to be seen, the air was crisp and clear, and the sun turned the snow-covered landscape into a sea of diamonds. The red and black banners of the Hux clan stood in sharp relief to the pale background – only further magnifying the sense of tininess all those felt who came upon this sight for the first time. He wondered briefly what Kylo had thought of it when he arrived so many months ago. Had he felt as small as Maul did? Had he felt the same awe as Maul and his Knights were now struck by? Had he felt welcome?

The thought was too painful, and he forced himself to push it aside for now. There were other, more pressing matters that demanded his attention now. They could not be certain that they would be welcome; if he knew Kylo half as well as he thought he did, then he would have alerted his war chief the moment things started to go wrong. There was a good chance their only welcome would be crossbows and spears. The Knights seemed aware of this too; their pace had slowed considerably the closer they got to the castle, and Maul could hardly blame them. The Knights of Ren rarely received a warm welcome anywhere even during times of peace and happiness – them arriving at the home of their deceased master’s beloved and bonded war chief, bearing the news of his passing, could spell disaster for them all. Their best chance was the Hux Crows. If they could somehow convince the people of the castle that they came in peace, perhaps everything could go smoothly. Otherwise, they would simply have to hope that Eira was still in the castle, and that she bore them no ill will for leaving her hatchling behind. But ravens were a vengeful bunch, Maul knew, so he did not hope.

Signing to the Knights to halt, Maul turned to them. The journey had worn them all down, they all looked tired and ragged. Erris’ beard had grown wild, even Aví had the beginnings of one – much to their displeasure – and Maul suspected he would have sported some impressive facial hair himself if he was still capable of growing it. Silass, Vilya, and Chava, were slumped in their saddles; in the hasty departure from the House, there had been no time for them to bring their herbs, and now they were all suffering through their bleedings – their discomfort made worse by the cold, and the fact that their bodies had not bled in years. Maul could feel their pain in the air, mixed with that bitter taste of grief that hung in all their minds. Aví, usually always so bright and cheerful, still clung to Erris’ robes like a teasel, barely speaking. Erris was not much better off. When he was not comforting Aví, he tended to his sisters as best he could, and kept a close watch on the Hux Crows’ horses, to ensure they did not stray. But his gaze was weary, dark, distant, and Maul knew danger when he saw it; it was not yet time to relax and trust Erris’ anger not to surface.

“We will be arriving in little more than an hour’s time,” Maul said. “Make sure your weapons are strapped to the saddles, we can’t afford to risk coming off as hostile in any way. Erris, you can let go of the horses; I will be releasing the Hux Crows now.”

Erris nodded, then dismounted and untied the reins from the long rope fastened to his own saddle. Murmuring gently to the tired animals, he carefully eased the reins over their heads so their riders could take them. Vilya, Silass, and Chava dismounted as well, to begin rearranging the weapons. Their movements were slow, exhaustion clear in their usually so proud postures. Once they were done, and had made it back into their saddles, Maul gently relinquished his grip on the Hux Crows’ minds. They slowly came back to themselves, blinking owlishly, still a little dazed as they looked around. Kylo’s closest ranking Crow – what was her name? Aya? – was the first to fully regain control of herself, and she let out a soft gasp upon realizing where they were.


Maul gave her and her siblings a gentle smile.

“It was too risky to let you ride the whole way here, still lost to your grief, so I put you all under my command. Forgive me, but I had to see to the safety of all of us.”
The Hux Crows looked equal parts shocked and awed by that, but Maul had not expected any different – not many Crows could control the minds of so many at a time, and certainly not for so long. He was long since used to these looks.

“You must lead the way,” he said. “Our only hope is that your warchief still has enough trust in his heart to allow you entry to the castle. I know my hatchling, he will have alerted lord Hux, and we cannot be too careful in our approach here.”

Aya nodded, and nudged her horse into moving up front – the rest of the Hux Crows mixing in with the Knights, and Maul took his place just behind her.

“The best we can do,” Aya said, “Is to approach with as much confidence as we can, and not cross the bridge until we have permission. Lord Hux will want to think on it for a little before he decides. We might have to wait for a while.”

“I don’t mind waiting,” Silass said. “I mind getting shot at. We will do as you advise, sister.”

Aya gave a short nod, taking a deep breath to steel herself, and then she led them on towards the castle. No one spoke even a word for the entire ride, all of them too tired, and too tense to even attempt a conversation. The Hux Crows were still readjusting to being able to think and move on their own again, and their focus seemed to be primarily on remaining in their saddles. Aví had hidden under Erris’ cloak, with Erris letting his horse follow the others while he held them tight.

~*~*~

The last thing Hux had ever expected to happen after everything that had gone so wrong during these weeks, was to have Crows at Skye Castle again. Yet this was exactly what occurred, when just before sunset, Eira – who had seemingly given up on living, becoming more apathetic each day – shot straight up in his lap, then proceeded to caw like a mad thing, flapping her wings, calling to the Flock, and making it quite clear to Hux that she wished for him to carry her outside. He had not gotten further than halfway through the great hall, Phasma and Mitaka following close behind, when one of the guards burst through the doors – eyes wide, disbelieving, awestruck, and still cautiously hopeful.

“My lord,” she managed to croak out. “My lord, the Crows! The Crows are back! They say they bring words! What should we do?”

“Follow me,” Hux said as he promptly marched past her. “I need to know of their intentions before I make any decision. Eira, little love, hold still!” She was flapping so wildly in his arms that he nearly dropped her – she was still mostly tangled up in the cowl, and it was making it difficult for him to keep a steady grip on her.

More guards joined in at Phasma’s command as they headed for the bridge. While Hux was aware that coming within sight of them could put him at risk; he had seen Kylo move things with his mind enough times to know that if they wished to throw him down the gorge, there was nothing he could do to stop them. But Eira seemed more eager than enraged, and he chose to consider it a good sign. His heart ached, though, when they walked out through the front gates, and he saw the group of midnight-clad people standing there. He recognized all of the clan’s own Crows – Aya at the front, the others behind her, standing with six strange Crows, none of whom he had ever seen before. It was then that Eira found some strength he had not thought she still possessed, and she tore herself out of his grip, flying for all she was worth… not to Aya, but to the Crow standing just behind her – a frightening looking man, with extensive tattoos that made his face more resemble some demonic creature than a mortal man. She dove into his arms, cawing, and chattering for all she was worth, and to Hux’ surprise, a wide, gentle smile broke out across that devil-like face as
the man carefully gathered her close. Though Hux could not make out the words, the man’s voice was deep, yet oddly soft, and he held Eira as if she was a treasure – not seeming to care about anything but her.

Aya carefully took a few steps forward, then knelt before him – and Hux felt oddly bad about it. Crows did not kneel to anyone but their gods, it went against everything he had been raised to understand about the world – and yet here they were, with one of his highest-ranking Crows kneeling in the dirt and snow before him, obviously unsure of his intentions.

“My lord,” she greeted him, and he could hear the fatigue in her words. “We-... We come in peace. W-we wish no harm upon this clan, I swear it on my gods. We bring news and words, and we are not strong enough to be of any threat to you now. May we enter your castle?”

Not strong enough, she had said. Hux did not doubt it – they looked about ready to collapse where they stood, all of them. And the look in Aya’s eyes, so pained, so tired, and hopeless – it looked genuine enough. The most convincing argument for allowing them entry was, without a doubt, Eira’s reaction. She would not allow just anyone to hold her, something she had proven many times since she had first come here, but now she was besides herself with affection for that strange man. Hux looked to Phasma and Mitaka next to him, only to find them, too, completely awestruck by Eira’s display.

“What do you think?” he muttered to them. “I trust Eira more than I trust most of our soldiers, but I would lie if I said I wasn’t wary of the newcomers.”

“What would master Ren do in this situation?” Mitaka asked. “Would he allow them entry?”

“Master Ren trusted Eira more than anyone,” Phasma said, a hand on his shoulder. “If she is happy to see them, I’d say we have to trust her. She’s probably known these people for years – if anyone can tell us of their intentions, it’s her.”

Hux regarded the scene in front of him for a little longer – taking his time, getting a better look at the group of Crows. They certainly did not look too good. In fact, they looked more or less as if they had descended through the seven hells and then back up again to come here. A strange lot, they were – three of them Hux assumed to be women, and all three a greenish pale, looking as if they stayed upright only through sheer force of will. Then there was a man, or so Hux guessed, with blonde hair, ragged beard, and a look in his eyes that spoke of pain and rage and bitterness. The last one was the strangest one of all. Tiny compared to the rest, and Hux could not for the life of him figure out if it was a child or an adult, and he did not even attempt to conclude the gender. The small person clung to the blonde man’s robes, as if they would die if they let go – their face mostly hidden in the black fabric. Hux was not a Crow, had not even the slightest gift for sensing shifts in the Force, but even he could feel how bad a state they were all in. He had seen this look many times before, on the faces of his warriors, after battles where they had suffered great losses; this same feeling would hang in the air all around their camp at night, leaving them with fitful sleep and gloomy minds. Hells, Hux himself had been in this state more than once – despite Phasma’s necessary intervention, he still felt it, that dull, nagging ache that never let up, no matter what he did.

The Crows were grieving. There was no fight left in them, at least not for now.

“Mistress Aya,” he called across the bridge. “Bring your fellow Crows to the tower. I’ll have the servants prepare beds for you on the floors below Master Ren’s. You have Eira’s approval, and are welcome at Skye Castle.” He considered them for a moment. “I will speak to you tomorrow – for now, you should all try to rest.”
It almost hurt to see the relief and gratitude on their faces, and Hux realized that they had likely thought he would either send them away or have them killed. If Eira had not been so obviously ecstatic to see them, he knew himself well enough to know that that would most likely have been exactly what he would have done. As he turned to walk inside, he could see how parts of the Flock had left the towers and rooftops to come down and greet the midnight-clad ones. After so long without a single caw, the sound of them was almost deafening, and Hux realized how much he had missed it. Skye Castle just was not the same without the songs of the birds in the air around it.

~*~*~

In the royal city of D’Qar, the air was buzzing with the sound of activity. Everywhere one looked, there were soldiers. Some were being trained, some were taking care of preparations of various kinds, and some were simply loitering about while they waited to be assigned a regiment or a commander. The lines to the registration offices were long, and getting longer by the day as more and more people gathered in the city in heed of their Queen’s command. Some soldiers, especially the younger ones, sat in little groups, chatting animatedly about the prospects of fame and glory on the battlefield, while older and more experienced soldiers bickered amongst themselves about how miserable they would be, and who would inherit whose personal affects when they fell. There were the usual bloodthirsty ones – soldiers who never quite managed to live outside war – squabbling with the ones who would much rather never see another sword for as long as they lived. In the middle of it all were the ones who were much too young, frightened half out of their minds already, and the ones who were much too old, but whose presence had still been deemed necessary to fill out the ranks.

The only people left in the city when the marching order came, would be the sick, the pregnant ones, and the ones deemed too old and brittle to even be used as fodder for the catapults and ballistae. The city guard would be down to only the most necessary number, and all sailors had found themselves forcefully recruited to the navy. It would, in all, be more a ghost city than a teeming centre of politics, culture, and commerce. Queen Leia’s advisors had tried, for days and days, and with voices brimming with increasing levels of desperation, to convince her to wait until spring, or at least to leave behind larger forces than this. If she could just consider leaving a blockade of ships outside the harbour, then the Northerners would have a much harder time taking the city. They were used to marching and fighting in the cold, surely her majesty must know that, and the royal army of D’Qar was not. This was giving them the upper hand, surely, she must see that?

Queen Leia, however, remained adamant. She trusted in the God of Mornings, she said. She had prayed for victory and glory, and He had shown her good signs in her dreams. Much to her advisors’ dismay, she did not consider a winter war to be giving the Northerners the upper hand – as far as she was concerned, the victory over the North would be all the sweeter if they conquered them when they should logically have the advantage. She wanted the North to burn, she said. She wanted their gods and goddesses banished and forgotten. The God of Mornings was the true God, the only God, and she would bring his light with her to save the souls of the North – and kill all who refused. The Queen’s word was law, and the advisors soon found themselves assigned to regiments of their own, which left precious little time for them to further question her orders.

It would not be very long at all now, before they ready to march – all barracks inside the city were already full, and the fields surrounding its high was were rapidly filling up with row after row of large tents. In the harbour, and almost every single little wharf or bay up and down the coast within a league from the city, the armada was gathering – the ships undergoing the necessary repairs and preparations, and the new recruits learning the myriad rules and regulations for sailing on a military ship. Every seamstress and tailor in the area were kept busy from dawn to long after dusk, trying to equip the ever-growing army with proper uniforms. The blacksmiths were not much better
off; all orders had been cancelled while they focused all their time and energy on creating swords, spears, arrowheads, and all the other necessary items an army would need. The Queen herself inspected the progress on a weekly basis, and they were all nearly tripping over each other in their eagerness to show her how well things were coming along. Queen Leia was a harsh woman, and praise was hard to earn, so every last little quirk of her lips counted – the ones who received a kind word, or a smile, would be treated as if they were royals themselves until next inspection came around, and the competition began once more.

~*~*~

Rey had almost begun to doubt the day would ever come when they would set sail for D’Qar, but here they were now. The storm had raged on for a total of ten days – the Southerners had all been both impressed and quite frightened by it – but it had finally died down the day before, and this morning at breakfast, Lady Hux had informed them that they were to set sail that afternoon. It had been so sudden, but Lady Hux had simply shrugged and said that there was a captain – a Southerner, even – who was heading for D’Qar anyway, and who had already been delayed due to the storm. She would take them with her, but only if they were ready to go that afternoon. Han had agreed, and they had all had to hurry to pack their things, and take one final look at what they could see of the great North, before they began their descent to the harbour.

The little twins, whom Rey had learned were actually lord Hux’ children, had been very upset to see her go. They had, apparently, taken quite a liking to her – even though they found her rather strange – and Rey could not help but feel endeared to them as well. They were such a pair, those two; rambunctious, bordering on the feral, all temper and laughter and an awe-inspiring love of life – yet at the same time oddly sweet, gentle with animals and children smaller than themselves, with shyness overcoming them at the strangest times, and a never-ending stream of curious questions about everything and anything. She had seen them train one morning, though, and she knew better than to think them innocent and defenceless. On the contrary, they were already far more adept with their daggers and their bows than Rey was with her own weapons. It made sense, she supposed. The North was a harsh land, inhabited by a harsh people, and it made sense that one would wish to make sure even the little ones could defend themselves. Especially if one’s father was the lord of the land. If there was anything Rey knew about them, it was that lord Hux was their greatest hero. Apparently, he had sent some gifts with Lady Mai, and the twins were beaming with pride when they showed her their new daggers, with sheaths decorated with the Hux clan symbol, and little oak leaves.

The slightly more temperamental one, Mára, had explained that the oak leaves were for their mother – who had loved oaks, and had even worn a crown of those leaves when she married their father. Rey, who had initially found lord Hux to be the single most frightening man she had ever met, found herself seeing him in much kinder light. It was obvious that he loved his children very much, and though the twins had explained – in a very unsentimental way – that they had been good friends but not ‘love-loved’ each other, lord Hux still made certain his children would not be without things to remember her by. They had heard of the new Crow, and they had been besides themselves with curiosity when Rey had accidentally let it slip that he was her brother. They were so eager to meet him, it warmed her heart to see. Cáelin, the slightly calmer one, told her that they couldn’t wait for Master Ren to come to Whitehaven, so they could hug him and thank him for making sure their father was not lonely anymore.

Out of all the things in the North, Rey found herself thinking that she would miss those two the most. It pained her to know, though, that many horrid things happened during times of war, and that there was currently no guarantee that even their father would survive it.

Now, they were stepping onboard a Corellian ship – Han and Chewie both breathing a sigh of relief
at the familiar shapes and curves of the vessel – the captain having shooed them up the gangplank, muttering about them missing the tide if they did not hurry. Poe and Finn looked somewhat resigned, and Rey knew why. Both of them had done a short time in the navy – that had been how they first met – and neither of them had been very eager to ever set foot aboard a ship again. Poe especially looked a little greenish, hiding his face in the crook of his husband’s neck, while Finn patted his head and rolled his eyes. Rey herself had never been to sea; Leia had always deemed it much too dangerous, and the closest Rey had ever come was the occasional visit onboard a ship that was safely docked in the harbour – visits that were usually very official, and with guards and servants all around her to make sure she would not fall in the water, or somehow manage to hurt herself. Despite the gravity of the situation, Rey was rather excited to finally be able to experience for herself all the wonders that her father always spoke about when he told her stories of his many journeys at sea.

She found a spot at the fore of the ship, her heavy cloak wrapped tightly around her, and as the ship finally began making its way out past the breakwaters, Rey felt a thrill run through her. Soon, all she could see was the great, dark sea, and the way it caressed the afternoon sky where they met at the sharp line of the horizon. She had never felt quite so free.

~*~*~

Ten days and night now, since Gaius had come upon his brother’s body. Ten days and ten nights of his lonely vigil here in the Hall of Visions, listening to the sounds of the last Crows leaving, and then of the wild beasts of the area, haunting the hallways and darkened rooms. He would be quite content if he never had to hear the sounds of his former siblings being eaten by whatever creatures lurked outside the doors. There had been a few times when there had been sounds from large paws and sharp claws against the doors, and Gaius had prepared himself to fight – the predators up here were giants, even to Gaius, and he knew the damage even one claw from a bear or dire wolf could do.

He counted himself lucky that he was used to fasting, and that he could make his provisions last for a long time before he would have to venture out in search of more. But he was tired, and lonely, and more frightened than he would admit even to himself. Being cut off from his siblings like this was strange, and very discomfiting. Not having their presences in his mind felt wrong, as if a void had opened itself up in his soul, and he had nothing to fill it with. But he did not regret his decision to turn back, even for a moment.

The Goddess had told him she had plans for him, and he trusted her the way any child would trust the mother who had never led them astray. He was not entirely certain what he had thought would happen, but he had expected something a tad more… dramatic. Instead, he felt a slight shift in the swirls of the Force in the halls – only just enough to bring him out of his gloomy thoughts – and when his gaze scanned the room, he gasped, and scrambled to his feet. The Force barrier was gone! It had disappeared, just like that, between one breath and the next, and he could hardly believe what he saw. Kylo moved slightly, and Gaius almost tripped over himself trying to get to his side as fast as he could. He was breathing, a frown showing on his face. He was a live. Kylo was alive, and there was nothing Gaius could do to stop his tears from falling. A miracle! It was a miracle!

The knife that had been embedded in his chest now lay on the stone floor next to him, the only trace that it had ever been near Kylo was a scar – even the horrid gashes on his back and thighs were scabbed over, some of them in a state of healing they should not have reached in ten days. Only one source of worry remained; Kylo’s eyes. They were still closed, the lids flat in a way that suggested there were no eyes underneath them, and there was still blood and something else cakes around the area. A whimper escaped Kylo, and it snapped Gaius out of his stunned staring enough to pull his own cloak off and gently wrap it around him.
“It’s alright, brother,” he whispered softly. “I’m here. I’m here with you, and I will take care of you, I promise.”

“G-Gaius…” Kylo managed, but it seemed to take more strength than he could really spare only to speak his name, and Gaius placed a finger across his lips.

“Yes, I’m here,” he soothed. “Don’t try to speak yet, brother. You’re much too weak.” He looked around, as if to assure himself that they were still alone. “I have your clothes here, and some food. Just let me help you get dressed, and we can leave. There’s no one left, only us and the birds.”

Kylo gave a small nod, allowing himself to be cradled to Gaius’ chest for a little before Gaius carried him over to where his clothes were. He had already begun to shiver in the cold, and he was far too tired and worn to feel bad about having to be dressed as if he was a toddler, by his own older brother. Gaius had seen him in bad states before, as Kylo had with him. A body was only a body, he reminded himself. His body was his tool – it was not him. If those vile people who tortured him had not succeeded in getting to him, then there was no reason for why he should feel ashamed now. He only wished he could have been of more help, but moving his limbs took strength he simply did not have, and half-way through, a new wave of those indescribable pains washed over him – making him cry out, all of his muscles stiffening, his joints locking as what felt like ice and fire and lightning and the weight of the ocean all at once had its way with him.

Gaius could do little else but hold Kylo tight and stare in horrified fascination as he went rigid, mouth locked in a pained wail, and things – candelabras, benches, and all sorts of other items – flew in all directions across the room. It came in waves, he realized; Kylo would go as stiff as a board, screaming in pain, and then objects would begin to fly – the air crackling as if before an oncoming thunderstorm – and then it would subside once more, leaving Kylo panting and exhausted. Dressing him must have taken hours, and Gaius already dreaded the journey from here. He could only hope that Askr was still somewhere near, and that he would heed Gaius’ call, because Kylo could not walk, and Gaius would not be able to defend them both if he was carrying Kylo on his back.

But all of that was currently a question for later. For the moment, he had to focus on getting Kylo to drink water, and have a bite or two of the provisions they had. There were a few apples that had not yet gone bad, a bag of nuts, and a cheese. The bread had gotten mouldy a day or so before, and the bags of turnips and oats would have to wait until they were on the way. They would be much too heavy for Kylo’s stomach at this point. Gaius would be lucky if he could get him to have an entire apple, and some very diluted tea. It was a frustratingly slow process, Kylo was in such pain, and so tired, that everything took so much longer – but Gaius forced himself to let go of his frustrations. It would not help either of them, and besides, he had just gotten his brother back. He would not have to travel down South to present lord Hux with his brother’s body, would not have to bury him, would not have to say good bye. Kylo, weak as he was, was alive.

It was the greatest blessing in Gaius’ entire life.

Kylo was alive.

Nothing else mattered in the face of this fact.

~*-~*-~

It seemed strange to Hux, that he had ever thought the group of Crows a threat. They were all so completely worn out, they had barely made it inside the castle – staggering, clinging to each other for support, not even caring about the fact that their weapons went with the horses into the stables. Mitaka had sent for towels and clean clothes, and had – with a gentleness he usually reserved for
skittish animals – shown them the way down to the baths, and then immediately sent further sharp orders to the servants to ensure that there would be both beds and a proper, warm, meal waiting for them on the floor below Master Ren’s. The gratitude in the Crows’ eyes was strong enough that it almost made Hux’ stomach turn. He was not used to seeing the sacred ones in such a state, and it felt all sorts of wrong.

Leaving them to their baths, Hux went back inside the Great Hall, to hear the final reports on the preparations for the campaign. He would need to send word to his chieftains to inform them that their Crows had returned and were being taken care of, but first he needed to know the state of his armies. The previous year had been a good one, and he had gathered three more clans under his banner – and though they all seemed very pleased with their new leadership, he knew that his armies were used to a slightly different training and discipline than most others, and it would need to be monitored for now. To his immense relief and pride, all reports were in order, and everything was either right on schedule or – in some cases – slightly ahead, and after a short discussion with Phasma and Mitaka, he sent the order out. The Hux clan’s armies would gather in one month’s time at the south end of the Starkiller vale. The navy would gather at Whitehaven, and there would be no excuses for tardiness or non-compliance. There would be no mid-winter festival this year, no big feasts, or happy games in the snow.

The drums were sounding.

The time for war had come.

Chapter End Notes

Hiya. Sorry again for slow update. I feel like this is pretty much the pace the fic will keep until it's done now. As usual, real life is being a little bit all over the place, and I also had to do a thorough re-read of the chapters published, and do some adjustments to the plot and general pacing of the fic.

So..... yeah. Kylo did an Oden. That's the way magic works around here - if you want something, there is always a price to be paid. All you can do is decide whether or not it's worth it. There are no take-backs.

Poor Crows being so tired!

Can I just say that I adore the Hux twins? Because I adore the Hux twins. And they adore their Dad.

And Leia... Well, sounds an awful lot like we've got a C R U S A D E happening. Scary stuff. Save the souls of the North? Leia, take a chill pill. They don't need saving.

Anyway, we'll be looking at longer chapters until the fic is finished - which I hope you won't mind too much. And, as always, I love you all for reading and commenting! If you have any questions, thoughts, or just a need to yell at me a bit, I'm as always available on Tumblr. Anon asks are currently disabled, but private messages work just fine too!
I hope you enjoyed your reading, and I'll see you next update!
It had been a frustrating, heart-wrenchingly slow process to prepare Kylo for the journey, and then another, just as slow process to make their way out of the House of Night – Gaius having to stop and listen at every corner to ensure he had not missed the presence of anyone else. With Kylo held close to his chest, bundled up in double layers of his own winter robes, then both his own beautiful cloak and one of Erris’ left behind ones, he had carefully navigated through the dark, cold hallways, avoiding stepping on the remains of the dead Crows that still littered the buildings as much as he could. Of course their corpses were still here; the only ones to come here besides the Crows were the wild animals, and it was evident that they had taken their fill when it had been offered. It was a sight Gaius would be very grateful if he could forget.

Having to leave Kylo in the stable, while he headed outside the walls to call for Askr, was one of the most difficult moments of Gaius’ life, but he had no other choice. He had to do it, in hope that the foul-tempered animal would still come when called by someone other than Kylo. The remaining birds had circled above his head, diving in low, twisting and turning, cawing in the air above him. They were torn, Gaius had realized, between remaining at the House and leaving with the two Crows. Their discomfort and fear was heavy in the air around them, making the Force swirls sharp and discordant.

It had taken several hours of reaching out, searching, and coaxing, before Askr allowed himself to be convinced, and Gaius had never been so happy to see the giant horse as he was when Askr appeared from the darkness – trotting past Gaius at a good distance, and heading right for the stable. Then came more waiting, as Askr and Kylo re-established their bond, which allowed Gaius some extra time to go back to their tower and bring another few bags of clothing and items they would need. Kylo’s undernourished body together with some saddle-bags was hardly a burden to Askr, who questioned Gaius’ choice to carry some of the bags on his own back.

They had been on their way for several hours now, Gaius jogging alongside Askr so that they could move at least somewhat quicker than they would have if the Crow had simply walked. Above them, a few dozen of the birds accompanied them. The rest had scattered, shaking both Gaius and Kylo to their cores. There was no longer a Mother Flock at the House - it had truly been abandoned. Kylo could barely sit up, and instead more or less hung like a ragdoll over Askr’s wither, holding on with whatever little strength he possessed, but his loyal horse moved carefully, even at speed, and seemed adamant about keeping his rider on his back. It was a small blessing, that they had been the last ones to leave the House; the road remained open enough for them to travel on it due to all the other Crows having left the same way before them, and they were in little danger now of meeting anyone – there was only them, the wild animals, and the deep dark night.

~*~*~

It was well past dawn when Hux, accompanied by Mitaka and a group of servants, knocked on the door to the second floor of the Crows’ Tower. The Crows had spent a few hours down in the baths the previous evening, no doubt undergoing some sort of ritual cleansing, and then immediately disappeared up the stairs to the floor assigned to them. When Hux went to bed sometime after midnight, there hadn’t been a sound coming from their new quarters. They must have been absolutely exhausted, and he could fully understand it. Though far from the same, he knew the way exhaustion could set in one’s bones, take root like a greedy sapling and drain one of strength
faster than it could be replenished – war had taught him that better than he liked to think about, especially after those battles where the losses were heavy, and many a familiar face was left lying in the mud and blood on the battlefield for the birds and wolves to pick clean. If Hux had no trouble sleeping for a full day and night after such events, then the Crows most certainly would not.

If he was perfectly honest with himself, they had probably slept better than he had. The sight of them, that tired, hopeless, pained look in their eyes; it haunted him well into the small hours, his sleep fitful and broken, a heavy feeling in his gut. In the end, he had been up at dawn for the first time in weeks, and had taken his breakfast in the great hall in order to minimize the disturbance for the poor Crows resting on the floor below his. The last thing they needed was a lesser army of servants and guards running up and down the stairs outside their door. As soon as Mitaka had joined him, Hux had arranged for more wood to be delivered to the Crows’ rooms, so they could regain a healthier temperature – they had looked frozen to their cores – as well as a warm and filling broth with vegetables and small bits of the goose left over from last night’s dinner. He felt confident in his choice; Kylo usually asked for this very dish after he had been fasting or feeling unwell. He sent for some extra bread, apples, and plenty of tea – reminding the servants that there was a dozen of them up there, and that he would not be pleased if there was not enough to go around.

It took a good while before there was even a sound of movement, but just as Hux prepared to knock again, the door opened – revealing one of the female Crows, the one with the golden-brown skin and pale hair. She looked somewhat more alive now than she had the day before, but there was no mistaking the exhaustion still clinging to her frame. She looked between him and the servants, a widening of her eyes as she swallowed hard.

“D-did we oversleep?” she asked, a note of distress in her voice. “I am so sorry, lord Hux, we didn’t mean to insult you in any way!”

“No, no!” Hux hurried to reassure her. “You can rest for as long as you need to. It’s clear as day that you all sorely need it. However, it’s almost noon, and I felt that it was high time to bring you something to eat, and some new wood for the fireplace.” He gestured to the servants. “If you’ll allow the servants to come in, they can leave the food by the fire to keep it warm if you don’t feel you can manage it right away. I will be in the great hall if you need me. Eira knows the way there, she can show you - or I’ll gladly come back up here if that will be easier on you.”

The Crow looked at him for a moment, puzzled. Then another Crow appeared behind her, the tiny pale one. They yawned widely, blinking owlishly up at Hux as they rubbed at their eyes with the sleeve of a tunic Hux realized was much too large for them.

“Nah, you can come in and sit with us now,” they said. “We’re awake, and Eira says she wants you to feed her.”

“Avi,” the first Crow said. “You address him as ‘Lord Hux’ or ‘my lord’ – he’s the war chief! He’s royalty!” She turned to Hux. “I’m so sorry, lord Hux, they’ve never been very good at proper etiquette.”

The small Crow, Avi, shrugged, and Hux found himself giving a little chuckle.

“I find it rather refreshing,” he said. “Titles weigh on you, some more than others. And I can use a reminder sometimes that I, too, am just a man. Now, if Eira demands that I feed her breakfast, then who am I to deny her?”

He gestured for the servants to enter the room, and followed close behind them – only to find himself faced with a most unexpectedly domestic sight. The Crows were indeed all awake, sitting
on their bunks – a few of them wrapped in blankets still – making good use of the brushes and combs lent to them, and braiding each other’s hair into more manageable styles than the tangled messes they had had upon arrival. All the bunks had been moved as close as possible to the two large fireplaces in the room, and put close enough together that they more resembled one giant bed, or, perhaps, a nest. While Hux had ensured that the clothes given to the Crows would be as dark as possible, it was still strange to see them dressed in something other than long, flowing robes. But, he thought, they would have their own clothes back as soon as they had been washed, and at the moment, all that mattered was comfort. Soft clothing and a warm room might seem trivial details, but he knew from experience that they could go a long way.

On the bunk closest to the fireplace at the far end of the room, Aya was having her arm tended to by that strange, tattooed man. Though surely painful, she held it together admirably as the man wrapped it, and helped secure it against her chest so she would not move it around too much. Eira had been made comfortable on the window sill, in a nest of blankets, and she gave an excited flap of her wings, chirping animatedly as he approached. Feeling the eyes of the gathered Crows on him as he came up to her and caressed her little head, Hux felt the pressure, the responsibility resting on his shoulders. He could not recall a time in history, at least not that he had read or heard about, when so many Crows had been at a warchief’s court at the same time. To make it worse, these were no ordinary Crows either. He might not be able to sense the Force like they could, but he did not need to in order to feel the power radiating off of the newcomers. Picking Eira up and cradling her to his chest, he sat down on the bench just below the window, and looked at his strange new guests.

“I believe introductions are in order,” he said. “While custom normally dictates that I learn your names before you enter the castle, none of you seemed to be in any shape for such lengthy procedures – I hope you can excuse me for that, but it seemed far more important that you get proper rest as soon as possible.”

“We are very grateful, lord Hux,” the tattooed man said, with a smile that was surprisingly soft in such a frightening face. “It is our belief that while protocol can be important, there are situations where it is little more than a bother.” He looked around the room, seeming to communicate with his peers. Looking back at Hux, he gave a respectful nod of his head. “I am Maul,” he said, “and I was the one to train Kylo Ren, and though our rules speak against it, I consider him my son.” Hux swallowed hard at the mention of Kylo’s name, and Maul reached out a gloved hand to rest on his shoulder. The simple gesture helped more than he expected.

“The Crow who met you at the door,” Maul continued, “is Chava Ren. The pale one to join her is Avi Ren.” Hux looked over at them, nodding in respect. Maul pointed to the tall blonde man, who was just pulling Avi down on the bunk in front of him to brush their hair. “That’s Erris Ren,” Maul said, “and the blonde woman on the bunk next to him is Vilya Ren. They’re twins. Lastly, we have Silass Ren.” He gestured to a regal looking Crow with beautiful black hair, which she was currently braiding. She looked up at the mention of her name, and gave a small nod. “She is the second in command of the Knights of Ren, and is to be treated accordingly, but for the moment I’m the one in charge, since I am the senior Crow according to our rules. There is one more Knight, Gaius, but he will join us later.”

Hux bowed his head in respect.

“You are all most welcome at Skye Castle,” he said, “and I speak for all my clan when I say that your presence here is to us a great honour, and a great comfort in these dark times. I promise that I will do all I can to ensure that you are all comfortable here, and that you are provided with everything you need, whatever that may be.”
“You are most kind, lord Hux,” Maul smiled. “We are immensely thankful to be allowed within your home, and we will gladly provide our services, such as they are, as a token of our gratitude.” He tilted his head in a curious gesture Hux recognized all too well. “Do forgive me, my lord, but I must ask - is there a war brewing here? I hear the sounds of soldiers, and weapons, and the Force feels restless, fractured.”

“We’re marching for the South,” Hux confirmed. “The campaign has been planned for a long time, and though we weren’t supposed to march until spring, we have, due to certain events, been forced to move out earlier. It’s hardly a problem for my armies - they are used to marching and fighting in all manner of weathers - and we will need that advantage.”

A servant handed him a bowl of broth, and a small tray of meat and seeds for Eira, and he thanked her, signing for the servants to leave them alone once they had finished serving the Crows their breakfast. Mistress Silass took a cautious sip of the broth, sighing in what Hux hoped was contentment, before looking at him. She had a remarkably piercing gaze, he noticed, and even he struggled to meet it for longer than a moment.

“Our brother didn’t mention a campaign,” she said. “Do you mind if I ask why a Northern warchief would wish to bring war upon the South?”

“When Kylo left we were still planning it for spring,” Hux shrugged. “Perhaps he didn’t think it was much to mention at that stage?” He sighed. The mere mention of Kylo still felt like a stab to the heart, and he knew they could all feel the change in his… what was it Kylo called it? Force presence? Yes, that was it. “We have since had reason to speed things up. While I have been wanting to put the South under the heels of the Northern clans for many years, certain events have taken place that has changed it from wish to obligation. I hope to take as much of the Southern kingdoms as I can, even if it takes years, but it is of the utmost importance to me that the kingdom of D’Qar is razed to the ground and erased from history as soon as possible.”

“D’Qar,” master Erris said, concerned. “That’s where brother Kylo was born. Would it be correct to assume you’re doing this for reasons connected to him?” He bit his lip, a sorrowful look creeping up over his features. “We- Have you- You do know that-”

Hux understood what he was trying to say, and made a little gesture of reassurance.

“I know,” he said, taking a deep breath and focusing on feeding Eira a particularly juicy looking bit of goose. “I know that he- that he passed. I felt it.” He gave a sad smile. “… I didn’t know it was possible to feel such pain, but I did. And now…” He sighed. “Now all I can do is avenge him. I don’t know if he ever shared this with you, but the queen of D’Qar is guilty of having committed some very serious crimes against him. Here, harming a Crow - whether in the past or present - comes with a death sentence. Crows are sacred, and those who harm them must die. So, if I can’t have my Kylo back by my side, then at least I can serve my Gods by upholding their laws. The South will burn, and it will burn for him.”

~*~*~

In the end, Hux stayed with the Crows for most of the day. It was a comfort, to all of them, to be in each other’s presence, and they spent their time discussing all manner of subjects - from life in the Hux clan, to the oncoming war, to the Crows’ tattoos, and the various complex aspects of Crow life. Eira hopped from person to person, and seemed happier than Hux had seen her since before Kylo had left. It was good for her little heart, it seemed, to have them all gathered in one room like this. Phasma and Mitaka joined them for a little - Phasma immediately winning the approval of Chava Ren, and Mitaka found himself under the intense, yet fascinated study of Avi Ren.
They could, of course, not avoid the subject of all that had transpired at the House of Night, and the Crows shared as much of the details as they knew - Hux, Phasma and Mitaka growing steadily more horrified as they explained the Raven’s plans, Kylo’s choice, and the subsequent massacre and mass flight. While they had all understood that whatever had been happening had been bad, none of them had ever thought it could reach such abysmal levels. While Hux felt some satisfaction at having been right in his suspicions that the Crows had turned against the North, he mostly felt worry, anger, even fear at the thought of what this could mean for all of them.

Eventually, the Crows’ fatigue caught up with them, and after a warm meal, Hux left them to their rest. Half of them were asleep before he was even out of the room, and he ached at the sight of them like this. He had been raised a devout follower of the old Gods, had learned all the old stories and legends about the Crows, the children of the Gods, and their strange and immense power, their mysterious practices, their resilience. To see them so... human, was incredibly disturbing. Even Tarkin, at the end of his long life, had still had that air of power and strength, despite him looking like he might lift from the ground if too strong a wind caught him. Kylo too, in his most broken moments, had radiated something so raw and primal that the word ‘power’ felt sorely lacking.

He tried not to think about how harrowing the experiences must have been for them, if they could be reduced to this.

~*~*~

The Goddess had certainly not lied when she had told him his new powers would come at the price of a world of pain. He was never free of it; it was in every fiber of him, every muscle, every joint, every last little mark on his skin - a sharp, burning sensation, sometimes red-hot, sometimes ice-cold. His head hurt worse than anything he had ever felt - the pain came in waves, that rendered him incapable of even screaming, causing him to throw up from the sheer strength of it, and in between left a horrid, dull and pounding ache somewhere behind his forehead. His eye sockets, despite no longer containing any eyes, felt as if they were full of sharp pieces of glass one moment, and then frighteningly numb in the next. But all of that he could handle. It was excruciating, but he could bear it - after all, he was trained to do just that. Pain was nothing more than a bully, and Kylo knew how to win against it.

But the there were those attacks, for lack of a better word, when his entire body seized up, and he lost all control of the Force. He could feel it unleash, shoot out from his body in all directions, but since he had no eyes, he did not know what the results were. He had never manifested the Force to this level in his entire life - even in the beginning, when he was a child, before he had begun to learn control, he had never been near this level. He could hear things around him being thrown about, could hear Gaius’ surprised curses as he hurried to pull Kylo close and hold him through it, but he did not know, and he hated it. He needed to know that he was not causing too much destruction, but from the power he felt swirling around in him, restlessly slithering like giant snakes under his skin and in his gut, he knew it had to be quite bad. A lesser man might have felt thrilled to have this much power, but all Kylo could feel was fear, and awe in equal amounts.

There were going at a good speed, Askr had told him, but they could go faster if only Gaius would stop being stubborn and actually sit up as well. It had been night once already, and they had made a short stop to eat and rest for a few hours, before getting up and continuing their journey. Gaius had wanted to allow Kylo a proper, full night’s rest, but Kylo was not having it. He needed to be with Hux, with his Braith. It was a need that was becoming more pressing by the day - and not solely for his own, personal reasons, but because he could not shake the feeling of urgency, of dread, of darkness and blood and battle. Something was about to happen, and Kylo knew he needed to be there when it did.
Now, night was coming once again, Kylo could feel it in the air around him, the way it became more crisp, more biting against his face and in his lungs. He was learning quickly how to make up for his loss of eye-sight. He knew he had no other choice - blindness did not excuse anyone from their service to the Gods, not even Kylo Ren. He had to learn other ways of seeing.

“Night’s falling,” Gaius commented, glancing up at his brother. “Do you want to stop and rest? Kylo, Askr?”

“No,” Kylo managed, adjusting his hold around Askr’s broad neck. “We must keep going. We don’t have much time.”

“I can keep going for hours yet,” Askr said, with a toss of his head. “If your dumb legs are tired already, you can climb up, and I will get us all there.”

“My legs have kept pace with you this whole time, you beast,” Gaius retorted, fondly. “Well then - looks like we’ll keep going for a little while longer.” He looked at Kylo. “But we will be stopping in a few hours no matter what you say. Me and Askr may not need the rest, but you do. Your last attack was really bad, Kylo. You need to sleep for a little, get some food in you.”

“I promise you, I’m fi- ah!”

The pain struck again, the Force exploding out of him, wave after wave, every joint freezing, every muscle seizing - he would have fallen off Askr’s back if Gaius had not been so quick to catch him. This was going to be a long journey.

~*~*~

“Your Majesty,” a voice came from the other side of Leia’s desk. She looked up from the pile of papers currently awaiting her signature to find one of the senior servants standing there, nervousness like a little cloud around him. “You have a visitor.”

“Is that so?” she replied, an eyebrow raised, as she leaned back in her chair. It was much darker in the room than last time she looked, and there was an awful stiffness in her back that made her frown slightly. Oh well, there was little to be done - war always involved more paperwork than people tended to expect, and though she was still in good shape she was far from young. Across from her, the servant kept his gaze on the floor, waiting patiently for his queen to speak. The servants had all gotten rather skittish since they got their marching orders, but Leia had little sympathy. If she went to war, so did they. Working in the royal palace was no excuse to stay behind. “Who is it? Go on, spit it out. I don’t have all night.”

“Your brother. He said it was very urgent.” The servant hesitated. “Should I send him in, or ask him to come back another time?”

Leia sighed. There really was no point in sending Luke away when he wanted to speak to her. A holy man he may be, but still not above using the Force to get her attention if he decided it was important - even if it was somewhat against the rules. She preferred having her mind to herself, and the only way to keep it that way was to let him in. Already she had an inkling of what this may be about, and there was little use delaying it.

“Send him in,” she said. “Then leave us alone - my brother is a private person. Having people around when we talk unnerves him. You are all excused for the night.”

The servant bowed, and hurried towards the door to her private quarters. As soon as she was alone, Leia stood from her chair to stretch her tired body. Days like this she missed Han more than usual.
He had always been good at finding the knots and tensions, working out the cricks she still got in her neck sometimes. The palace healers had simply never quite mastered the techniques, and Leia would not let just anyone near her neck. One did not rule for as long as she had by being a fool.

Luke’s steps were silent on the thick carpets that covered the floor, but she did not need to hear them to know when he entered the room. She was not sure she even needed the Force to know it; they were twins, after all, but they had never quite learned to tell what was their bond, and what was the Force. She supposed they would never really know, but it mattered little. Luke was the one to choose the path of the Force, not her. She had precious little interest in such things, much to Luke’s eternal dismay. But she hardly needed the Force to know how agitated he was as he approached her where she stood by one of the large windows. It seemed to be his usual state of mind these days, ever since he had learned about the war. Luke, being a true and obedient Dove, hated violence of all kinds, and it had taken many years for them to fully reconcile after that whole debacle with Ben. She loved her brother dearly, but he was the farthest thing from ruler material - he lacked the necessary ruthlessness.

“Leia,” he greeted as he came to stand next to her. “I know you already know why I’m here.”

“You’re about to launch into another one of your anti-war sermons, aren’t you?” she snorted. “If you are, you can save it for those who attend your services.”

“I’m not going to have anyone left to give sermons to if you drag them all away on this foolish quest of yours!” Luke retorted. “Leia, you must understand; we’ve been praying, meditating, begging for a sign for weeks and weeks now. Just the smallest sign that what you are about to do is truly His will - but Leia, there are none! This is not our God’s will! This is foolishness!”

“You say that as if you are the only ones who can have visions,” Leia shot back, heading over to her desk again, and leaving her brother stranded by the window. “I know what I saw in that dream. I will march, and I will win, and the North will bow to me.”

Luke stared at her, as if she was some phantom entity that had replaced the sister he had grown up with, as if her words had been hissed by demonic tongues rather than in their shared language, as if what she spoke was blubbering madness, and not blessed vision. Then he seemed to sag, becoming older even as she watched - tired, worn, thin as parchment, and twice as brittle. He had aged this year, and had she not been so busy planning her last, great march, she would have worried for him. Luke had always been too soft for the world, too soft for all the darkness, all the filth - it was evident in how he had even, somehow, forgiven her bastard son for his unspeakable deeds. How he found that forgiveness in his heart she would never know. She certainly never did.

“I once had a sister,” he said, voice hollow, drained, bitter. “Of her, there is nothing left. I see now that power has corrupted her, turned her into this… this creature that bears my sister’s face but none of her heart. Your vision was false, if you even had one.” His face turned stern, nothing left of the gentleness he usually displayed around her. “You want war because you want blood, and carnage, and power. Cheap, worldly things. You are greedy, and you are blind to the suffering of other so long as you get what you want. But then again, I shouldn’t be surprised. You are the woman who ordered your own child executed, and could not even spare him a tear as they led him to the scaffold. Our mother would be appalled if she saw what you have become.” He looked at her with was perhaps the closest to contempt she had ever seen in his eyes. “The daughter of Queen Breha, the great promise - and she turned into a greedy, power hungry, murderer.”

“They have Rey,” Leia heard herself hiss. She did not usually waste her breath defending herself; she did not have to - as queen, the world was as she said it was. “You may think me a monster, brother, but I would like to remind you that your niece is somewhere up north in this very moment -
most likely in the grimy hands of one of their warchiefs. Do you really think they will just let her go if they realize who she is? Do you really think they won’t subject her to all manners of unspeakable things, just to spite me?” She sunk into her chair, eyes fixed on her brother. “I am not so much monster that I would not tear the world to shreds to take my heir back.”

Luke looked at her for a long time, his usually so expressive face revealed nothing his thoughts. Then he sighed deeply, his mouth curling in disgust.

“You ordered your own flesh and blood executed. You had him hunted down like an animal. When you found out he was alive, you chose to send his own father to make a third attempt at his life.” He shook his head and pulled his robes tighter around him as he moved towards the doors. “Forgive me if I doubt your words.” Just before he put his hand on the large brass handle, he shot her one last look. There was something about it, something final, that Leia refused to acknowledge in that moment. “By all means, your Majesty - go to war. March up north, and hope for the best. But do so knowing the Doves are not behind you, that whatever has spoke to you in your dream is not your God, and that I will not be marching with you. I will not take part in this madness.”

Leia remained in her seat for what felt like hours after he had left - the candles having shrunk almost to nothing when she finally retreated to her bedrooms. Not having Luke by her side when she marched was quite a blow - her brother was not only one of the highest ranking Doves in D’Qar, but the royal advisor as well. Not having him there during the war would not look good in the eyes of her people, and now she had to think of some way to turn this back into an advantage. There were many Doves she could use as advisors instead, but she had to think quickly to come up with a good reason for leaving Luke behind - something that would not allow room for rumours and gossip. No one must know there had been a disagreement, it would be far too damaging. The royal house must be a united front at all times.

When sleep finally enveloped her, Leia was no closer to a solution than she had been when Luke left her study.

~*~*~

On the Crows’ second morning at Skye Castle, Hux had not even sent them breakfast before master Maul appeared in the Great Hall, Eira on his shoulder, and asked to speak to the warchief. He looked somewhat more alive than the previous day, but with all the tattoos, it was rather hard to tell for certain. His golden eyes seemed more alert, and he carried himself differently, so Hux had to assume this meant he felt better. Granting the Crow’s very humble request to talk while walking, Hux ordered a servant to fetch his cloak, and they headed for the doors. He noticed that most of his hounds followed them outside as well - all of them tripping over one another to gain Maul’s attention.

“They’re beautiful creatures, your hounds,” Maul chuckled as one of them put his front paws on his shoulders and licked him across the face. “I cannot wait until they meet Erris.” He smiled widely. “Though I imagine that we won’t be seeing him or the hounds for a day or two once that happens. Animals have a habit of adopting him that we have long since given up attempting to interfere with. Kylo is much the same, as I’m sure you will have noticed.”

Hux nodded.

“Yes,” he smiled, even though it hurt. “From the moment he came here, I don’t think there was an animal in the castle that wasn’t trying to adopt him. Some nights, we had so many hounds in the room with us we could barely fit. The cats would bring him things, and for some reason four different ones had their litters in his bed. It was… quite extraordinary.”
Maul nodded sagely.

“I’m familiar with the phenomenon,” he said. Then he sighed, looking at Hux quizzically. “He loves you more than anything in this wide world,” he said. “He was very nervous about coming here, frightened even. With so much darkness, so much distrust in him, he was terrified of the thought of being bonded for life to a warchief who didn’t care for him. But I think you loved him from the moment you saw him. Am I right?”

“I did.” Hux saw no reason to deny it - he had fallen for Kylo in a way he had never imagined possible. “He was... he is everything to me.” He pulled the cloak tighter around him, as if the thick wool could provide an armour against the pain. “You don’t speak of him in past tense,” he pointed out.

Maul gave a sad smile.

“He is my son,” he said simply. “Not in blood, but in all the ways that counts. I have to confess that I... struggle with accepting his passing. No, not struggling. I refuse to accept it.” A little magpie landed on his head, and he gently picked it up and let it sit in the folds of his cowl instead. “Kylo is... How do I explain this? He is more a living swirl of the Force clad in skin than he is a man with an ability to channel it. It comes to him so naturally, on such a primal level that I cannot make myself believe, even for a second, that the Great Mother would take him home in such a mundane way. At such a young age, too.” He gave a rueful smile. “Perhaps I’m merely a grieving father, but every fiber of my being rebels against the mere thought of him gone. I cannot accept it, and I will not accept it until I have his body here in front of me. Kylo is the master of the Knights of Ren - only the Raven truly outranks him - he should not have been killed this easily. It goes against everything we believe, and everything we have seen.”

Hux nodded, resting his elbows on the parapet, looking out at the vale. The day was cold, but bright and sunny, and the vale had always looked quite spectacular in this weather. It offered little comfort, though, as all he could think of was how much he wished Kylo had been here to see it, how his beloved would have loved the view, how he would have smiled at the sight.

“Take it from a man who lost a child before it had even been cut from it’s mother’s cord; I refused to believe it until I held his body in my arms. I had to feel for myself that there was no life there.” It had been well over twelve years since the day his first wife and firstborn son had passed within hours of each other, but - as always when he thought about it - he found that the pain had not lessened much. He took a risk and put a hand on Maul’s shoulder in a gesture of support. “Fatherhood, I think, isn’t something that we have a choice in. If the Gods want us to be fathers, they will give us a child - it matters little how that child enters our lives. When we find them, we know.” He sighed, taking his hand back to run it through his hair. “I’ll admit that I can’t really accept it either. He is my life, my world, I can’t... I can’t think further ahead than the next hour, the next meal, the next point on the list of preparations to see to - I’ll lose my mind if I do. But I have to, somehow, keep going. I don’t want to, master Maul - and this I have only told my cousin before you. All I want is to follow him, to be with him. I’m not a crow, I can’t see the future or hear the Gods, but I can’t help but feel that... that this is not how it was supposed to end.”

Maul nodded again, pulling the hood of his cowl up over his head to protect it against a few snowflakes that danced in the crisp air around them.

“I have the same feeling, lord Hux,” he said. “All of this feels wrong. There is so much that doesn’t add up, and the Force is... behaving strangely, and has been since before Kylo came back to the House. Something is building up, some sort of storm, and it’s affecting all of us. Kylo had many bad feelings, many things weighing on his mind. He is not usually the kind to be easily unsettled
by things - annoyed, yes, but rarely upset.” Then he smiled, turning to give Hux a thorough once over. “He told me about you, you know. I have been looking forward to our meeting since then.”

“You have?” Hux did not quite know what to do with that information, or how quickly Maul had steered the conversation in a lighter - and much needed - new direction.

“I have. Your reputation, of course, precedes you - as reputations tend to do for men like you. We knew the name Hux well, back at the House. I was very glad to learn he was going here - no other warchief could ever have been worthy of his allegiance. But nothing made me happier than learning that you had fallen in love with each other. He’s always needed that, my child. He gives so much love to everyone around him, but it’s always been a fear of his to never be loved, or desired, in this way by another. He guards his heart well, but you stole it the very first day, and that, lord Hux, is quite a feat. As his father, of course I was very curious about this man who won my child’s heart, and I am very pleased with what I see. Your heart and mind are as strong as the rock this castle sits upon, and yet your love is gentle and giving. If anyone deserves Kylo’s love, you are the one. It almost makes me wish Kylo had not been a Crow, so that the two of you could have had your love celebrated more freely than your stations allow you.”

“I would lie if I said I hadn’t wished the same,” Hux admitted. “I gave him a King’s chain for that very reason. I might not be allowed to call him husband, but to me he was. He was, and he will always be. None can ever come after him. However long or short this miserable existence of mine will turn out to be now, I will face it alone.”

Now it was Maul’s turn to place a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“For what it’s worth, lord Hux,” he said, a softness and understanding in his voice that made Hux fight back tears he had not been aware were building up. “We will be with you. Our order is in shambles, but Kylo has asked us to protect you and your clan with our lives - and that is what we will do. For him, we’ll do anything. And maybe this way we can all heal together.”

~*~*~

It was closer to morning when it happened. In their room on the second highest floor of the Crow tower, the Knights of Ren, Maul, and the Hux clan’s Crows sat straight up in their beds - as still as statues, staring wide-eyed at each other. There was something - a stirring, a flicker. Something familiar. It had been strong, but only for a fraction of a moment - enough to wake them all, but not allow them to feel exactly what it had been.

Then it came again, and they all scrambled to their feet, gathering close, trying to focus their minds together, to locate the source, to find confirmation, to know if it truly had been what they thought. It was unsteady, coming and going, spiking, then receding, but there was no mistaking it - they all knew that Force presence.

Kylo.

Then everything was a mad dash as they hurried to pull their robes on, not bothering with more than making certain they were covered, before scurrying out of the room and up the stairs to the top floor - only to be met half-way by lord Hux, looking equally wild-eyed and disbelieving. He had felt it too, but since he was not a Force wielder, he had needed their confirmation on what he felt, needed them to assure him he was not simply losing his mind to grief.

He wasn’t. Kylo’s Force presence, once they had managed to find it and focus on it, was flaring up wildly, erratically, but it was there.
As it spiked out especially violently, another presence crept up around its edges, folding itself around it, calming it. They all breathed a sigh of relief when they recognized it; Gaius. Kylo was alive, and Gaius was with him.

A few hours later, when Kylo’s Force presence had dimmed down in a way that suggested he was sleeping, Gaius’ oh so very welcome voice filled their minds. His message was brief, but it was the greatest gift he could have given them. He told them simply;

“We are on our way.”

Chapter End Notes

I am so very sorry for this ridiculous delay. Real life decided I didn't have enough on my plate already, and threw in an absolute madness parade for me to deal with. Uni is eating up my life, my laptop crashed and had to be replaced, I had to put one of my furry babies to sleep + a bunch of other shit that just didn't help matters much. So, again, I'm so sorry for the wait, but I really hit a roadblock there.

I don't have much else to say about this chapter, other than a sorry if there are more typos/grammar stuff than usual. I've had a lot more days of brain fog than usual, so I'm not sure I got them all when I proff read it, but yeah. I do actually feel pretty good about this chapter, and i'm very happy to finally get it up here so I can share it with you guys.

Until next time, lovelies!
The Blessing of the Goddess

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It happened so quickly; all those terrifying events seemed to fit in the space of a breath. A moment ago, they had been sound asleep, now the cold, deep sea roared and growled all around them – the waves rearing up and crashing down, rain hammering the already boiling surface. The currents seemed more like greedy arms, reaching for them, hoping to pull them under and swallow them whole. The ship was groaning, creaking, whining as it was being crushed against the hidden shoals it had drifted into despite the best efforts of the crew to keep the ship on its course.

The weather had been good for the first day or so, but then the clouds had begun to darken, and the winds pick up speed, and the captain’s face had become steadily more serious with each passing moment. Then the rain had come, and then the waves had grown large and round, before rising up and forming foamy white ridges, like the manes of a flock of wild horses but infinitely more sinister. The crew had been concerned, she could tell, and the captain had warned them that the journey would not be smooth or pleasant, but that she would do her very best to make sure they reached D’Qar.

And then this happened.

Rey had lost sight of her companions at some point in the madness that had followed that first, horrible impact and they had been forced to hurry up on deck or risk being drowned or trapped as the water began flooding in from a hole the size of Rey herself. From there everything had only gotten worse; the already stormy weather had picked up momentum and strength, slamming the ship against the underwater cliffs whose peaks only just breached the surface when the waves receded for a moment. They could barely hear each other shouting over the roar of wind and sea, and with the waves crashing over the deck, forcing it more and more onto its side with every new attack, everyone was focused on holding on and not getting swept overboard.

As a wave hit her, making her lose her footing and fall into the water, Rey could only hope the others would make it home to D’Qar.

~*~*~

The sun had risen onto a cloudless, bright blue sky – a good sign, causing even the least superstitious of officers in the Queen’s Army to breathe sighs of relief. A breeze blew from the sea, less cold than it could have been, playing with the forest of flags and large banners, making them dance and billow majestically. The red and blue of the banners contrasted with the polished brass of the poles holding them up, as well as the drums and horn of the regimen in charge of setting and keeping their pace. The army itself, gathered in tight formations, armour polished until they reflected the sun well enough that it less resembled and army and more a miles long snake of pure, blinding light.

After so many long weeks of preparations, now was finally the day. The Queen herself was there; sitting on her giant white steed, wearing armour that differed from her troops only in that she bore her house crest over her heart, and a bright blue cloak over her shoulders. She had given a speech, full of fire, and determination, and resolve, and now she raised her hand pointing north, and with one sharp word from her mouth, the drums began their steady rhythm, and the army was moving. If any of the officers or soldiers had doubts about their chances of success or survival, it was thoughts they kept to themselves. No one wished to be the one who could later be pointed to as the
one who doubted Queen Leia’s ability to bring the North to its knees and make them embrace the one true God of the world. She was a warrior queen, they all knew, and she had led them victoriously through many a battle before. And now, with their God’s blessing, there was simply no way they would not return home as victors and conquerors once more.

~*~*~

It was a miracle, and nothing short of a miracle, Rey thought as she rose from the depths of unconsciousness just as she must have from the depths of the sea. She was alive. Somehow, whether by divine favours or sheer dumb luck, she was still alive – washed up like seaweed on a small, rocky shore somewhere along the Northern coast. The weather, capricious as ever, had changed at some point, and now the coastline bathed in bright, warm rays of sunlight – the sky bluer than anything she had ever seen, with little puffs of clouds chasing each other across its endless expanse like playful cats.

She barely had time to register the sound of thundering footfalls across the ground before she found herself lifted off the ground and into a warm and safe embrace – relief flowing through her as she realized who it was. Chewie. Her beloved uncle Chewie was here, alive, safe. She was not alone in this – God had not taken them all from her.

“Are you alright, child?” Chewie signed once he had put her down again, and she slumped against him like a sack of flour. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m alright,” she managed. “Cold, and… and exhausted. But I’m not hurt. At least, I don’t think so.”

Chewie nodded, looking around them for a moment, and then pointing further inland.

“There are trees there, we can find some shelter there, start a fire, and think on our next step.” He smiled at her. “Don’t worry, my girl, we’ll get you home.”

Chewie would not call it luck that he still had his flint and his knife, reminding her that he never removed either item from his belt, and that he had endured worse things in his life and still come out of them with his flint and his knife where they should be. They had managed to find a relatively protected spot; a small, sandy hollow behind a few fallen trees, and Chewie – with decades of experience to draw from – had found them firewood dry enough to work with. Rey felt guilty for not being of more help, but they both knew that there had been nothing in her life to prepare her for any of this. A princess, especially a crown princess, was not supposed to be anywhere near either a shipwreck or a storm. From where she was perched on a small tree stump, Rey could look out over the sea – the remains of the ship, sticking up from the now deathly calm waters. It looked like the skeleton of some great beast – a dragon, perhaps – masts and splintered planks reaching for the sky like an enormous ribcage, and just as dead as one.

There were bodies on the shore, she noticed when she first looked back – frozen, bloated, limbs twisted and broken in odd angles. It had made her nearly vomit to see birds land on and around them, picking at them, fighting over the best pieces of frozen flesh. She had turned away, and refused to look at them again; she did not want to have to look at one of them and realize it was her father, or Finn, or Poe. When she had asked Chewie if they should see about other survivors, he had looked at her with sympathy before telling her that there really was no point in doing so – it was miracle enough that the two of them were still here. Going to look for more survivors while they were both exhausted and still freezing from their time in the waters could end up killing them too – and then who would let all the families know what had happened? The Goddess took who she wanted, he said with that simple acceptance only Northerners seemed capable of in the face of death, and all the living could do was to ensure that those left behind were given some closure.
Grief was for the living, not the dead. And there were people in D’Qar who now needed to be allowed to have theirs. Then he had given a crooked smile, reminding her that Han Solo was a legend for a reason, and that until they came upon his body they should not consider him among the dead. He had survived too many impossible situations already to be counted by the standards of ordinary people.

Rey could only hope he was right.

~*~*~

“Finn! Oh, thank goodness, you’re alive!”

Finn opened his eyes to find his husband’s worried face hovering just above his own. Poe had an ugly bruise covering a large part of his face, and endless cuts and scrapes covering the rest. He had had a bloody nose at some point, though most of it had dried or been wiped off, and his lower lip was swollen around a nick slightly off to the right side. As soon as Finn managed to completely open his eyes, giving a weak smile in an attempt to reassure him, Poe pulled him close, peppering his face with kisses interlaced with murmured thanks to their God for letting them both survive.

“I’m alright, love,” Finn croaked. Everything hurt, but after giving himself a cursory once over, he felt confident that nothing was broken, and that he could probably manage fairly well. “I’m a little sore, but I’m fine.”

Managing to sit up on his own, he realized to his horror, that his husband was not as fine. Poe’s right arm dangled uselessly at his side – his shoulder had been dislocated, and he knew that the only thing keeping Poe from screaming in pain was his legendary self-control. He had a few more cuts, and two of the fingers on his left hand were bent at strange angles. They had to find some way to wrap them, make a brace of some sort, both for the fingers and for Poe’s shoulder once Finn had pulled it back in place. But first, they must get away from the beach. The day may be warm and lovely now, but it would not stay that way – and shipwrecks always attracted the sort of people neither one of them were currently able to face, their military training be damned.

“I wonder how many survived,” he mumbled, eyes fixed on the bloated body of one of the sailors. He did not want to think about Captain Solo, or Chewie. And he could not bear to think about Princess Rey. If she had drowned in this shipwreck, D’Qar was without an heir, and he and Poe would very likely be without heads as soon as Queen Leia found out. She was known for many things, but her forgiving nature had never been one of those.

“Don’t think about that now, my heart,” Poe sighed, getting to his feet. “We can mourn the dead later. For now, we really need to find shelter, and some clue about where we are.”

“We must have drifted pretty far,” Finn agreed. “I can’t even see the ship from here.”

Leaning on each other, they slowly made their way across the shore – if one could call it that, consisting, as it did, of mainly large boulders and piles of rocks, before a deep forest abruptly took over. It was a bit of a climb to reach it, but they managed. Why the God of Mornings had allowed them to live, they did not know, but they were not about to waste the gift when it had been given them. They had to stay alive now. They had to find their way back home, and deliver the news to their queen – no matter the cost to themselves. They were men of the Royal Guard; their lives had belonged to the queen since the moment they entered the barracks for the first time. If she had hanged, then so be it. They had done their duty, and at least they would die together. That was still more than most men in their profession could ever hope for.

~*~*~
Han woke up to the smell of smoke, and something cooking. Strange. The last thing he had remembered was Rey’s shriek as she was washed overboard. He had thrown himself forward to grab her, but right in that moment the ship had lurched sharply to the side – sending him flying in the opposite direction. The water had been so cold it had knocked the breath right out of him, but that was all he could remember. He managed to pry his eyes open, but it did not make much difference – the inside of the little cottage he was in was almost as dark as the night had been when the ship went down. The only source of light was the fireplace, where the flames danced cheerfully on stones as old as time itself. Someone had saved him, that much was evident. But who? And where were they now? The cauldron hanging from its small hook bubbled for all it was worth, threatening to boil over at any second.

As he sat up, groaning when every fibre of his body tensed up in pain, the owner of the cottage came into view. She was older than him, a Northerner, and she hurried over to the cot where he was sitting to gently press him back down.

“You got a nasty bump on your head there,” she said. “Better not move around too much just yet. The sun’s barely started to rise, you need to rest a little more before you can start moving about. Trust me, I know my way around shipwrecks. They come with nasty injuries. You can’t be too careful.”

“Did you pull me out of the water?” Han asked, amazed. He was not really the smallest of men, even though he was well below average height by Northern standards.

“Of course, I did,” she scoffed. “You were stuck in one of me nets. I couldn’t very well throw you back in, now could I?”

There was not much to say to that – she was right. And Han knew better than to argue with Northerners after so many years with Chewie by his side. They had their own way of seeing things, and they never bothered with wrapping it up to make it look nicer.

“You didn’t, uhm…” he began. “You didn’t by any chance see anyone else out there?”

“It was storming.”

“Yes, but-”

“I barely made it back in, myself. I went out too close, and we nearly went under, both you and me, as it was. No, I didn’t see anyone else.” She went over to the cauldron to inspect whatever it was that was cooking in there. “If they were meant to live, the Goddess will let them live,” she said simply. “If not, she has gathered them in her arms and taken them home already. She takes who she wishes, when she wishes. Nothing we can do about it.”

“Can you at least tell me where I am?” Han asked, knowing better than to argue with a Northerner about life and death. “I need to get back South as fast as possible.”

“Clan Kinnon’s land,” she said. “We’re south of the Huxes and their vassals, and just north of the Middle lands.” She looked at him, pursing her lips and scratching her temple. “I can’t say how long it’ll take you to get to wherever you’re going. I’ve never been south of here myself. Never wanted to, never needed to. And my wife’s over in the village overseeing a birth, so she’s got the horse with her. I’m afraid you’ll have to walk.”

Han nodded. He knew how precious the horses were to people living in these remote places, and no matter his reputation, he would never ask them to give him their one means of transportation.
“It’s alright,” he assured her. “Walking works just fine. As long as you can point me in the right direction, I can do the rest myself.”

“Good.” She had acquired two bowls from somewhere, and was now scooping up a generous helping of something that might be a stew. It smelled better than it had any right to. “But first you need to get some food in you, so you get some warmth back. And then I’ll see about some better clothes. You’re naked, if you hadn’t noticed.”

Han had, in fact, not noticed until that moment, tightly wrapped in soft blankets as he was. But he was too old to be embarrassed, and given that the woman had mentioned a wife, he doubted anything about him interested her anyway.

“My late brother left some clothes when he went and got himself killed,” she said, putting the bowl on a little tray and bringing it over to him. “I think you might be the same size. Maybe a little bit smaller, but better than wearing clothes that are too small.” She handed him a spoon. “Here. Now eat. You can worry about the rest later.”

~*~*~

Hux always felt a deep, warm pride for his clan, but he would be lying to himself if he pretended he did not feel it more strongly in times of war. The first birds had arrived the day before, alerting him to the imminent arrival of his vassal clans, and more of them had kept arriving this entire morning. Now, with the sun high in the sky, he stood in his favourite spot up on the parapet and watched the temporary camp being set up across the bridge. On the horizon, he could already see the specks of blood red, the gleaming of armour, that signalled the approach of the first vassal chieftains and their troops. It had been agreed upon that all vassal clans to the north and east would gather at Skye Castle and march together with Hux’ core troops to the meeting place. An army on the march was always vulnerable, and they would take no chances. Safety in numbers was a lesson they had all learned long before their teachers had let them grip their first swords – and not only because of the presence of hostile clans. No, this was a harsh land, where the predators were as ravenous as they were giant, and where the cold could kill a soldier faster than any arrow ever would. Numbers meant warmth, safety, and protection – and they would need as much of all of those as they could find over the coming months.

Rurik’s clan would be one of the first to arrive, and he looked forward to it. He had missed his friend over these past months, cursing their duties for making it so difficult to see each other as often as they would like. Rurik was a good man, a good chieftain, and they had known each other long enough to be more brothers than anything else. His presence among Hux’ officers was a source of great comfort, though Hux knew he was not the only one who was eagerly awaiting his arrival. He had informed Aya earlier that morning that her chieftain was on his way, and she had been so happy and relieved she had broken down crying. It was obvious that the separation from their chieftains had taken a massive toll on all the Hux Crows, though he suspected that Rurik and Aya’s relationship more closely resembled his and Kylo’s – which would explain the magnitude of her reaction. Hux was glad to have been able to bring her those news; good news was hard to come by these days, and he felt more blessed than he deserved to be to know that his beloved was alive and on his way back into Hux’ arms where he belonged. It felt good to bring some happiness to others as well.

Aya was up on the parapet with him, along with master Maul and the Knights. The remaining Crows had volunteered to go over Kylo’s inventory of herbs, potions, and other supplies, since their clans were not due to arrive for another day or so. Though clearly still affected by their ordeal, the Crows all looked much better each day, and with them all back in their signature black robes, everything felt closer to normal once more. They were a strange lot, there was no denying that –
and they radiated such immense power it made goosebumps rise all over him when he stood too close to them – but Hux found himself growing more fond of them all with each passing moment. Eira was recovering as well, and had spent the past few days hopping from person to person, demanding to be petted and held, and carefully beginning to spread her wings again. It was an immense relief to see her become herself once more. Now, she was perched on the parapet in front of Hux, her wings spread to catch the breeze, her little head raised towards the sun. She looked quite content, and Hux smiled to himself.

“They’re quite a large clan, lord Hux,” Erris commented next to him. He was leaning on his elbows, cowl thrown back so that the bright winter sun made his hair gleam like polished gold in the light. Half a dozen birds had landed on and in front of him – two of them, a pair of magpies, were attempting to groom his hair. He scratched his short beard, glancing over at Hux. “You said there were several more coming that were even larger? You sure you will be able to fit them all?”

“Yes,” Hux said, eyes fixed on the approaching clan. “We’ve long since learned the best ways to fit massive amounts of people into relatively small spaces. Here in the North, it’s an advantage. It helps make sure the troops won’t freeze to death, and with more coming, it will get even better.” He chuckled to himself. “It’s also a good thing to have Rurik and his men have their camp closest to the castle, because they are by far the most orderly, and Rurik has even less patience than I do with unruliness and inappropriate behaviours. If the other clans, especially the more recent vassals, see that they are here already, it will help keep order from the beginning.”

“I’m sure having a dozen Crows in your castle will help boost the morale as well,” Chava grinned. “If anyone acts up, we’ll just let Maul, Erris or Silass go down there and glare at them, and they’ll be sweet as kittens.”

“I don’t glare,” Silass objected.

“Yes, you do,” Vilya said, patting her on the shoulder. “And you’re very good at it.” She looked at Erris, who seemed about to say something. “And so do you, and you know it.”

Erris looked somewhat defeated, earning a sympathetic pat on the head by Avi.

Hux smiled at their little exchange. He was still getting used to the playful banter between them; it was so far from everything he had learned about the Crows while growing up. Tarkin had ever only been an embodiment of quiet, graceful dignity, and he had rarely interacted with more than one Crow at a time, so their internal dynamics had largely remained a mystery. But it did make sense that they would be more relaxed and open around each other – after all, they were all of similar rank, and they had grown up together. They were siblings, no matter the lack of blood-ties. Maul was the one who stood out, but it was hardly strange – with his gentle, regal air, and the immense power he radiated, the man would likely stand out from any group he was put in.

“Your presence in this castle is considered a gift and blessing,” Hux smiled. “I don’t know how comfortable you all are to be the centre of attention, but it’s probably a good idea to prepare yourselves to be drowning in people on a daily basis until we move out. I had to give the clanspeople more than one stern talking to before they learned to give Kylo some room to breathe. They don’t mean anything bad by it – we simply have a much deeper respect and admiration for Crows here than in many other places.”

“We will manage,” Maul smiled. “It’s honouring for us to know that our presence here is welcome, and we will of course do our best to live up to the expectations.” He chuckled. “Besides, as soon as Kylo returns, they will forget all about us. He is deeply missed, that much is clear, and it makes me very happy to see. Perhaps you would do well to prepare as well, lord Hux. You might have to fight for some time alone with your beloved.”
Hux laughed, scratching his beard. Maul’s complete acceptance of their relationship both comforted him and took him by surprise on a daily basis, and he suspected it would take some time before he had gotten used to it.

“I’m fully prepared,” he assured him. “And I’m more patient than people think me to be – I can wait. At the end of the day, I’m the one who shares his sleep, and that – I think – is something well worth waiting for.”

The wide grins coming from the group of Crows told him he had their full understanding and support, and he found that it meant more to him than he had previously thought. It had always been a worry of his, that other Crows would disapprove of what he and Kylo had between them – that it would tarnish Kylo’s reputation in some way – but he was learning that Kylo had been right. No one minded. They were all happy for them, and it was a great weight off his chest to know.

~*~*~

Rurik’s clan arrived, and with them came two of the smaller vassal clans, and well into the evening the whole castle was a giant beehive of activity; tents being erected, fireplaces arranged, troops assigned sleeping quarters, and the chieftains and their officers reporting in and receiving the information they needed. He was equally pleased and proud to find his clanspeople so prepared, despite this happening so much sooner than originally planned. They all seemed ready and eager to march, cold and danger be damned, and the spirits were high even in such a dire situation. It was an impressive sight to behold now, the field between the castle and the sacred groves; the large fires shone like fallen stars in the deep dark of the night, mirroring the bright dots across the endless velvet-blue sky above. The tents stood in rows as straight and sharp as a blade’s edge, the temporary palisades protecting them at all sides making the camp seem more like a city, picked up by the Gods on a whim, and put here in the middle of the vast expanse of white that was the Northern winter. It stirred something fierce and strong in him to see it, to know that it would grow even larger still, that the armies of D’Qar may be powerful, but they were far from unmatched. Clan Hux of the North would meet them as equals, and remind them of the true strength of the children of the Old Gods.

Though he really wished and needed to speak to Rurik, Hux knew it would have to wait until morning. The reunion between Rurik and Aya had been an emotional one, and he had given them a private room in the guest wing to allow them some time to themselves. No business would ever be more important than caring for the bond between chieftain and Crow, and theirs had had a solid decade to deepen and grow – Hux and his war was insignificant next to it, and he did not mind. When Kylo came back, he would do the same, and he could not care less what anyone had to say about it. Instead, he focused on introducing the Crows to his chieftains and officers, listening to Mitaka’s and Phasma’s reports on the state of the troops and supplies from the castle, and ensuring that everyone felt welcome and appreciated.

To his immense relief and joy, Mai had arrived at the same time as the clans, having pushed herself and her poor horse quite hard to make it home in as short a time as possible. It was welcome news to learn that the Southerners had sailed off safely, despite the delay, and that his children and mother were well. Lady Bríghid was ready and prepared to defend the coastline around Whitehaven, Mai reported, and she had made certain that there were several escape plans in place to ensure the safety of the little ones. Mai herself could vouch for the readiness of both defences and the fleet – the ships were in perfect condition, and the crews had been as eager to set sail as the army was to march. All they needed was their warchief’s order, and they would be off with the next tide to wreak havoc on the Southern coast.

After having received confirmation that the vanguard was set to depart for the main gathering
place to begin preparations there, and even having the time to speak privately to Mai about the latest news and happenings in Whitehaven, Hux retired to the tower with a considerable weight lifted from his shoulders. Caélin and Mára were doing well, impressing their teachers on a daily basis, and even showing signs of calming down and maturing much earlier than he himself could make any claims to have done. He had been considered something of a menace well into his adolescence, and it was a wonder, really how anyone had the patience to deal with him at times. Of course, it was mostly Caélin, but he knew that his son took after his mother much more than he took after Hux. He was of a calmer nature, thoughtful, observant. The few times Hux had spoken to him about the complexities of strategies and politics, he had shown an almost uncanny sense for it, and if he would be the one to succeed Hux, then the clan would not have to worry. Given a few more years to hone his skills, Caélin would be all set to build a reputation as a master strategist and good leader. Not that Mára would be any less worthy of inheriting the title. She was as fierce and wild as the land around her, but she was in every way her father’s daughter. She had that air of authority and command about her, and an iron will to go with it. There was not much she would not be able to do should she wish it. Yes, she would go far in life, he knew, and he already had a feeling of which direction she would choose when the time came.

As he made sure Eira was comfortable in her nest on the pillow next to his, before settling in himself – trying to secure as much of the bed to himself as he could, when three of his hounds hopped onto it as well – he allowed himself to feel relief. His army was ready to march, his children and mother were well, the Crows were settling in and healing, and Kylo, his beloved Kylo, was on his way home. While there were many days to go yet, he was on his way to Skye Castle, on his way back to Hux, and there was no thought in the world more comforting to him than that. Soon he would get to hold him again, smell his hair, feel the solid weight of him against his side as he slept. Soon. With the word anchored firmly in his chest, Hux let himself drift off to sleep.

---

Twelve days and nights they had been on their way now. Twelve days and nights of snow and ice and darkness paired with urgency, dread, fear, and a slowly growing sliver of hope – like the first inklings of sunlight on the horizon after a stormy night. Kylo was recovering more with every new day – though still in very bad health, he could now sit up in the saddle on his own, and he was having less trouble stomaching solid food with each meal. It seemed to be mainly the fatigue that clung to him like a leech, refusing to yield its grip just yet, but Kylo was nothing if not stubborn, and he bore it with his characteristic dignity and grace. The spontaneous Force manifestations continued to occur several times a day, but they were learning to manage them. There seemed to be degrees to them, and not all would have Kylo struggling to remain on Askr’s back anymore. Some, of course, were intense enough to cause him to lose consciousness, but they were learning to see the signs that would allow them to stop somewhere safe and ride them out. It bothered Kylo to not only have been robbed of his eye-sight, but his eyes as well. Blindness could be managed, in some cases even helped – but there was no cure to be found for the two empty sockets hidden under the tight bandages he now wore around his head. The Goddess had chosen to take his eyes as payment, and Kylo would simply have to learn to accept it. He was already learning, and learning quickly, how to compensate the lack of eyes by using the Force to read his surroundings. It was anything but easy, but he was learning.

It worried them both some, though, that he kept being struck by debilitating headaches, seemingly concentrated to the area around where his eyes used to be. While they were trained to know all sorts of causes for headaches and other ailments, they had yet to come up with any reason that would explain it. And it was not just that. Over the past few days, Kylo had complained of a strange feeling in his body, often also paired with a severe headache, that he could not make sense of. It felt as if a lightning storm had taken residency in his skin; it was as if his muscles, every fibre
and tendon in him was on fire, as if he was torn in several directions while simultaneously being pressed together by a great weight. It felt as if whatever it was, was building up, struggling against its confines, searching for an outlet, an opening, some way to escape his skin to manifest itself. He would get those awful cramps whenever it happened, his body tensing and convulsing helplessly, jaws locked so tightly together not a word could escape, but Gaius could do little else but sit close by and whisper soothing words to him. If he made any attempt to touch him, he would be hit with a wave of sharp, stabbing pain – like a million daggers hitting him all at once.

They had finally made it to the Hux clan’s land, and Gaius would seek out and describe the places and buildings they were passing, so that Kylo could estimate how much further they would have to travel. It was not far at all now, they realized. Half a day’s journey, maybe not even that if Kylo’s Force manifestations would contain themselves for long enough. The flock of birds that had followed them were also becoming more excited with each passing league; they were picking up on the presence of the resident flock, and seemed eager to join them. The road they had taken from the border had shown signs of having been recently used by a very large number of people, horses, and wagons, and it had made them both concerned. The clan was going to war, yes, but not until spring, and they had found themselves struck by a new sense of hurry. They had chosen to approach the castle via a lesser used road through the sacred forest, both of them eager to tap the peaceful atmosphere for some much needed energy and calm.

They should have known it was like inviting bad luck to have such thoughts, as Kylo had barely dismounted to stretch his legs for a little when a new attack seized him – more violent this time than it had been so far. Gaius recognized it as one of those during which Kylo could not be touched, and despite the feeling of guilt and betrayal in his heart, he hurried to take cover behind a nearby tree – dragging Askr with him to keep him out of harm’s way. There was something about it this time that had him suspicious. He had felt it in the air around Kylo; it felt charged, as the summer air just before a rainstorm – his skin prickling, and his lungs feeling tight. If the sky had not been perfectly clear above their heads, Gaius would have been listening for thunder. But there was none – only Kylo, collapsed on his back in the snow, his body spasming, jaw clenching, breathing coming short and shallow as the most gut-wrenching whimpers and sobs escaped him. Tears were already wetting through the blindfold where his eyes had once been, and his hair was full of snow from where he could not keep it off the cold ground. The strange energy around him, the prickling, sharp pressure only kept building, increasing, as his little brother’s body tossed and turned itself helplessly around on the ground. Everything was becoming stronger, more urgent – and then…

Kylo’s mouth locked in an ‘O’ as he let out a scream the likes of which Gaius had never thought a mortal man capable of, rising to his knees, body gone as rigid as a tree, face towards the sky, as blinding bolts of lightning tore free from his body – instantly searing everything they touched. Wave after wave of the purest form of destructive Force shook Kylo’s already worn body, though the scream stopped after the third or fourth; it seemed he could no longer even make a sound. It would have been a beautiful, awe-inspiring sight had it not been so frightening. To be able to manifest Force lightning was an ability most Crows never even dared to dream of. It took enormous strength to channel it, even more so to fully master it, and the only other Crow alive, as far as Gaius knew, who could do the same was Snoke. It was, after all, the method of punishment the Knights had encountered the most when they had in some way displeased their leader. Though the light itself could only be seen in person, the pain travelled freely, and there were many old legends among them detailing the impressive deeds of Crows long dead who had used this ability to subjugate, conquer, and punish – all in the name of their Gods. The Touch of the Goddess, they called it, and it was regarded as the greatest blessing – double edged as it may be – that any Crow could ever receive. But seeing Kylo like this, how much pain it caused him, how he had suffered for it… Gaius could not think of it as a blessing at all.
When the final wave had exploded out from him, Kylo fell to his side, barely clinging to consciousness. He was breathing harshly, gulping down air like a man nearly drowned, and there was blood flowing from his nose and ears. As Gaius hurried to his side, a series of deep coughs wracked his body, disgusting large globs of blood hitting the snow as he did so.

“Don’t-!” he wheezed as Gaius reached for him. “Don’t touch me! It’s not- not safe yet.” He coughed again, helplessly spitting more blood into the growing pool before him. “I’m alright, brother,” he said in answer to Gaius unspoken question. “I’m just… just tired. It doesn’t feel as bad now. It feels… calmer.” He carefully turned over on his back, face as pale as the snow again the dark of his hair and robes, the blood so frighteningly red against it. But he had been through worse, and they both knew it. Kylo was anything but frail. Anyone who thought him such did not know him at all. “I need- need some water.”

Gaius did not need to be told twice, scrambling to fetch him some. By the time he turned back around, Kylo was slowly getting himself into a sitting position, chest still heaving, and coughs coming in little waves with every other breath. He reached out for the bottle, and Gaius handed it to him, making sure their hands did not touch, just as a precaution. If Kylo said it was unsafe, then he meant it. They sat in silence for a little, while Kylo slowly sipped the water and tried to steady his breathing again.

“Force lightning,” Kylo said eventually, a disbelieving chuckle escaping. “I never thought… The Touch of the Goddess. She gave it to me.” He was quiet for a moment. “I’m scared.”

“You are allowed to be,” Gaius said. “It shows that you take serious the responsibility of owning such an immense power. It would be irresponsible and dangerous of you not to be frightened by such a gift.”

“True.” Kylo grabbed a handful of snow, using it to clean the blood off his face. He was already so much stronger than he had been when they left the House. It was good to see his spirits return with such force. “We will be at the castle in an hour or so,” he said. “I’m strangely nervous about it. It feels like another lifetime, me leaving there. I can’t help- I just…”

“You’re worried about facing your beloved again,” Gaius filled in for him. Daring to risk it, he reached out and placed a hand on Kylo’s shoulder. Nothing happened, and encouraged, he grabbed the hem of his own cowl and carefully went to clean up the specks of blood that Kylo had not managed to remove. “I’d say that’s normal. Many things have happened in such a short time. You do not face the Goddess and return unchanged. But his love for you is as strong as the mountains. He will love you no matter how you return to him.”

“I cannot even see him.”

“Yes, you can. The Force, brother. The Force will be your eyes, and it sees truer than your old eyes ever could.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Kylo sighed, smiling ruefully. “It’s silly of me to think like this when I know better. After all, I’m hardly the first blind Crow in history. I think I simply needed it off my chest before we arrive there.”

“I will not tell a soul, I promise.” Gaius gave him a playful nudge of his elbow. “If anyone asks, the great Master Ren is never nervous, and I will challenge them to a fight for even suggesting it.”

“That’s unusually violent of you, but I appreciate it,” Kylo laughed. It was good to hear him laugh. “But perhaps it is better to leave the violence to Vilya or Erris? Maybe Avi? They thrive on it much more than you do.”
“Hey now, I appreciate a good fight as much as anyone,” Gaius objected. “And unlike our dear siblings, I do actually know when to call it off. Remember when we were caught in that horrible fight in the tavern down in the Middle Lands? When you, me, and Erris had to forcefully tear Avi off of that Southern traveller? I thought they were going to tear his throat open with their teeth.”

“I do remember,” Kylo nodded, shaking his head. “The day will come when Avi learns when to back off, but I fear that will be the day the world ends.” Putting the cork back into the bottle, he carefully stood up, with only minimal help from Gaius. “Remind me to acquire some sort of staff or cane,” he said. “It might take a while before I learn how to not walk into things in the castle, and I’d rather not come back after all of this only to make a fool out of myself by tripping over something. With that said, shall we? I’d rather not wait any longer.”

~*~*~

The Crows had been terribly restless that morning, Hux had noted. The birds too. And Eira had been positively insufferable; chattering and cawing for all she was worth, trying to drag him outside the moment he was within a few steps from a door. Something was about to happen, and though he did not dare hope, he wished for it to be Kylo. They should be arriving any day now, and Hux’ patience was wearing thin. He had to restrain himself, lest he take Béla and ride out to find them for himself. It would be the most idiotic thing he could do at this time, and he had not risen to his rank by being an impulsive fool, so he stayed put despite the frustration it caused him. They had received word from other clans, from warchiefs that had not sworn any allegiance to Hux, who had heard rumours of a march against the South and wanted to join in. The North had generations of suffering to avenge, and it seemed no one wanted to miss the opportunity to do just that. Mitaka and his assistants wrote messages until their hands cramped to send back to them, stating that all were welcome, but that the armies would march very soon, and that they would not wait for anyone. If preparations were not complete, the other clans would have to join in along the way. Each and every one of those messages had to be read and signed by Hux himself, so he could not leave the castle even if he wanted to. His duties, once again, proving helpful in keeping him from acting foolishly.

A little before noon, they had felt one of those spikes in the Force again – Kylo’s Force presence flaring up like a beacon in a dark night – and after that any focus they had managed to gather was lost. It was close. Kylo was nearby, close enough that the flare almost sent Hux tumbling to his knees, unused as he was to adjust to such things. Hux had hurried to leave command to Mai and Rurik, hurrying toward the doors, with the Crows right behind him, heading for the parapet so he could see his beloved arriving. In the air above them, the flock was going positively mad, the excited shrieks and caws from the many thousands of birds loud enough to nearly drown out any other sound. They flew in massive, billowing, flowing clouds – darting this way and that – but it was obvious that it was a dance of joy.

“*My hatchling!*” Eira’s voice broke through the ruckus like a knife. Had she been human, Hux could have sworn there were tears present in her voice. “*My hatchling is coming back! Thank the winds! Kylo! Kylo, Kylo, Kylo!*”

With a jump, she was in the air, flying upward to join the flock again, as if she had never been ill – her white coat a perfect contrast to the mass of black and grey above their heads. But Hux agreed wholeheartedly with her sentiment. His heart was taking leaps in his chest, butterflies swirling in his stomach, skin prickling in excitement. On both sides of him, the Crows were in a similar state – eyes fixed on the field below, hopeful, shaking smiles on their faces. Maul had his hands together in a gesture of thanks, his peculiar golden eyes moist at the corners as he mumbled praise and prayers to the Gods. Silass and Chava clung to each other in an unusual display of affection and comfort – Chava holding tight to Silass’ cowl as if it was all that kept her grounded. Vilya was
gripping her twin’s arm so tight Hux feared she might break it, while Erris attempted to calm Avi, who was practically bouncing from the frustration of waiting. His eyes never left the field below, even as he took turns murmuring soothing words to both his sister and little sibling.

And then, there they were – two figures emerging from the forest below, black dots against the white – Askr’s giant form unmistakeable to anyone who had encountered him. Afterwards, Hux would never be able to surely say how they made it from the parapet to the bridge, and then down onto the field, and he cared not. It must have looked absolutely ridiculous to see the greatest warchief of the North, in his heavy armour and cloak – hair coming undone from his braids - with almost a dozen of the holiest creatures in the land, running for all they were worth though the camp, but they did not care. Dignity was such a silly thing that it did not even register in their minds, because there they were, Kylo, and Gaius, and Askr – alive, whole, and back with their family again. A pang of worry and fear hit Hux at the sight of the blindfold, and the ragged state of them both, but then Kylo was there, in front of him, reaching for him, and all else ceased to exist as he pulled him into his arms, kissing him deeply. His beloved, his Knight, his Crow, his husband in all but name – his heart and soul and entire world – he was here, solid and warm and alive.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! Let me first, as always, apologize for the delay. Well over a month this time, and perhaps it annoys me more than it does you, but I still want to apologize. Life continues to be anything but kind, but you're not getting rid of me that easily.

Now, as I seem to have made several of you a bit confused regarding the state of Kylo's eyes, I want to clear that up. It might have become evident in this chapter, but still. Kylo currently doesn't have eyes. At all. His eye sockets are empty. The icky goo that Gaius cleaned off his face back at the house? That white-ish stuff? Yeah, that was his eyes. I'm so sorry for that mental image, but yeah. There is a reason and a plan, I promise.

But whoa, Kylo made Force lightning happen, and it doesn't really seem like it was a very pleasant experience.

And our poor Southerners just can't seem to catch a break, can they? Don't worry, there's a plan for that too. There's always a plan. Sometimes more than one.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to shamelessly promote the project I'm lucky enough to be a part of together with the ever brilliant and amazing thegoodlannister. If you like modern au's with a hefty dose of both hurt/comfort, humour, and a sidenote of our boys being silly in ever new ways, I'd recommend you to check out our fic How Did We Get Here (I used to Know You So Well). We post under the name TeamRedhead, and we tag on the 'better safe than sorry' side, and if you have any questions, we're always available on tumblr to answer them.

Now, with that said - I hope you've enjoyed this chapter. If you did, do take a moment to leave a comment - your feedback is both vital and deeply treasured. Until next time, lovelies!
The reunion had been a loud enough affair that Hux suspected they had been able to hear it over in Whitehaven; The Crows had been beside themselves with joy, and the second Hux had loosened his grip on Kylo, his siblings had swept him up – holding him tight, unashamedly crying all over his robes, telling him how they had missed him and how they loved him, before doing the same all over again with the other Crow – Gaius, was it? Maul had, to everyone’s surprise, been so taken by the situation that his words failed him, and for the longest time, he could do little else but stand there, holding Kylo close, stroking his hair – eyes directed at the sky in silent thanks, and a trembling smile on his lips. Kylo had been in much the same state; His slender fingers trembling as he touched the faces of his loved ones, before allowing himself to be more or less crushed as they all tried to hug him at once. This moment was too important to care about dignity or appearances.

And they were not the only ones who had trouble containing their happiness. Eira seemed incapable of stopping the loud chattering and caws from either herself or the rest of the Flock. They dove down in waves, chattering and shrieking – the mass of bodies and feathers so thick they completely covered the Crows from view. Eira had buried herself against Kylo’s chest, her little body trembling from excitement, as Kylo had to hurry to secure a grip around her, lest she fall to the ground. Then the hounds, sensing the return of one of their favourite humans, had come charging down the field as well, barking and howling, followed by the castle’s entire population of cats. It had, in short, been absolute chaos on the field for a long time, until everyone had calmed down enough to begin moving towards the gates. It was glaringly obvious, as Kylo let Hux support him as they walked back up to the castle, that both Kylo and Gaius were on the brink of exhaustion. Their steps were heavy and stumbling, their shoulders slumped – even Askr looked more than a little ragged. But even so, they looked in good spirits, and Kylo’s grip on his jacket was firm, strong, letting Hux know that despite his appearance, Kylo was still far from weak.

Once they made it inside, the Crows declared that they were taking their brothers with them to the baths. There were rituals that needed performing, cleansing of minds as well as bodies, and that Hux would have his beloved back as soon as he had been appropriately purified after his ordeal. Hux knew better than to argue with Crows, so he swallowed down the reluctance to let Kylo out of his sight now that he finally had him back, and instead kissed him softly before letting Vilya and Chava lead him away down the corridors. There were still things he needed to do, and as soon as the Crows were out of sight, he focused on having Askr properly fed and taken care of, and food ordered for both Kylo and his brother. Gaius was a large man, he could only imagine how hungry he must have been during the journey. It took a lot of food to keep a body like that up and fighting, Hux knew, and he sincerely doubted they had had much time to acquire anything even remotely nutritious enough before they had left the House.

When Maul finally delivered a much cleaner and more human looking Kylo to the top floor of the Crow tower, it was already late in the evening. Kylo hesitated by the door, and Hux had nearly smacked himself when he realized his Crow was still wearing that blindfold, and thus obviously could not see where he was going. He had hurried over, gently guiding Kylo to the sofa by the fire, helping him get comfortable, and showing him where the food and tea was on the table in front of him. They needed to talk, they both knew, but as far as Hux was concerned, that could wait until he was sure Kylo had at least had a proper meal.

~*_~*_~
Much later, so late that midnight had come and gone, and the pale crescent moon had wandered past the windows in the Crow’s tower, Hux and Kylo finally made it to bed. Phasma and Mitaka had come in to welcome Kylo back, and it had been a warm and heartfelt reunion. Mitaka had taken Kylo’s robes and cloak, promising to have the servants wash them carefully and have them ready again by morning. Phasma had offered to speak to the carpenters about making him a proper staff, so that he could find his way around without having to depend on anyone else. Kylo had thanked them both profusely, informing them that he could probably use Eira, or another one of the birds, as eyes, but that a staff did sound like a good idea nonetheless. Hux had been quite concerned with how slow a process it was for his beloved to manage his bowl of soup, but Kylo assured him it would not be this way for long. He merely needed a few days to re-adjust – just like he did whenever he fasted. There had also been that terrifying moment when Kylo had had some sort of seizure, collapsing on the floor, his body spasming like a mad thing while objects all around the room had lifted straight up, before flying in every direction. Hux had done the only thing he could think of, and sat down on the floor and put Kylo’s head in his lap, so he wouldn’t hurt himself on the stone floor. Mai’s first wife had had seizures similar to this, but without the Force manifesting as well, and growing up, he had seen people in the castle do this when she had fallen ill. There were others too, with similar afflictions, and Hux was glad he had seen fits like this many times before. If he had not known what to do, this would have terrified him.

Now, as Hux pulled Kylo in, letting him rest his head on Hux’ chest – warmth spreading through them from the furs and extra blankets he had made sure to bring – the silence felt heavy with expectation. As much as Hux wished they could simply curl up and sleep, he knew that such simple things were not for men of their stations. Tomorrow, they were both expected to be a united, solid front again; the two strong, fearless, and blessed leaders they had been before the Crows had left for the House of Night. The only way for them to be that was to sacrifice rest for the burning pain of ripping the scabs from still raw wounds, and bare their souls to each other – knowing full well that they had as good a chance at healing together as they ran the risk of the events of the past month driving a permanent wedge between them. It was telling enough that neither one of them had stripped past their undershirt and breeches. He might not be a Force wielder, but Hux could still feel uncertainty, even something akin to fear, coming off Kylo in waves. His Crow, he realized, was waiting for his rejection – which was evident in his inability to relax and let his full weight rest against Hux’ side as it usually did.

It seemed that he had to be the one to go first. But how did one even begin a conversation like this? The dead did not usually come back, and grief still held an iron grip on Hux’ heart, his mind still struggling to comprehend that Kylo was here, next to him, alive.

“I won’t ask you for more details than you can manage to share,” he began, as he secured Kylo closer to his chest. “But I… Kylo, beloved, you- You died. I- I felt it. What… Please, I don’t understand how this happened. And you-” Hux had to bite back on the frustrated, frightened anger that suddenly threatened to burst out of him. “You promised me you wouldn’t go where I couldn’t follow you! You promised me, and then you… Then you died. You died, Kylo! I-” He cut himself off, reaching up to wipe away the tears he could not stop from spilling. “I don’t understand. What happened?”

Kylo was silent for a long time, but Hux could feel the warm wetness of his tears as they leaked through both blindfold and nightshirt. The powerless anger simmering inside his chest was joined by a heart-wrenching pain and desperation. If there was anything in this world Braith Hux could not stand, it was to see Kylo in tears. He pulled him as close as he could, turning them both on the side so that Kylo could hide against his chest as he used to do when he was upset, and rubbing soothing circles over his back. Angry he may be, but never enough so that he would not try to comfort his beloved.
“I’m sorry,” Kylo managed. “I’m so sorry – I had no choice, I-…” His grip on Hux’ shirt tightened, and he was trembling from the force of his emotions. “The Rave- Snoke. He- he ordered us to kill our warchiefs. To take power for the order, for him. I refused. The others, did they tell you what happened?”

“They did,” Hux nodded. “I could scarcely believe my ears. They said you remained behind to give them time to escape.”

“I did. I had to. I was the master of the Knights of Ren – it was my sacred duty to protect the balance, and to protect those under my command. I…” Kylo was quiet for a moment. “I was foolish. I thought I could actually get away with it. I thought that if I let him take his anger out on me, my Knights could escape and warn you, and then come back for me. I thought perhaps I could find some way to escape. The torture didn’t frighten me as such – I could endure it if it meant I kept you, and the clan, and my Knights safe.”

“What happened?” Hux was reeling already, and he knew the worst part was still to come. “That night… you called to me. Were you still being- still being tortured?”

Kylo nodded against his chest, curling further on himself.

“He wouldn’t stop!” he whimpered. “He tried to break me, break my will. He was so angry. I thought all I had to do was endure, and I’d be able to escape somehow. But then… He… He tricked me. Made me- made me choose between sacrificing you, and thereby protecting my Crows, and gaining more power than I could ever imagine, and to- to die. Crows take their oaths for life, I had to die to break free from my servitude to the order, and he used that against me. Told me that if I lived, I’d have to obey him and- and… kill you. But I would have my Crows, and my power. If I chose to die, I would have my freedom from servitude, but he would go after both you and my Crows. He thought he would be able to force them to submit to him. He thought them weak and lost without me. And he said he would have you killed.”

“You chose death. Why?” It came out more accusing than Hux had intended, but there was no taking it back now.

“Because I knew my Knights would never allow you to be hurt. I knew they would never bow to him ever again, knowing what he did to me. And my death was a small price to pay for keeping you all safe.” Kylo reached up to press a trembling hand to Hux’ cheek. “If you cannot forgive me for breaking my promise to you, I understand. I- I hurt you, I know I did. But at least know that I did it out of love for you and for my Knights. If you cannot-… If you’d rather not have me as your… lover anymore, I will understand. My loyalty will always be yours, no matter the way I am allowed to show it.”

There was something about the quiet dignity with which Kylo seemed to have already prepared to be rejected that buried itself like an arrowhead in Hux’ heart. How could he possibly think-? How could Hux have failed to prove his love to such a degree that his beloved had come back to him fully expecting to be rejected?

“Kylo,” he pleaded, gently pulling him up so he could shower his face with soft kisses and caresses. “Kylo, my love. I- When you died, the light went out of my life. I saw no meaning, no reason to continue on. All I wanted was to join you. There is no life without you, Kylo. Not for me. I love you, you fool. And now that I have you back with me, I will never let you go again. I care not who sees, or what anyone says – I will never again hold back on showing you how much I love and desire you.” A sudden, terrible thought struck him. “That is… if you still want me to. I- I mean, you’ve been through an ordeal beyond what I can even comprehend. If you don’t.”
“I want to!” Kylo hurried to interrupt him. “Braith, please, I- All I want is you. I care not for the order, or Snoke, or power – or any such things – anymore. I just want to be with you. Always.” He bit his lip, worrying it between his teeth in a way so familiar Hux could not help but smile, despite the severity of the situation, and gently prying the lip away from teeth Hux knew were far sharper than they had any right to be on a human. Kylo sighed, sitting up. “You should know,” he said, “that my body… It’s not… There are scars. I… I’m not beautiful to look at anymore. And I- Well, I- I wear this blindfold for a reason. My eyes aren’t damaged, Braith – they’re gone. I will never be able to see your face again, or, indeed, anything else.”

“Kylo, my sweetling,” Hux sighed as he sat up as well – cradling Kylo’s face between his hands, “you could have come back to me covered in the plague, and I would still have desired you as much as I did when I first saw you. You are the standard against which I measure beauty – you could never be ugly or undesirable to me.”

He went to remove the blindfold, but Kylo clamped his hands over his, a terrified whimper escaping him.

“Please don’t!” he pleaded. “It’s not- It looks hideous! I don’t want you to have to see-”

“Kylo.” Hux’ voice was firm as he placed Kylo’s hands back in his lap, and untied the blindfold. “I have seen warriors hacked to pieces, crushed by rocks and horses, burned, drowned – no matter the state of it, your face will never be hideous to me.”

He could feel Kylo trembling, but he nodded nonetheless. As Hux removed the soft black fabric, he was prepared for all manner of strange marks or scarring – but to his surprise, there was none. Kylo’s face looked much the same – paler, and more worn, yes, but still the same – and the only real difference was that where his eyes had once given them a rounded shape, his eyelids now lay flat. Some form of crusted matter gathered in the small gap, but it was hardly off-putting. It simply… was. Hux had seen far worse in faces of people who still had their eyes. It did not stop the sizzling, boiling heat of anger from rising in his blood at the thought of someone putting his Kylo through this. His Crow. His.

“Did Snoke do this to you?” he asked, trying and failing to keep the anger from being heard.

Kylo shook his head, a sad smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

“No,” he said, “the Goddess did. This was part of the price I had to pay to- to be allowed to come back. There are other things as well – some I know, and some that will be revealed to me when She deems me ready. It’s the Law. Everything has a price, even life and death. All we can do is hope that it is worth it.”

~*~*~

Kylo barely left the tower for the entire first week back. He spent most of his time sleeping, safely tucked in under a mountain of blankets and furs, with Eira nested on the pillow next to his head, and at least a dozen hounds and cats in and around his bed. The few times he did attempt to come down and show himself to his worried clan, he inevitably had to return to his chambers after only an hour or so – exhaustion clinging to him like a leech. But no one faulted him for it; for the clan, all that mattered was that he was back with them again, back with their warchief again, and if he needed to rest and recover from whatever ordeal he had been through, then they would keep him safe while he did so. Lord Hux’ mood had already improved dramatically, and whenever he had his Crow on his arm, he looked like a man who had been given the greatest blessing in all the worlds. The other Crows spent much of their days in the tower, keeping their master company. They came down to the great hall one or two at a time, relaying messages to Lord Hux and his war council.
The clanspeople did not question it; the Crows and their ways were not for common mortals to know.

Every night, Hux returned to the tower in time for dinner, and he and Kylo spent the evening on the sofa by the fire – Hux helping Kylo brush and braid his hair while they talked about everything that had happened during his long absence. Their first night together had been hard on them both – Hux learning the full extent of the torture and sacrifice Kylo had endured, while Kylo had struggled with guilt and fear. They had not slept much, but they knew it had been the right decision. Now, their evenings and nights were devoted to finding their way back to where they had been before Kylo had left, and though Kylo was obviously starved for and seeking every morsel of affection and comfort Hux could give, he was still just as obviously frightened and unsure – seemingly convinced that when Hux laid eyes on his body as it looked now, he would turn away. A part of Hux was furious that the progress they had made regarding Kylo’s ability to feel comfortable with his naked body on display, but he knew that since they had managed to do it once, they could certainly do it again. All he needed to do was to be patient and gently encouraging, and to never downplay the depth of his love and adoration for his Crow. With a little time, he would have Kylo safe and secure next to him, skin against skin. He could be patient when he needed to.

Kylo was, much to his own surprise, able to rise and dress himself together with Braith that morning. He was still incredibly tired, a sharp, pulsing pain in and around his empty eye sockets draining him of energy quicker than he found logical, but at least the rest of him was recovering well. The pain, on the other hand, had really only gotten worse. It came in waves, and between them, it sat there – only a pressure, a weight, a pulsing... something. It made him irritable and distracted, but luckily both Braith and his siblings and parent had long since learned to ignore it. He was comfortably curled up on the sofa, in his usual spot closest to the fireplace. While he missed the two large armchairs that had been placed in front of it when he came here, he had to admit that there was something very appealing about being able to stretch out comfortably like this. Braith had shown him the armchairs in their new spot by the window, and he thought it might be a good place for them, but he tried not to ponder on it, lest he start mourning for the loss of the much loved view from those windows. Irritatively massaging his temples, Kylo cursed under his breath, almost missing the sound of the door opening, had it not been for Eira’s chattered greeting as the Knights and Maul walked in.

Maul sat down next to Kylo, his Force presence wrapping itself like a soothing blanket around him, gently swatting Kylo’s hands away from his temples so he could take over. He was more open now, Maul, with his affection for his adopted child, and Kylo found himself not minding it even a little. It was a novel feeling, to be allowed to openly admit that he considered Maul more his father than the man who sired him ever could be.

“I’ll see about some lavender water and mint tea,” Maul soothed as he kept gently massaging Kylo’s temples. “Perhaps putting some lavender mint oil on your temples would help as well.”

“I’ll try anything at this point,” Kylo grumbled. “I’m going to lose my mind if this pain doesn’t let up soon.”

“You should let that man of yours help you into a bath with lavender and chamomile,” Chava said, as she poured them all tea. “Let him rub your shoulders and back while you’re in it.”

“I’ve always had good results with a large glass of liquor, mixed with chamomile and sweet-briar,” Silass offered, “at least for the more severe cases.”

“If that pain continues,” Erris said, as he took a careful sip of his tea, “there’ll be time enough for
him to try all of our favourite treatments. But I believe we have something other than our brother’s headache to talk about today. If you feel well enough, Kylo?"

“I’m well enough,” Kylo confirmed. “My headache is what it is, and as much as I loathe it, there’s little to be done about it right now. But we must come up with a plan for dealing with Snoke, and that as soon as we possibly can. Time runs away fast now, and Braith told me the army will be marching out in only a week or so.” He sighed, scratching his jaw. “We should already have had this conversation. I apologize for wasting so many days.”

“You needed to sleep,” Avi shrugged, plopping down on the floor in front of Kylo with their mug of tea. Kylo ran a hand through their downy hair, smiling gently. “It’s not like you would have been much help anyway – you and Gaius both. You’d just have fallen asleep halfway through, and left the rest of us to try and fill in the blanks.” They made a sulking noise. “I hate guessing games.”

“That’s because you never let anyone finish asking the questions before you try to answer,” Vilya remarked as she made herself comfortable on the floor by Erris’ feet – engaging in a game of toe-wrestling with her little sibling. “You need patience for guessing games, not just enthusiasm.”

“Come on now,” Gaius sighed from his seat in one of the armchairs by the windows. “Kylo is still tired, and so am I. Let’s get to it, please.”

“When you were… in the other place,” Maul began, choosing his words carefully. “What did She tell you? She must have shared something with you, some reasoning behind her decision to bring you back.”

Kylo nodded, a shiver running through him at the memory. Taking a moment to gather his thoughts, picking at the hem of his cowl, Kylo forced himself to recall as vividly as he could what had transpired when he had been trapped between the worlds.

“Snoke wants to rule the world,” he said finally. “The Goddess, she told me that he no longer serves the Gods – he only serves himself. He’s been hoarding power as magpies hoards shiny rocks, and he wishes to be King of the world – with the Crows as his servants and weapons.”

The Crows shared concerned looks, Kylo feeling their worry in the way the swirls of their Force presences shrank, grew prickly, their movement more restless, anxious.

“I feared this was the case,” Maul sighed. “These last few years saw many changes in him, but in my naivety. I thought he was merely getting old.” He put a hand on Kylo’s shoulder in support. “What must we do?”

“Destroy him.”

“You mean kill him?” Chava inquired. “Because that’s gonna be hard, even for us.”

“No,” Kylo said, shaking his head, “I mean destroy him. The Goddess said we must tear him apart – body and mind – and burn the remains. It’s the only way to ensure that he is gone forever.” He hesitated for a moment. “She said he had gained more powers than he should have been able to have, and that all of us were needed, but especially me… and Maul.”

All eyes were directed at Maul, who sighed again, pursing his lips and looking ruefully up at the ceiling.

“Oh,” he said, simply. “That was… rather unexpected.”

“What did she mean by that?” Vilya questioned, confusion plain in the Force around her. “Did she
give any explanation?"

Kylo bit his lip, deliberating with himself for a moment.

“She said you had made the same sacrifice,” he said eventually, turning his head in Maul’s direction, out of habit more than actual need. It wasn’t as if he could see Maul’s face anyway. “She said you, too, had been given powers beyond those of ordinary Crows. That you had… undergone the same ordeal.”

“Is it true?” Gaius’ voice trembled with cautious awe. “Master, did you do this too?”

Pain flickered over Maul’s tattooed face, and he was silent for a long time before he finally answered, and when he did, it was evident that this was not a fond memory.

“Nine days, and nine nights,” he said. “Beaten, bruised, bloody, and broken. Nailed to a cross, not a thread to protect me.” He pulled his cowl tighter around himself. “I thought I knew pain before that trial, but oh, I was so sorely mistaken! Yes, the Goddess spoke the truth. But the difference is that I chose to take the trial. I chose to forego a claim at the name of Ren, and instead lend my body and soul to the Goddess in this way. The way of Old, the way of Balance.” He looked around at his younger companions. “I was younger then – more foolish – but I don’t regret it now. This was not uncommon in the old days, for Crows to go beyond simply being Children of the Gods, or Children of Death – and to become Balancers, carrying life and death inside us, with us. We are no longer mere men, nor are we Gods; We are in between. We walk the threshold between the realms – freely tapping our powers from Gods, mortals, life, and death.” He put a hand on Kylo’s knee – reassuring or apologetic, it was hard to tell. “You are no longer just a Crow, or a Knight. For better or worse, you have transcended your humanity, and there is no going back. This change is forever.”

“Did you die too?” Avi asked, clinging tighter to Kylo’s robes. “Did you have seizures like Kylo?”

“I did,” Maul nodded, reaching out to pet them gently on the head. “My mentor, Mistress Asajj, she kept watch over me the whole time. I was dead for six days and nights, and it took me many, many weeks to gain control of my new abilities. I’m glad you were with your brother, Gaius, for I know I would have been lost without Asajj there – and it pains me to even think of Kylo having to go through this on his own.”

“I would have been lost without Gaius there, too,” Kylo agreed. “But how come… I don’t mean to overstep, but how come you’ve never said anything? All these years, you’ve carried this immense power and burden – but you still act as if you’re nothing more than an average, mediocre old Crow. Does anyone know?”

“I was sworn to secrecy.” Maul shrugged. “It was part of the price. I was given these powers, and told to hone them and sharpen them until I could pierce a hole through the world with them, but it was my burden, and my burden alone to keep. Mistress Asajj was the only one I was allowed to tell. It seems clear to me now that the Goddess did the right thing in putting that vow on me – had the Raven known the full truth, I now have no doubt he would have attempted to use me to do his treacherous work.”

“We have to find him,” Silass said. “Did the Goddess give you any leads as to where he might be?”

Kylo shook his head.

“None. We’ll have to seek him out through the Force.”
“That won’t be easy,” Erris stated, scratching his beard. “With how well he can hide his Force presence, it could take us weeks.”

“Then let’s not just sit around here talking about it,” Chava said, getting to her feet. “Let’s head down to the audience chamber and get started. It’s too cold to be outdoors, and that room is the only one big enough for us all.”

“We must also inform the warchief and his war council,” Maul pointed out, but stood up as well. “I think that in this situation the more they know, the better. We cannot afford secrecy at this stage.”

~*~*~

Hux, Rurik, Mai, and the rest of the gathered chieftains that made up the Hux clan’s war council, had only just finished their mid-day meal when the doors to the Great Hall swung open to reveal Phasma and a few of her guards. They had a newcomer with them, bearing the Kinnon clan’s insignia on their muddy and bloodstained clothes. The person was not dressed as a messenger, Hux noted as they came closer, but as a member of the court – a scribe, perhaps, or an advisor. They could barely stand on their feet, instead hanging like a ragdoll between two of Phasma’s guards, barely able to remain conscious. Hux looked at his cousin. Phasma looked grim, the way her eyes kept straying to the stranger spoke of worry, of bad tidings, and Hux approached cautiously. He was not worried the stranger would be an assassin or anything of the sort; even if they were, Hux could defend himself, and he was surrounded by some of the best warriors clan Hux had seen in generations. Stopping in front of the person, he reached out and gently nudged their head up so he could look them in the eyes.

“What is your name, stranger?” he asked, as kindly as he was able to. The person, a woman, he guessed, attempted to open her mouth to speak, but it was difficult – and no wonder; she had multiple cuts and bruises all over her face and neck, the fingers on one hand were pointing in all the wrong directions, and a closer look informed him that there was something very wrong with her right leg. She also looked as if she hadn’t eaten in a week, which – given how far South the Kinnon clan’s territory was – was definitely a possibility. He sighed, turning to Mitaka. “Give her something to drink,” he ordered. “And someone go find the Crows – she needs to have her injuries looked at.”

At the word ‘Crow’, the Kinnon woman violently flinched, her face going even paler than before, and she started to tremble. Vigorously shaking her head, she tried to wrestle herself out of the grip of the guards, but she was too weak. The reaction surprised all of them, and Hux found himself cradling her face between his hands, trying to soothe as best he could. It was not a talent of his – Kylo was much better at this sort of thing – but he understood as much as the presence of a Crow being the last thing she would find soothing in this moment.

“For the Gods’ sake, woman,” he sighed as she kept struggling. “Calm down! No one is going to harm you here. Not me, not my warriors, and most certainly not my Crows. But you need to calm down so you can have some water, and then tell us why the thought of being near a Crow frightens you so. We will have your injuries tended to, and you will have food and shelter, but you must calm down, or we won’t know how else to help!”

Mitaka came over with a mug of water, gently helping her drink some. It was a slow process, her lip had a nasty cut in it that had caused it to swell badly, and it was obvious that swallowing was painful. Once she had managed half the mug, she finally nodded and took a deep breath.

“I’m… I’m Lyra, daughter of Maya,” she wheezed out, voice broken and hoarse.

“Maya? Warchief Maya?” Hux inquired. Lyra nodded.
“She’s… I- I think I… I think I might be- be the warchief now,” she said, tears rising in her eyes. “Mother, she’s- I… I can’t- I… Our Crow, he killed her. He killed so many. So many. M-my uncle, he- he saved me. Put me on a horse and- and said to k-keep riding until I reached Skye Castle. Said- said you’d protect me? Said there was- uhm, that there were bonds?”

Hux nodded.

“He told you the truth,” he confirmed, and Lyra sagged in relief. “Lady Phasma here,” he nodded in her direction, “is of clan Kinnon on her father’s side. One of your late mother’s cousins.” He fixed her with a firm stare. “We have many Crows with us here in the castle,” he said. “But they will not harm you. On the contrary, they seek to put a stop to Crows like your mother’s. They are the best healers in the North, and they will keep you safe while under their care. I will have someone fetch them, or at least one of them. Can I trust you to trust my word that they will not cause you any harm?”

Lyra hesitated, then nodded – letting herself be led over to a bench by one of the fireplaces, so that she would not have to strain her already exhausted body any further. Mitaka promptly sent for the Crows, and had the servants bring over a plate of whatever was left from the meal, so she could have something proper to eat. While she ate, Lyra managed to give a more detailed account of what had happened. It had been a good week ago now, but it was still much too fresh in her memory, and she had to pause several times to wipe the tears from her eyes. No one could fault her; she was only seventeen winters old, and the Kinnon clan had not been involved in any conflicts in two generations – even though she was a trained warrior, she had not seen battle, and to have her first witnessed combat being the one that ended up killing her mother was understandably deeply traumatic.

Though her account was chilling, she was not the first, and – Hux reckoned – not the last. This very same morning, another messenger had arrived, from one of the clans just north of the Hux clan, equally bloody and dishevelled. That warchief had also been slain, along with his entire family. The clan was in the grip of the Crow, and the messenger had urged Hux to be very careful, and to watch his back at all times, or that clan might just stab him in it.

When the Crows arrived, Lyra, the poor girl, looked about ready to faint – but Chava and Gaius quickly approached her, being as gentle and non-threatening as they could, speaking quietly to her while they gave her a brief assessment. It took some convincing, but she did eventually allow Gaius to pick her up, so that they could carry her back to the tower for further treatment. The other Crows kept quiet and stayed at a safe distance until they were out of the hall – it was a well-established routine of theirs. Chava and Gaius were the master healers of the Knights, and they were usually also the ones people deemed the most approachable and safe, so they no longer even debated whom to send. Chava and Gaius would always step up first.

They had only begun the preparations for their first vision seeking when a servant had come to inform them of a wounded person in need of care. The vision seeking was important, vital even, but they had all taken their vows, and they included a vow to never keep a wounded or ill person waiting. When they had arrived at the Great Hall, the tension in the room had been evident – the chieftains, officers and advisors all looking grim and hard-set. After a quick deliberation between them, they decided that this was perhaps the best time to inform the war council of their own plans.

Kylo reached out a hand, allowing Hux to lead him over to the table, sitting down in the chair Hux himself had used – the implications of this were not lost on the other members of the war council, if their awestruck staring was anything to go by. Hux fixed them all with a powerful stare, daring them to question his Crow’s claim to his chair – a claim normally reserved exclusively for a spouse – but no one was daft enough to say anything.
“Apologies,” Hux smiled at the group of midnight-clad ones that was now coming over to stand close to their brother. “I didn’t mean you all had to come, and I hope we didn’t interrupt you in the middle of something important.”

“It’s quite alright,” Kylo assured him. “We needed to have a word with all of you anyway, and now is as good a time as any.”

“Is something wrong, master Ren?” Rurik asked, exchanging worried looks with the other chieftains.

“Yes and no,” Kylo said, pulling his cowl tighter around him. “It’s not that simple.”

“What is it?”

“We must kill Snoke.” One could have heard a hair fall in the silence that followed that statement. “It is the will of the Goddess, and we must obey her. He has betrayed the Gods, not just our order, and he must be destroyed. We do not suffer traitors to live. Especially not when they have betrayed the very Gods to whom we’ve pledged our lifelong allegiance.”

“I have a feeling there is more to it than this,” Hux remarked, leaning against the chair. “What’s his motive? He has to have a reason for this… this madness.”

“He wants to rule the world,” Kylo said, sighing deeply. “He wants, or so we believe, to make himself King and God of all the world – to be worshipped instead of our Gods, and to wield supreme power over everyone and everything. He wants the Crows to be his weapons and tools for maintaining control.”

“So… you must find him and kill him.” Rurik sounded anything but at ease with this revelation. “Why do I get the feeling that there is a catch to this?”

“Because there is,” Erris said, from his seat at the edge of the dais upon which Hux’ throne-like chair was placed. “We don’t know where he is.”

The war council looked about ready to have a collective fit, a few of them choking on their ale and food.

“We need to seek him out through the Force,” Silass continued. “And that is no easy feat. Snoke was always incredibly skilled at concealing his Force presence, and according to our tradition, no one – sans for a very select few elders – knows where he resides. It was arranged this way for safety reasons. But now, it has rapidly become a problem.”

“What will this mean for your presence in our campaign?” Hux asked. He had taken the news with more composure, but it was evident that it had still unsettled him some. “You will still be accompanying us, I hope?”

“Yeah, we will,” Avi nodded as they wormed their way onto Erris’ lap, happily munching on a winter apple. “But we might have to leave at some point, to go kill Snoke. But we’ll be back right away after that – right big brother?” The question was directed at Kylo, who nodded.

“It’s as they say,” he told them. “We will accompany the army for as long as we possibly can, and we will fight every battle we come to face, but once we find out where he is, we must leave you temporarily, to seek him out and destroy him. This war of yours is for nothing if he still lives. He will wreak havoc upon you when you are at your most weak and tired, and steal both power and land from you. There is no other choice here. He must be destroyed.”
The Crows continued to explain the situation to the war council for several more hours; assisting them in drawing up back up plans for every possible and impossible scenario they could think of. Avi, the strange little Crow that none of the chieftains or officers had quite known what to think of, finally got to show what they were made of. When the Crows eventually withdrew back to the audience chamber, Avi had rendered them all speechless with their exceptional skills in strategy and planning. It was decided that all the Crows – both Maul and the Knights, and the Hux Crows – would be given a section of the army each, which would be theirs to fight alongside and protect. With the Crows’ ability to communicate through the Force, they would have an incredible advantage when it came to both troop movements and battle. Kylo would stay with Hux, it was decided. The Crows made it very clear that they would not accept anything else. He was the highest ranking one, and he was Hux’ – his place was at the centre of their little Force web, from where he could coordinate them and relay the orders from Hux and his generals. Hux had looked hesitant, but knew better than to argue with Crows, and so he accepted their demand.

~*~*~

The Crows did not emerge from the audience chamber again until it was nearly dawn, and then only because Kylo’s headache had reached a peak that had him in such pain he could not stop himself from throwing up. With the headache came another series of seizures, and they had to quickly take him up to his rooms to try and help him. Hux, who had been sleeping quite fitfully, had woken up by their hurried entry, and found himself with an armful of badly spasming Crow, before he had even had a chance to rub the sleep from his eyes. It took a long time for Kylo to even manage to tell them where the worst of the pain was coming from, and when he did, it was only a whimpered repetition of ‘eyes’. It made no sense! He no longer had any eyes! Only Maul seemed to understand; his own strange eyes brimming with empathy as he attempted to soothe his child.

It was after dawn when Kylo finally drifted off into a deep sleep, the seizures gone for now, and his headache alleviated by the strongest potion Chava had dared to mix together without risking his life. Hux was very reluctant to face the day when he knew Kylo was ill, but Mai solved the problem for him when she stopped by after breakfast and found him still in bed, holding his sleeping Crow close. Mai was nothing if not a highly competent soldier and leader, and when she offered to fill in for him until he felt ready to come down and join them, he gratefully accepted. He had already been away far too much from Kylo when he had been in pain, and he refused to ever do that again. Chava had informed him that Kylo would sleep like the dead for many hours, but even so, Hux did not venture further than the privy, and once to the sitting room to have some breakfast. Once he was done, he immediately returned to the bed, sitting up against the headboard – Kylo secured against his chest – to read through some reports Mai had agreed to leave with him.

It had become dark outside again when his beloved finally stirred, next to him – in his usual, cat like manner at first, and then he froze for a moment before more or less bolting out of bed, clawing at the blindfold. Hux hurried after him, rushing to steady him when Kylo looked about to trip over himself.

“Kylo, love,” he soothed. “Come now, take it slow. What in the world is going on?”

“My eyes!” Kylo sputtered. “I can-! They’re-! Braith, please help! Get this thing off me!”

“Alright!” Hux assured. “I’ll get it off you, I promise – but you need to stop squirming for a moment, or I won’t be able to get to the knot.”

Kylo went still, leaning in to hide his face against Hux’ chest as he worked open the knot to the blindfold. It had caught a little on Kylo’s hair, and Hux did not wish to cause him any pain if he could at all avoid it. Once he finally managed to untie it, he could feel Kylo begin to tremble
against him, and as Hux took a step back, taking the blindfold with him, Kylo was visibly shaking – eyes still closed, face turned down and away. Hux reached out and gently cradled his chin in his hand, encouraging him to face him.

“I’m scared,” Kylo whispered.

“Why?” Hux inquired as he softly ran his thumb over Kylo’s plump lower lip.

“What if it’s not real? What if it was just ghost pains? What if they’re- what if they’re hideous?”

“Oh, Kylo. Sweetness.” Hux pulled him close again, kissing him until he felt some of the tension dissolve from his Crow’s shoulders. Pulling away only just enough to breathe, he murmured:

“Nothing about you can ever be hideous to me. If you are not ready for me to see just yet, then I will respect that – but please do not think so lowly of me as to believe me so shallow that I could ever find you anything but beautiful and oh so very captivating.”

Kylo hesitated, biting his lip.

“Can you promise me to be honest?” he asked. “Please? If- if they do look horrid, and you can’t stand to see them, please tell me so. Please. I can’t live with myself if I feel that you are forcing yourself to look at them. At me.”

“I promise.”

Kylo was still as a statue for several moments, before slowly facing his lover, and – after some further hesitation – opened his eyes for the first time in weeks. The light was clearly much too bright for him, even as limited as it was, and he had to quickly close them again – his hands coming up to rub at them. But Hux had seen. This had not been ghost pains of eyes long gone. No, Kylo’s eyelids had a healthy round shape to them once more; a pair of eyes sitting in their sockets as they should, as if they had never been missing. And oh, what a pair! A gold so deep it was nearly copper, with a ring of a beautiful green around it. Eyes like those commonly found on the large snow cats, and the dire wolves that stalked the great forests of the North. While he would miss the dark, golden hazel pools he had fallen so in love with the first time he ever saw Kylo, he was just as quickly falling in love with these beautiful golden green eyes. They suited Kylo’s fierce and wild nature perfectly, and Hux knew he would turn even more heads now than before. It made him feel a fierce pride and love – knowing that he was allowed to share the life of this otherworldly, stunning young man.

“Please, say something!” Kylo whimpered, fear fraying the edges of his voice, and Hux realized he must have been staring like some fool for longer than he thought.

Gathering Kylo into his arms once more, he kissed him deeply, burying his hands in his hair.

“They’re beautiful,” he whispered against Kylo’s lips as they parted. “So beautiful. You are beautiful.” When he felt Kylo’s hesitation, he kissed him again, pulling him flush against him – a sudden fierce need to prove to this incredible, alluring, strange, beautiful creature just how much Hux adored and desired him rising hot in his blood. “If you cannot believe my words, will you believe my actions?”

Picking Kylo up, causing him to yelp and cling on tight, he carried him to bed – lowering him into it as if he was a sacred thing, before covering his body with his own. He hesitated for a moment, worried that he was moving too fast, that Kylo was still too weak to handle lovemaking, but then Kylo pulled him as close as he could possibly come, initiating a deep kiss of his own as he guided Hux’ hands to where he wanted them. Hux still took his time as he undressed them both, showering
each new patch of skin revealed in kisses, caresses, and words of worship and praise. He was gentle, so gentle, but firm – making himself a rock for Kylo’s damaged confidence to lean against and take strength from – and by the time he was finally deep inside, Kylo had relaxed enough to make demands on what he wanted from his lover. Hux was more than happy to oblige. Their first time as lovers had been so hurried, so desperate, so full of fear and pain and unshed tears – but now… Now they had time. They had all the time in the world, and Hux fully intended to make use of it. Blasphemy it may be, but before Braith Hux worshiped his Gods, he worshiped Kylo Ren – mind, body, heart, and soul – and he put everything he had into ensuring no part of Kylo could still harbour doubt about the depth of Hux’ love or desire.

He moved slowly, almost languidly, while caressing every inch of skin he could reach – fingers trailing the massive snake tattoos, counting runes and symbols, while he kept Kylo’s lips locked to his in a lazy kiss, while revelling in the feeling of sharp nail trailing down his back and sides, of strong fingers gripping his hair. Their climax built slowly, and Hux would not mind at all to keep going just like this for as long as he could, but it seemed Kylo had other plans; he managed to flip them both around, so that he came to straddle Hux instead – the shift in position making them both gasp and groan with the sensations. After some adjustment, Kylo found a rhythm to work with, and from there it did not take long until Hux’ grip on his hips became almost bruising, the muscles in Kylo’s thighs tightening more and more as his chased his release. Hux desperately tried to hold back, wanting to make sure his lover got what he needed and wanted first, praise and declarations of love falling from his lips like seeds from a dandelion under the strong summer winds, until Kylo’s climax hit – the sheer force of it causing objects around the room to lift from their places, only to come crashing down as the first wave had passed. Feeling Kylo clamping down on him was all it took, and Hux climaxed with a gasp of his lover’s name.

~*~*~

The next morning, Hux woke to the sight of Kylo standing by the mirror, wearing only a pair of trousers – his scarred back on full display – and Hux knew they would be alright. He had succeeded in regaining his Crow’s trust, or at least enough of it to have something to build on. After they had cleaned up the night before, they had laid curled up close together under the furs, talking about silly things, just enjoying the closeness until they eventually fell asleep.

At the moment, Kylo was examining his new eyes, and Hux took the opportunity to study the damage done to his body. It made wrath boil in him, thick and molten and burning. He had been raised knowing that harming a Crow was among the greatest sins a man could commit – a sin with death as punishment, and no second chances given – but when it came to Kylo, to what had been done to him, by his own fellow Crows… Suddenly, the law against harming Crows felt very breakable. He wanted them to pay. He wanted them to suffer, a full day for every hour they had tormented his Kylo. He wanted them to beg and cry for death, and he wanted them to die in pain. Braith Hux was not a good man, and he knew himself well. He would gladly torment the very sanity out of them, and he would not regret it. There would be no mercy for those who harmed his beloved.

No mercy, no justice – only death.

Hux had lost him once – he would tear the world apart before he ever risked it happening again.

Chapter End Notes
Hello. Uhm, to absolutely no one's surprise, this chapter got ridiculously delayed as well. For much the same reasons as the last few ones: life hasn't been very kind to me, and I've been stressing myself out quite badly with the thesis bit. Right now, I'm working on re-establishing some proper routines, and should hopefully be able to cram out the remaining chapters in some sort of more reasonable intervals. Because, as you might have noticed up by the tags, we're finally starting to see the finish line. 36 is an estimated number, but it should be around that if my plot planning holds.

So, yeah... I'm not entirely pleased with this chapter. Dunno, but it feels a bit... off, in terms of flow and pacing. So heads up that I might decide to go back and edit it a little. Maybe.
Anyway. We finally got the bit about Kylo's eyes resolved! Tell me if you had guessed it already :) Regrowing eyes is apparently quite the painful process, and I sure as heck wouldn't want to go through it.
And we got some more Knights being Knights, and we even got a little bit of smut! What more can you need?
No Southerners in this chapter, because there just wasn't room for them in this chapter. But don't worry - you'll see them again soon.

Before you go, do take a moment to leave a comment and tell me if you enjoyed the chapter, yeah? Your comments are all loved and appreciated, and serves as fuel to keep this thing going :)

Until next time, lovelies!
They had to keep moving – stopping meant freezing to death. Born and raised in the pleasant and dry heat of the South, Poe and Finn had never experienced cold like this before in their lives, and they knew that it would only get worse as the winter secured its grip on the lands. So they kept moving during the nights, only taking shorter breaks for food and rest – using the daytime and it’s slightly less blistering cold to take their longer rest. It was much too dangerous for them to be moving about near the main roads during the day either way, so they made use of the hours by huddling close together by whatever small fire they dared to light – always somewhere out of sight of the roads.

Once they had recovered a little after having floated ashore following the shipwreck, they had – after some deliberation – gone back down to the beach, to recover what extra clothing and equipment they could. It felt wrong to steal from the dead, to leave them half clothed and unburied on a Godforsaken beach somewhere, but necessity has no laws and they needed to make it to D’Qar alive by any possible means. If that meant looting the corpses of dead sailors for clothes, money, and weapons, then so be it. They had to make it back to D’Qar somehow. They had a duty to their Queen, to inform her of the passing of her daughter, her lover, and her good friend. The first night, they had cried for them – clinging to each other as they grieved for their princess, their friend, and her father and uncle. They had been her guards for so many years that she had come to feel more like their little sister than their queen to be. The loss of her was a sharp, tearing, grinding sort of pain, and they could not even begin to think of how great a loss this was to D’Qar. Queen Leia was not getting any younger, and this was the second time she had been robbed of an heir – even though the first one had been a subject not brought up by anyone who possessed even the smallest grain of self-preservation. While she was in good health, and had always been, Finn and Poe both knew this loss would have the vultures flocking to the palace to try and gain enough power to influence the order of succession. What would happen if the South learned that her firstborn, her very own blood heir, was still alive? What would happen if they were to learn that he was not only alive and well, but one of the most powerful Force wielders in generations? Civil wars had begun over less than that, and they could only pray that such horrors would not strike their precious homeland.

They had been travelling south for a good week now, both of them coughing and sneezing, having wiped snot from their noses so much they had turned red and raw, to the point where it was now painful even to have a snowflake land on them. They both knew they were running a fever as well, but they simply did not have any chance to stop and rest for as many days as they needed – at least not at the moment. They still needed to make it further south, or they would risk being captured by the local warchief, and probably executed the second they learned who they were. But if they could make it far enough south, they would have a decent chance at finding shelter with people who were, if not allies, then at the very least neutral.

And so they kept moving forward – slowly, one step at a time, leaning on each other for support – the deep, silent darkness of the Northern winter night pressing in on them like the walls of a tomb.

One step at a time. They kept moving forward. They had a duty, and they would not fail.

~*~*~

Rey could scarcely remember a time when she had felt more miserable than now, being carried on
Chewie’s back as if she was a knapsack and not a princess, with the fever making her dizzy and her mind foggy. She must have coughed up half a lung at this point, and she tried hard not to think about the never-ending flood of nasty things coming from her nose. Poor uncle Chewie’s jacket; it would never be clean again. The thought was childish, and very uncharacteristic of her, and she blamed the fever – it was clearly making her silly. It was embarrassing how sick she had gotten, especially since uncle Chewie remained completely and utterly unaffected by both the ordeal and the weather; he had carried her on his back like a child for several days now, not so much as a sneeze or cough coming from him, and his pace remaining quick and steady as he marched them southward. So far, they had had an immense blessing in the fact that Chewie was so obviously a Northerner, which had allowed them to approach a homestead a couple of days earlier, and ask for some warmer clothing for Rey, and something to eat on the way. As payment, her uncle had helped them mock the stable and feed the animals, before he and Rey set off again. They had been offered to sleep in the barn, since the poor girl was so ill, but they could not risk it. One never knew with people, and Rey’s prominent Southern accent had already caused some raised eyebrows. They had to keep going.

If she was honest with herself, Rey had never felt more torn about seeing her mother than she did now. Like most, but certainly not all children, Rey wanted to be back in the safety of her mother’s arms after the ordeal she had been through over the past months. She needed the sense of normality with a desperation that frightened her, but she also found herself wanting to ask Chewie to turn around. Turn around, and head back north. Warchief Hux may be a demon in a man’s guise, but the lands, the people, the castle… She had felt at home there in a way she could not quite remember doing before. And back up north was her brother, the one she had lost and come so close to having back. Her brother, Kylo, the Crow. Rey had never seen a Crow, but she had heard all the stories, and it felt important to her to know that even though he was denied his claim at a royal title and inheritance, he was still powerful and respected in his own right. He had made a life and a home for himself with people who loved him fiercely enough to go to war for him.

Going South and reuniting with her mother meant that she would most likely find herself locked in the palace while her mother marched North – and if she was locked in the palace, she could do nothing to help Kylo. Even worse, she knew she risked being accused of treason if she uttered any positive opinions about Lord Hux. Leia had already sent one child to the scaffold, and it was dawning on Rey more and more with each passing league that if she could send her own flesh and blood to his execution, then she could certainly do the same to her adopted child. Her adopted status had never bothered her before – had, in fact, rarely even been in her thoughts at all. Her mother had always been her mother – her saving angel when the woman who had birthed Rey had been taken from her. But now… It was a sickening feeling to no longer be able to ignore the possibility that her mother’s love for her was highly conditional, and that it could be withdrawn at any time. She was an investment, an asset, a plan for the future – any love Leia had for her came second. The conversations she had had with her father had also made that rather clear. When even Han Solo, who had been the royal paramour for three decades, worried about what the Queen might do when they returned, the situation was anything but promising. He had told her, the night before the shipwreck, that his only reason for going back south at all, was to try and stop Leia from going after their son again. It had been a painful admission that he scarcely recognized the woman he had fallen in love with anymore, and that if the choice was to be between his only son, and the woman who had attempted to murder him three times in a row – before sending his own father to ensure the fourth attempt was successful – then Han could not live with himself if he chose anything but his son.

Perhaps, Rey thought despite herself, having been lost at sea was a kinder fate than telling Leia that he would choose the side of a Crow over his Queen. No matter how he phrased it, there was simply no way it would not end in absolute disaster – and Han had known that full well.
It was all up to Rey now. She would have to be the one to protect her brother against their mother’s vindictiveness. No matter the cost. She would do it – in honour and memory of her father.

~*~*~

The camp at Skye Castle had been large enough in its own right, but it was dwarfed quite spectacularly by the size of the camp at the main gathering place. More a city made of tents than a camp, it sprawled out in all directions like some gigantic sea creature; knife sharp rows of tents were interspersed with massive cooking fires and outdoor kitchens, training areas, stables, smithies, supply sheds, and paddocks and folds for horses and cattle. Enclosed on all sides by massive palisades, with the top end sharpened – causing even more resemblance to some wild, hungry monster emerging from the snow to feed on anyone foolish enough to approach it – the camp sat well protected. One could never be too careful, not even in one’s own territory. War had rules, yes, but only in theory. Reality was, as always, very different.

Hux, Rurik, and the Crows were in the last troop to arrive – the traditions demanding that the warchief and his Crow should always be the last to leave the castle. It was symbolic; with the warchief and the Crow went the power of world and spirit, and it was considered bad luck to have them leave while other leaders were still present at their home. Most of the Flock had gone with them, but several thousand birds were still guarding the castle; nestled safely in their towers, ready to attack to defend, or raise the alarms at a moment’s notice. With the addition of the birds from the Mother Flock, Kylo’s own Flock was by far the largest in the entire North, and when all the birds flew together above their heads they blocked out the sun by the sheer force of their numbers. It was an impressive sight.

Hux had worried about Kylo’s health and strength, but to his enormous relief, he had been proven wrong; Kylo had handled the journey brilliantly, showing only very mild signs of fatigue – but those, he knew, would linger for a while yet. One did not undergo an ordeal like what Kylo had without some lingering effects. While he knew that them engaging in sweet lovemaking on an almost daily basis did not help, he would not trade it for the world. Kylo needed to feel desired, had said so very clearly, and Hux would be damned if he did not give his beloved everything he asked for. Kylo still suffered from seizures every now and then, and his new eyes were extremely sensitive still, which caused some discomfort in the shape of continued headaches, but he was improving each day. It made the warchief warm inside to see his beloved’s spirits rise again, to see him drink in the sights around him, to see him slowly emerge from the shell of fear and insecurity he had withdrawn into following the events at the House. Much to his surprise, and following delight, they had learned that Kylo’s eyes reflected the moonlight, making Hux’ first impression of them as almost feline-looking even more true. Kylo had had mixed feelings about it – as he usually did when it came to anything that would make him stand out further in a crowd – but after some encouragement from his warchief, along with a gentle reminder from Maul that his eyes, too, reflected the light in the same way, and that there was a reason for them to do so, Kylo had begun to accept it.

He knew they still had serious matters to talk about – the unexpected arrival of Kylo’s long lost father and sister being the most pressing one – but it would have to wait a bit longer. He could not risk his beloved’s fragile stability just yet. He still needed to ground himself more, but Hux felt like a filthy liar more and more for every day he did not breach the subject. Rurik called him daft, and master Maul had approached him, worried, asking if there was something amiss between them. Hux had shared only the briefest of explanations, and Maul had advised him to have the conversation sooner rather than later, as Kylo might feel betrayed if it took too long. As if Hux was not painfully aware of that already! Even Phasma had told him he was being silly. Eira, precious little mother to them all, was so far the only one on his side.
Their arrival in the camp was a formal affair, a display of power and command, meant to boost the troops’ morale, and build a sense of unity and camaraderie. Hux doubted his troops needed it, but tradition was tradition, and so they were making their way to the main entrance of the camps surrounded by the entire high guard, a lesser forest of banners, pipers and drummers, and the Flock as a pitch-black cloud in the air above. Rurik’s clan brought up the rear, protecting Hux’ core troop from any attempts at attacks coming from that direction. The North was a harsh land, and the Northerners knew how to seize an opportunity, a moment of weakness, and work it in their favours. One could never be too careful.

Hux was wearing his usual armour, polished until it was bright enough to sting the eyes, with a fur-lined blue woollen cloak, and his circlet firmly in place on his head. Béla had been fitted with his own impressive armour as well, and – being the surprisingly vain creature he was – was prancing and posing as if he was the warchief of the clan. Askr, who had – much to his dismay – been given his very own set of armour as well, seemed infinitely less amused by this, and refused to so much as look in Béla’s direction. On his back, Kylo looked like a prince in his own right. Wearing his usual battle robes together with his precious black cloak, with his broadsword hanging safely at his hip, Kylo had his hair pulled back from his face by intricate braiding, coming together at the back of his head to form one single, thick braid that reached well past his shoulder-blades by now. Though Hux knew his beloved was deeply uncomfortable going to war without his helmet – which had been left behind during their hurried departure from the House – he was proud and impressed by how well he kept it hidden. Anyone who did not know him as well as Hux did would think him the epitome of confidence and control.

Just behind them came Mitaka, Phasma, and Lady Mai, together with Maul and the Knights, who had been outfitted in similar garments as their master, and with a wide selection of weapons at their sides. Aya, and the rest of the Hux Crows, followed close behind in Rurik’s troop. The armies were ready, waiting for them in perfect rows on each side on the camp entrance – their armours and shields gleaming in the sunlight, and their heads respectfully bowed as their warchief passed by. The chieftains and officers had certainly made sure to give their leaders a proper welcome, and the sheer pride and sense of importance that permeated the air made them all sit up even straighter in their saddles as they entered the camp, and made their way to their assigned tents in the heart of the enormous complex.

The following morning, surrounded by their closest friends and family, Phasma and Mitaka were finally united in marriage. Hux, relieved not to be the one to wed them, had instead escorted Mitaka to the makeshift altar while Mai had been Phasma’s escort. Both of them had grinned at each other as they walked behind the happy couple, swords crossed between them as dictated by tradition – not that it was very likely that either one of them would have second thoughts, but customs were customs. Kylo waited for them by the altar, with all of his siblings and his father there to assist – making Phasma and Mitaka’s wedding an unprecedented event. Never in living memory had so many Crows been in attendance at a wedding. Phasma looked happier than Hux had ever seen her, dressed in her ceremonial uniform, and next to her Mitaka – in a new jacket gifted to him by Hux – simply did not seem able to stop smiling. He deserved it, Hux thought, after the horrid start he had been given in life. He was the kindest man Hux knew, and the clan owed him more than they could ever repay. Their humble request had been easy enough to fulfil, and a tent had been set up in a quiet corner of the camp, prepared with braziers, soft bedding, and plenty of good food and sweet things. Come war or peace, Braith Hux would always ensure his family were cared for.

~*~*~

Han had been living with the two Kinnon women since he had been washed ashore. It had not been
his plan or intention, but he had gotten very sick from the ordeal, and then there had been a monster of a blizzard, which had caught them all unprepared. According to his two hosts, blizzards this early in winter was incredibly rare, and that there was no leaving the house, much less the clan territory for several days, because sometimes, when there was one, another one would follow close behind. Coastal weather, they said, it could not be trusted. Han, tucked in under a pile of blankets in a spare cot by the fire, did not attempt to object. He was far from young; going outside alone in his current state would kill him. Thankfully, his hosts did not seem to mind his company, and he helped as much as he could with what he could – his many years at sea proving a great asset when it came to helping them repair their nets and pots, and they seemed to find his stories rather entertaining too.

Unfortunately, all the time he had on his hands also meant time to think. Han had much preferred not to think about things until he had done what he set out to do; convince Leia to cease her foolish campaign, or die trying. But here he was, and the thoughts came like hungry wolves after a weakened prey, and with them came grief, and doubt. People could survive shipwrecks, he knew that. Rey was a good swimmer, he knew that as well. But the Northern seas were wild, ravenous, cruel, and unpredictable. And, above all, they were freezing cold, even in summer. The chances of her surviving were so slim they were all but non-existent, and Han had already spilt more tears than he knew he had left after losing his son all those years ago. Two children now. Two children who had loved him and trusted him – and he had failed them both. All he had ever needed to do was to be their father first, and everything else second, and he had done the opposite – always driven by his own selfish needs and his queen’s demands in equal measure.

This was punishment.

Whichever God or Goddess it was that held the claim on his soul, they were punishing him for his deeds. And oh, did he deserve it! Han Solo was not a good man, and had never pretended to be, but now he sat there – in all his coughing, snot-laden glory – wishing he had been, at least when it counted.

Going South to seek Leia out suddenly did not feel like a good plan. She would kill him. He had failed to kill Kylo, and he had failed to bring Rey home. He had failed to kill his firstborn son, and then unintentionally caused the death of his daughter. No matter how he turned the situation over in his mind, there was no way to look at it that would not end with his head on a spike. Perhaps it would be better not to go back. He had no loyalty left to the South. His only son was alive, and somewhere in the North. Warchief Hux may well be a demon in human form, but Han knew he would at least listen to reason. He might not agree, and he might still kill you, but he would at least listen. And he cared about Kylo, more deeply and fiercely than Han had thought humanly possible. Perhaps he would give Han a chance to prove himself enough to earn a place in his armies? Han would beg on his bare knees if needed – he had little pride left anyway, he might as well sacrifice the last shreds of it to be close to his son. Even if Kylo refused to so much as look at him, Han would consider it a blessing. It was an ever-growing need of his – to be near his child again, in any way he was allowed.

During their time at Hux’ court, Han had heard the way the clanspeople spoke of him, the pride and awe resonating in their voices. They loved him, he had realized. They loved and respected and cared for him. They felt honoured and blessed to have him. It was so far from the image of the Force-crazed monster Leia had painted him out to be. ‘Master Ren’, they called him, always with a smile. They spoke of the steel in his voice when he scolded those who misbehaved, the warmth and gentleness in his eyes and voice when he handled animals or children, the regal, ethereal grace with which he carried himself, and the immense and unshakeable self-control and self-discipline he
displayed at all times – even when exhausted or under pressure. Hearing and seeing these Northerners, this harsh, hard-bitten people – so used to the difficulties of surviving in the unforgiving North, so difficult to impress, and even more difficult to endear to anything – speak of his son as if he was their father, their son, their most beloved older brother… Han could scarcely remember ever being more proud of him than he was now – when Kylo no longer even seemed to acknowledge Han as his sire. Kylo belonged there, in that castle and in that clan; he was theirs, and they knew he was a blessing unlike any other.

Even if he arrived to Hux’ land and found himself bound for execution, he could take it. He would die by his son’s hand, and that, he thought, would be an honour greater than he deserved. His son was a better man than he had ever been; to die by his hand would not be dishonourable. And, if he was very honest with himself, it was a death that was more than deserved. Kylo had the right to take his life, by both Northern and Southern laws, and Han promised himself that he would never again deny his son anything – not even if it meant giving up his life.

But then there was the problem of who else would stop Leia. There was very little chance that Chewie, Finn, or Poe had survived the ordeal either – and even if they had, who knew in what condition they were, and what had happened to them after they had come ashore. For all he knew, they could have been caught, or ended up further North, or died in a blizzard or by being attacked by some wild animals. He could not count on them. As much as it pained him, Han knew he had no choice but to assume them all dead. That meant that this was all up to him. He would most likely not survive it.

But hopefully, with more than a little luck, his sacrifice might help make sure his son was kept safe.

Kylo’s safety was all that mattered now.

It was, perhaps, the most unselfish thought Han Solo had had in years. But it was the one that hardened more and more with every beat of his heart, into something that looked like the beginning of a resolve.

~*~*~

On the third morning after the warchief’s arrival in the camp – bathed in the light of a sun rising in a halo of blood and gold against a cloudless blue sky, that seemed to stretch on to the very edge of the world – the armies of the North marched out. The drummers setting the pace were drowned out the sound of heavy boots and hooves marching in perfect synchronisation, each step a wave of rolling thunder across the snowclad landscape, the marching chants of hundreds of thousands of Northerners, the eager cries of countless birds in the sky, enough to set every wild thing within leagues fleeing in terror. The night had been spent watching the Crows sacrifice the foods, animals, and prisoners brought by each clan – offerings to the Goddesses of death and war, a prayer for their protection and blessing, a child’s outstretched hand to their parent, asking for them to lead the way safely to victory and then home again. The spirits were high, and the army marched with confidence, safe and trusting in their Goddesses.

It was not large enough yet to meet the Southern armies on an open field, but more would come. More would always come. War was in their blood, and when one called, others would heed – it was the way it had always been. And the North had never much favoured the open battlefield. If choice was theirs, they would always favour the smaller skirmishes, the stealth attacks from fast moving groups, the sabotage – always working with the landscape and conditions around them; hunting their enemies as they hunted their prey. They all knew that the South feared this more than anything, and that they would most likely do everything in their power to swing the balance over to
their advantage. But they trusted their warchief. Lord Hux had nothing to prove to them; come summer or winter, field or forest, sea or land, he had led them to victory in every campaign he had called them to serve in. He would lead them home victorious from this too. He had the favour of the Gods, and anyone with eyes could see this for themselves. Anyone with eyes to see his blessed bond with the Children of Death, would know to join him.

Certainly, there would be resistance from those clans that had been overtaken by treacherous Crows, but the Hux clan came ready with the Knights of Ren, with the Master of the Knights himself – they would find their way around that particular obstacle. Around it, or through it, it did not seem to matter much to them. The armies did not frighten easily, and they had all been around Crows since they were in swaddles – most of them had been helped into the world by a Crow – but to have so many of them around for the march, to have the most legendary of Crows leading their way… It set a tone for the campaign, a sense of importance, a feeling that this march was more than simply another war. It set a feeling that this march would change the world as they knew it.

---

As soon as the light of dawn had begun to reach the docks and wharfs around Whitehaven, a horn sounded from the castle wall, and one by one answering calls came from the ships anchored there. It was a cold, clear day, with a breeze coming from northwest, filling the blood-red sails. The sea lay as calm as a mirror around the black hulls of the Hux clan’s armada, as they sprung free of all restraints and headed for the open sea – ready to wreak havoc on the Southern coast, to kill and conquer for their warchief and their clan.

---

Poe and Finn had almost given up hope of ever finding their way back to D’Qar, having been on the road for what had to be at the very least a fortnight now; the snow-covered lands giving way to autumn reds and browns as they pressed on with as much haste as their sickly and hungry bodies could manage. Then, finally, they came over a small hill-top, and found themselves faced with a veritable forest of the sky-blue banners of House Organa. The army had already marched out, and they looked at each other as their stomachs filled with a cold, sinking feeling. It would be even harder now, to convince Queen Leia not to go North. It would end in nothing but disaster, they knew. They had not seen much of the Northern armies, but they were experienced enough to draw conclusions from what they had seen. The North was more than ready for war, they were strong in both numbers and force, and they were fully devoted – hearts, minds, and souls – to their warchief. They would march right into the seven Hells, and think nothing of it, if their warchief asked it of them. Devotion of that kind was hard to come by; a precious gift from a people to their leader, worth more than every piece of gold or jewel in the world combined, because of the power that came with it. True faith and devotion would keep an army marching long after provisions and hope had run out, and clan Hux had it for their leader.

Queen Leia’s armies, they both knew, did not. Not anymore. The true, devoted core of her armies were as old as, or older than, her – their strength waning, their own greed waxing, as the sand in the hour-glasses of their lives slowly ticked towards the end. The younger soldiers were afraid of her, afraid of failure, afraid of repercussions, of being found wanting. They would have needed more years to build a trust before being ordered out to kill and be killed for a Queen who these days rarely even left her palace.

They were recognized by the guards as they came closer; the first shred of luck they had had in the last few weeks – their surprised calls and hurried questions a most welcome cacophony to their weary minds. Apparently, no one thought they were alive, and they were rushed to the healer’s tent to be tended to before they saw the Queen. The healers were not impressed with their health as
much as they were with the fact that they were even alive in the first place. After Poe had explained the events of the last few weeks – Finn’s voice having been temporarily lost due to him coughing his throat raw – they had stared at the pair as if they had suddenly grown an extra head, and then promptly gotten them dressed in the warmest clothes they could find, followed by a dose of every single potion they could dig out of their many bags and chests in an attempt to combat the illness in their bodies. They would not be going to see the Queen, the healers informed them. They would be on bedrest, and would be transported on stretchers until further notice. Ideally, they would be sent back to D’Qar, to rest up properly in the peace and quiet of the royal city, but they all knew it was unlikely to happen. Even so, the healers refused to budge on the matter of their rest. Queen she may be, but Her Majesty would simply have to come to the tent if she wished to speak with them.

And that she did – after supper had been finished, she entered the tent, accompanied by a few of her higher officers and a few Doves, whom neither Poe nor Finn recognized. This was not a good sign. The Queen’s brother was more often than not the only one who had any semblance of a change to change her mind, or give advice she would actually listen to. If he was with her on the campaign, he would have been here now – his absence did not bode well.

“Where is my daughter?” She asked, as straight to the point as ever. “Answer!”

Poe and Finn shared a glance. The likelihood of them surviving this decreased with each breath, they both knew it.

“Your Majesty,” Poe began, letting his voice convey the sadness he felt – maybe it could provoke some pity in her. Pity enough to let them die quickly, at least. But, then again, she was not known for her leniency. “There was an accident as we were sailing back to D’Qar. A shipwreck. I don’t know what happened to the Princess. We were all washed overboard – the fact that we’re even here to inform you of this is… unfathomable to us.”

“A shipwreck?” The Queen paled considerably, before the anger crept back onto her features. “Are you saying my daughter, my heir, was lost at sea?”

“There is a chance, yes, Your Majesty,” Poe nodded. “But, uhm, seeing as we made it ashore, and the Princess always was an excellent swimmer, she might have made it.”

“And you didn’t bother to stick around to find out? You just tucked tails and headed for the woods as soon as you crept ashore? Officers of the Royal Guard, and when it matters, you both turned out to be incompetent cowards!”

“We searched the beach, my Queen,” Finn croaked, his voice so faint and low they all had to lean in to hear. “Couldn’t find her.”

Queen Leia looked about ready to strike them both – her face an unhealthy red shade, a vein in her neck bulging from the high pressure in her blood.

“And Han and Chewie?” She ground out, obviously forcing herself to refrain from violence. “Did you find them? Or are they, too, possibly dead at sea, but possibly alive somewhere where you just didn’t bother to look?”

“We don’t know,” Poe sighed, resignation heavy around the edges of his words. “We searched as much as we could of the beach, but we didn’t find anyone else alive. But shipwrecks, Your Majesty, they’re chaotic – people can end up scattered over large distances. It’s possible they’re alive, and that the Princess is with them.”
She was quiet for a long time, staring them down, her usually dark brown eyes now a dangerous black, anger clearly simmering very close to the surface.

“You’ve failed to keep the Crown Princess of D’Qar safe. Because of your failure and gross negligence, our kingdom stands without an heir. This is, as far as I’m concerned, as serious a crime as had you killed her yourselves.” She turned to the officers. “As soon as the healers are done with them, I want them transported back to D’Qar. As soon as I return, I will have them tried and executed for treason.”

With that, she left the tent.

~*~*~

The closer to the South they came, the more Rey wanted to simply turn around and head for the North. She knew that she had a duty to honour her father’s memory – a duty to prove herself and be the Queen her people wanted and needed – but every inch and fibre of her being rebelled against returning to her mother’s side. The thought of being hidden away in the palace again, as if she was some fragile heirloom only brought out at special occasions before being placed back into a cupboard somewhere, made her feel sick to her stomach. Because once it had dawned on her what the world really looked like, and how much of her mother’s words had been misleading, if not blatant lies, she could not make herself pretend that she could ever be happy or proud to follow in those footsteps. She had seen the world now – had been farther North than Leia ever had – and had learned that not only was there so much richness and beauty to be found in all the cultures, but that at the end of the day, they were all as much regular people as the citizens of D’Qar. Furthermore, she realized that at the end of the day, she was simply another person – her own person – and that with a little time and effort, she could have a life of her own choosing. A life that was hers, and no one else’s. With a wife or two that she loved, a home that was theirs alone, and a world at their doorstep that no one would stop her from wandering out into whenever she chose.

She had tried to persuade Chewie to turn around and head North, had attempted every last little trick, tactic, and ploy she knew – every last thing she knew had always worked on him and his soft heart – and in the end, she had even resorted to begging, but Chewie refused. She had tried to go by herself, but that had only led to the embarrassing situation in which she currently found herself; carried like a sack of flour over Chewie’s broad shoulders, with a rope tied around her waist keeping her within a maximum distance of ten feet from him at all times. Chewie was good with knots, always had been, and she knew without even trying that she would never manage to untie herself. Cutting the rope was just as useless; Chewie kept the knives close, and he was a light sleeper. No matter how she tried, Rey would simply not be able to steal one. Even if she did, the rope was thick, and it would take time for her to work through it.

She could only pray he would let her walk the last bit of the way on her own two feet; the thought of being seen by the people of D’Qar like this; dirty, smelly, carried like a felled deer across her uncle’s massive shoulders through the streets of the royal city was a humiliation too great to stand.

~*~*~

Han would be forever grateful and indebted to his two hosts, not only for saving his life and caring for him during his illness, but also for persuading one of their neighbours to sell them one of their horses – allowing Han to travel both quicker and safer. His resolve had proven frailer than his cowardice, and instead of taking the road South, Han Solo had headed for the North as soon as he reached the first crossroad.

Maybe the two women had seen his decision coming, for they had provided him with what provisions they could spare, along with a sword that had belonged to the same dead brother whose
clothes Han was wearing, and some extra things he could use to trade with in case he needed more supplies along the way. They did not trade goods in the South – there, only coin was accepted. But he was especially grateful for the warm woollen blankets they had given him; the nights were painfully cold, and he shared the blankets equally with his horse, making sure the poor creature did not suffer too much from the merciless winter nights. It had only been two nights since he left the two women, but they were covering a good distance each day, and hopefully it would not take long before they had reached clan Hux’ land. Now all he could hope for was that the army had not already marched.

It was just before sunset on the third day, when Han encountered other humans for the first time since setting out – and his heart skipped a beat upon realizing that the group of riders rapidly closing in on him from a crossing road wore the midnight robes of the Crows. Something did not quite feel right about them, but Han put it down to his own ignorance about these mysterious creatures. Lord Hux had made it clear that Crows were honoured and revered here in the North, that they were priesthood, healers, teachers, and teachers all in one. Han moved to the side, to allow them room enough to pass without difficulty – not wanting to risk offending them. His son would surely not approve of it should he find out, and right now, Han could not afford anything that could further risk his chances of forgiveness.

But the Crows did not pass. Instead, he found himself surrounded – their horses circling closer and closer around him, leaving no room to escape. Han’s horse danced nervously under him, and Han did his best to remain calm. If they wished to harm him, there was nothing he could do, and he knew it. Even without the Force to wield, they were all armed, and they had him cornered and outnumbered. All he could do was to attempt to keep his composure, and not let himself look as intimidated as he felt. It was something about the way their grins seemed too wide, their eyes too feral to fit a human face, their movements too alert, too eager. He had seen faces like theirs in wartimes, and in the lawless, violent corners of the world, where those too twisted and evil to live among their fellow humans went to lead an existence drenched in blood and betrayal. They were drunk on carnage and cruelty, looking for a new toy to pass their time with.

“This is not the time for lone, old Southerners to be out wandering the wild,” one of them said, leaning in and thereby forcing Han to lean back in order to avoid having their noses touching. There were specks of dried blood around the Crow’s mouth, and, Han realized, all over their cowl, robe, and gloves. They all reeked of it. The horses too. “We do not suffer Southerners to live in these lands, did you not know?”

“I’m on my way to see my son,” Han replied, as calmly as he could manage. “And I don’t stray from the roads, or knock on anyone’s doors.”

“Your son, eh?” Another Crow leaned in, from behind this time – cackling in glee when Han flinched. “Nervous, old man?”

“It’s polite to speak face to face,” Han retorted. “Not to hover over someone’s shoulder like some ghoul.”

“Who is this son you speak of?” the first Crow inquired. “What self-respecting Northerner would ever have lain with you? Or did you take them by force, and have started to regret it now in your old age? We do not suffer rapists in the North either.”

“My son is Kylo Ren, and he’s the bonded Crow of clan Hux.”

“Kylo Ren?” The Crows looked at each other, before bursting out in another fit of gleeful cackling – the sound sending shivers of dread down Han’s spine. “Did no one tell you, old fool? Kylo Ren is dead. The treacherous whore thought he could defy the Raven, so the Raven killed him.”
“You lie!”

“Yes, about a great many things, old man,” the second Crow chuckled. “But not about this. There wasn’t a Crow in this world or the next that didn’t feel his passing – and make no mistake, old man, we celebrated it. We do not suffer traitors to live.”

They might as well have kicked him in the chest, for the air left his lungs with the same force, and he found himself sagging where he sat. Kylo… dead? It could not be. It simply… could not be. Not now, not this way. How? Why?

“Run back to the South,” a third Crow chimed in. “Find a good place to die. There is nothing for you here.”

“Or, if you want proof,” the first one smirked, “all you need to do is ride as far North as you can get, and enter the House of Night. You’ll find his corpse waiting for you. If the animals haven’t gotten to it first – they’re practically ravenous this time a year.”

More thundering of hooves against the ground was heard, and a second group of Crows approached – lead by an older, stern looking person, with frightening tattoos all over their face.

“Did I say you could stop and play?” they barked. “We’ve got more ground to cover before we can rest – get going! The Raven won’t tolerate any tardiness!”

In a flurry of black, and the stench of death and blood, the Crows had gone on their way – as quickly as they came – but not before they had shoved Han out of his saddle, and made him scramble to get out of the way of the steel-shod hooves of a dozen horses. His own horse had been spooked, but luckily not run away, if only due to the reins catching on and tangling up in the branches of a withered tree a few yards down the road. Once Han had managed to get back onto his feet – aching all over, but hopefully, he thought, without having broken anything – it was dark. It took some time to calm his frightened horse down, but even after he had done so, he stood there, face against the soft, thick fur of its neck, unable to make himself move.

Kylo was dead. His son. His only son. The child for whom he had been prepared to sacrifice everything he had ever been, had been murdered by his own leader. Murdered, and left to rot somewhere far to the North. Han would never see him. Would never hold him again, would never hear his voice, see his smile… Would never be able to ask forgiveness for all that he had done wrong.

Did Hux know?

A terrifying thought gripped him. The sudden rush to get them out of the North. The serious faces, the increased activity from the smithies, the way Lord Hux’ eyes had turned cold and hard, the line of his jaw tense, and the tone of his voice emotionless, frightening… He had known something was wrong, had been preparing to act. Han was no fool, he knew what it looked like when a leader was preparing to go to war. If he had learned that his beloved, the very core of his world, had died…

There was no clan to find at Skye Castle anymore. He knew it in his heart. Lord Hux had taken his army with him, intent on burning the world to cinders for robbing him of man he loved.

If Leia thought him and Rey dead, then she would march with the first light – she would not allow the loss of her heir to go unpunished. If both armies were marching towards each other, there would be carnage the like of which the world had never seen. Whole lineages would be eradicated, cities razed to the ground, villages, sacred groves and fields trampled and forgotten.
This could not be allowed to happen. He had to stop it. As much as he wished he could ride North, and die with his son, he had to focus on those who still lived. He would mourn Kylo properly, once this was over.

For now, he had to stop Leia from setting foot in the North. If she did, Hux would send his army at her like a pack of ravenous wolves. And, he knew, if he did, Leia would not survive.

He had to stop it.

With a heart shattered and heavy in his chest, he sat up in the saddle, and headed South.

~*~*~

Hux had hoped to wait a little longer before being forced to bring up the topic of Kylo’s father and sister, but now, it seemed, the Gods had decided he had postponed it long enough. They were laying close together under the warm blankets, having enjoyed the lingering afterglow of their lovemaking. Hux had thought Kylo would be hesitant to engage in such things while they were in camp – given the lack of privacy caused by the cramped space and thin walls of the tents – but his Crow had given him a surprisingly cheeky smile, and asked Hux to look at himself in a mirror. It seemed his beloved thoroughly enjoyed the sight of him in a full suit of armour, and Hux had vowed, after all, never to deny him anything he wanted. And, to be fair, the camp was loud enough as it was, and he doubted that even if someone had heard them, they would value their health enough to not say anything.

But the quiet moment between them had led certain thoughts and worries to surface in his mind again, and this time they were powerful enough that Kylo took notice despite his reluctance to listen in on others’ thoughts. Hux could pinpoint the exact moment he did, because he tensed up, seeming almost to shrink a little in Hux’ arms, before pulling away slightly. His golden green eyes were big and worried as he looked up at his warchief.

“Han Solo,” he whispered, looking for all as if the name burned his tongue as he spoke it. “Why—Why is that name on your mind?”

Hux sighed. How to even begin explaining this?

“Sweetness,” he began, caressing Kylo’s cheek, then pulling him in safely against his chest again. He felt like a coward, but this was not a conversation where he could bear seeing the hurt in Kylo’s eyes. “Please forgive me for taking so long in telling you this. You were so ill when you came back, and I couldn’t bear the thought of causing your further pain or distress, I—”

“Tell me what?” Kylo interrupted. “Braith, speak plainly, please. I can handle more than you think, but not this circling around the subject. Please. Just tell me.”

“Alright, love,” Hux nodded. “Anything you need.” He still took a few moments to gather himself. “About ten or so days after you had left for the— for the House, two men came to Skye Castle, by prison transport. One of them introduced himself as Han Solo, and he claimed to be your father.”

“What?” Kylo sat straight up, and Hux was glad that they had both kept their undershirts on as the cold night air hit him. “He was here? He was— He was in your castle? And you didn’t tell me?”

“I’m sorry, my love. Please, listen to me.” Kylo was shivering, whether from cold or emotions, it was difficult to say, but he gave a short nod for Hux to continue. “He told me about your childhood. What happened. What that… that wretched creature of a mother you had did to you.” He took a deep breath, swallowing hard around the lump of anger, fear, and guilt in his throat. “He
thought you were dead. All these years, he believed that you had been killed.”

“Then why was he here? Why did he have to come here?”

There it was again – that look in his eyes that had been burned into Hux’ memory; that tormented, haunted look that he remembered from the very first time they met. But even without seeing him, Hux knew how badly he was hurting – he could feel it through their bond, so strongly it was making it hard to even breathe. He sat up as well, cautiously reaching out to take Kylo’s trembling hands in his, knowing that approaching him when he was in pain was much like approaching a wounded, cornered animal; one wrong move, and he would lash out to protect himself. Hux did not blame him; with a history like his, one would learn how to keep oneself safe by any means.

“There is no easy way to tell you this, my love,” he sighed. “But apparently, that queen of his had somehow learned that you were alive, and she sent him to-…. To-”

“To kill me.” Kylo did not seem surprised, only bitter and tired. The look he gave Hux was frightening in its steely intensity. “You let him inside the castle, inside my home, when he was sent out to kill me. How could you?”

“Love, stop right there with those thoughts,” Hux pleaded. “Listen to me. Do you really think I would do that? Do you really think I would sit idly by as someone plotted to take the life of the man I love? The man I have pledged my undying love and loyalty to? Do you really think so little of me?”

“I don’t know what to think!” Kylo whined as he untangled himself from the beddings to pace back and forth across the thick rugs on the floor. “I don’t understand! This doesn’t make sense, and I just-… Why?”

“He came to warn you,” Hux said, also getting up, so he could gently nudge his beloved back to bed before he gave himself a cold. He may have been recovering well, but Hux did not take any risks where his beloved’s health was concerned. Kylo had stopped dead in his tracks at the last revelation – staring at him with wide eyes. “It’s true. He didn’t come here to kill you. He was ordered to, yes, but he was prepared to stay here in the North, or take whatever punishment was due to him for his crimes against you.” Carefully pulling his Crow close, Hux kissed his forehead. “I can’t say I liked the man. Frankly, he disgusts me. But he did come to warn us that someone meant to harm you. To me, that merits at least some leniency.”

“Where is he now? What happened – what did you do?”

Hux could not stop the tired chuckle as he remembered those rather chaotic few days. Kylo looked quizzically at him.

“It was quite the family gathering at the castle, my sweet,” he smiled, shaking his head. “Not only did your father, and that mute fellow he travels with turn up, but a young girl – accompanied by two soldiers – who was very adamant that she was your little sister.”

Kylo looked about ready to faint.

“The Crown Princess? You’re telling me that she- that Princess Rey came here to see me? Braith, tell me you’re jesting!”

“I’m not jesting, Kylo, I swear.”

“But- But how, why, I-… I don’t understand.”
“Then let me finish,” Hux chided him gently, kissing him softly on the tip of his nose to show that he had not meant it as an admonishment. Kylo bit his lip, but nodded. “Thank you. Now, it seems that warmongering, selfish cow of a queen that birthed you wanted to kill you to ensure her adoptive daughter – that is, Princess Rey, yes – wouldn’t have any competition for her claim to the throne. However, and this is the important bit, sweetness; Princess Rey was shocked and appalled by her plans, and ran away – with only those two guards of hers – to find you and warn you of what her father had been sent to do. Or, if she could, to stop him from doing it. The girl’s got steel in her, I’ll give her that.” He ran a hand through Kylo’s tousled hair, kissing his forehead. “They wanted you safe, love. Han Solo, disgusting as he may be, wanted a chance to make things right – even if it meant defying his queen.”

“But… What happened? They weren’t there when I returned – I would have felt it if Han had been there. Did they leave?”

“Yes, because I made them. A foreign princess with no formal escort at my court, when we’re getting ready to go to war against her mother? That’s a disaster waiting to happen. I had to send them back. There was no other way. Had queen Leia found out that her daughter was in my castle, she would have marched within the hour, and even I would have had difficulties finding support if there were claims of me kidnapping a child.” He sighed. “I can only hope they can convince that wretched woman not to do anything stupid. I want her head on a spike, and I’d prefer not to have to waste too much resources on getting there.”

Kylo gave him a sharp look, his head cocked to the side in that peculiar way of his.

“You’re making a claim on her head?” he asked. “How come? I mean, I know she must be killed if we’re going to be able to claim D’Qar and continue South. But it sounds so… personal.”

“Oh, Kylo, love and light of my life,” Hux chuckled, kissing him deeply. “It is personal. This is the woman who have attempted to murder my Crow, my beloved, my husband – if only I had been allowed to officially call you that – and that, I cannot allow to stand. By our laws, she is to be executed for the crime of attempting to harm or kill a Crow. And for purely selfish reasons, I want to be the one to cut her head off. I want to make sure she knows why she’s about to die, and I want her to know how much I’ll relish it.”

This time it was Kylo who initiated the kiss – by grabbing him by his hair and forcefully crashing their lips together.

“Thank you,” he whispered when they parted. “Thank you for- for doing this for me.”

“I love you,” Hux smiled, caressing his cheek. “When I thought you dead, it was all I could think of. I was going to march South, and burn everything in my path, kill everyone who so much as dared look at us – for you. I wanted the world gone for robbing me of you. And I especially wanted your mother and father gutted and hanged for their crimes against you. I still do. That is, if you’ll let me. I don’t want to steal your revenge from you. It’s yours to claim long before it’s mine.”

Kylo sighed, taking Hux’ hand and leading him back to bed so he could rest his head on Hux’ chest, like he did most nights. Apparently, the sound of Hux’ heart beating soothed him, and Hux would hardly complain about getting to have him so close.

“You need to be the one to slay Leia,” Kylo said once he was comfortable. “You’re laying claim to her lands – the symbolism is too important, not to mention that the laws of succession by conquest demands it. Just promise me something.”

“Anything.”
“Make sure she suffers.”

“I promise.” Hux pulled the blankets closer around them, still a little worried about his beloved’s health. It was very cold in the tent despite the braziers, and Kylo had just been up pacing in nothing but his nightshirt. He was not convinced, yet, that his Crow would not fall ill from such exposure.

“And Captain Solo?”

“I… don’t know.” Kylo played with Hux’ King’s chain while he seemed to turn the issue over in his mind. “Whenever I think of him, all I want to do is cut that selfish, cowardly heart of his right out of his body, but I… For so many years, it was nothing but wishful thinking, a fantasy to keep me fighting through the hard times. And now…”

“Now you can make it happen.”

“I can. All the laws of the North support my claim to his life. I am a Crow, and he brought harm upon me – the Gods themselves have stated that he must die for that crime. I know. I know all of that. Yet it still feels so strange.” He ran a hand through his hair, biting his lip. “I have never in my life hesitated about killing anyone. At least not since…”

“Since the Temple?”

Kylo flinched at that, about to once again withdraw from Hux’ embrace, but this time the warchief did not let him – instead pulling him close, flipping them both over so that he had Kylo held in place by means of his body weight. Sometimes, he had learned, that was the only thing that worked. He felt stupid for bringing the topic up without warning, but there was nothing for it now; it was already out there.

“Calm down, sweetness,” he soothed. “Kylo, please. Listen-”

“What did he tell you?” He could not tell if Kylo was more angry or scared; it seemed an equal amount of both. “What did he say, Braith? Tell me, please.”

“He said… He told me how they shipped you off to join the Doves, how miserable you were, and how they still left you there. About that day, he said they had told him how you hadn’t seemed yourself, how you hadn’t resisted being arrested, much less responded to anything they said or did.” Hux fought to remember the conversation as accurately as he could, but at the time he had still been tired and in pain, and he had also been busy keeping himself from strangling Solo right then and there. “He said they didn’t even come see you when you were imprisoned.”

“No,” Kylo confirmed, voice smaller than Hux thought it had any right to be, and his hatred for Han Solo and Leia Organa grew. “No, they didn’t. It was so dark down there. So dark. Cold. Rats everywhere – they bit me all over. I was all alone. For weeks and weeks. They kept me separate from all the other prisoners. So many cells, and just me and the rats.” He looked distant, as if he was back in that place, in that moment of time, and Hux pulled him closer. “I didn’t even attend the trial – they just turned up one day to tell me I was being executed.”

“They will pay for what they did,” Hux vowed, fiercely. “They will get what’s coming to them.” He paused, a question burning at the front of his mind, but he worried it would be too much. Still, he might never get another chance. “He said… Forgive me if this is too painful, love, but he said that you had nightmares, of a voice speaking in your mind. Did that voice make you do what you did at the Temple? I mean, you adore children – I refuse to believe you would commit this sort of deed out of your own free will.” Tears welled up in Kylo’s eyes, and Hux scrambled to pull him in against his chest again, stroking his hair and back to soothe him. “I’m sorry, love! I didn’t mean to cause you more pain. I’m so sorry. You don’t have to speak of it, I promise.”
“It’s alright,” Kylo managed. “It’s just that… No one has ever believed me. At least- at least no non-Crow. I would never-! To harm children, I couldn’t! I didn’t like them, and they didn’t like me, but the thought of harming them was never… No. I would never.” He was still and quiet for a long time, and only when Hux began to worry did he speak again. “He took me. Took control of me. I- I could see, hear, and feel everything, Braith. Every last moment of it. And I could do nothing. It was like watching through a glass window, only the window was my own eyes. I heard them… their screams. They called my name, begged for mercy, asked me why I was doing this… I- I never wanted to hurt them. But I couldn’t stop it.”

“You said ‘he’. Kylo, love, was it Snoke? The voice in your head, the one who made you do that – was it him?”

Kylo hid his face even closer to Hux’ chest – his breath tickling the hair growing there. It seemed he had exhausted himself, and Hux cursed himself for pushing. But just when he was about to reach over and put the candle out, a single word could be heard in his mind.

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

I am so very sorry for this absolutely insane delay. August was a weird month, and September has had me scrambling to keep up with everything that has been going on. My intention is to avoid letting it take this long again, because I really don't like it when it does. I have my routine, and I don't like it when it get messed with. Luckily, I have found a great place to sit down and write, so that should hopefully help a little.

As you might remember from the previous chapter note, we are nearing the end now, with roughly 10 chapters to go. Give or take a chapter or two. I'll keep them at about this length, so I hope you don't mind too much that they're longer now than they used to be.

Now, to the point. This was something of a transport chapter, but a very important one. It's that chess thing again. And we've learned that Han Solo finally found a backbone, although it might be too late. Rey is having doubts. Poe and Finn are in a world of trouble. Leia is pissed. Hux is homicidal, and Kylo really doesn't like to talk about his past. Pay attention to the details in this, because you'll need them later.

With that said, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and if you did, please take a minute to tell me what you think! <3
Blood on the Snow

Chapter Notes

TW: blood, gore, graphic description of injury, graphic descriptions of violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Even by sea, the distance between the North and South was great, and it had taken a full fortnight for clan Hux’ armada to make contact with enemy ships. By then, the blood red sails had been joined by others, as the warchiefs and independent families along the coast had smelled the chance to glory and profit, and joined the growing forest of sails as they broke into smaller units on the way southward. It was easier that way; they could both cover a larger area, which meant more opportunities to attack and sink enemy ships, but it also meant they kept the Southerners guessing when it came to their actual numbers. The fact that nearly every fleet in the world did the same thing was, as far as they were concerned, only to their benefit. It kept them on their toes, kept them hungry, kept them hunting with undiminished eagerness and determination.

The first skirmish took place in the early hours of the morning, a league or so off the coast, when the thick morning mist cleared enough for a lookout to spot the sky-blue sails of the D’Qar fleet, and quickly giving the signal to all the ships to prepare to attack. The Southern ships were of a heavier build; laying quite low in the water, their high masts and bulkier hulls made them an impressive sight indeed – but it also made them slower, and far less easy to steer. It was not a problem during routine patrols and long-distance travels. Ballistae, and spear-throwers along the railings and on the lower deck kept them well-defended and allowed them the upper hand as long as their enemies were at a distance.

But the Northern ships, although smaller in sheer weight and size, were sleeker, light in the water, and fast as a hunting dog on a blood trail. They made next to no sound as they glided closer, their red sails temporarily exchanged for plain white ones to take advantage of the cover provided by the lingering mists. For every fifth regular ship, armed to its teeth, the Northern fleet carried a catapult ship as well – armed with both loads of heavy iron lumps, designed to strike holes in the hulls of the enemy ship, and pots of oil and tar, wrapped in flammable fabrics. They would be set on fire and launched at the enemy, setting fire to everything it touched – hull, sails, crew, nothing was safe. In case of trouble, the catapult ship could be torched or sunk, while the rest of the armada headed for cover in any little bay or river they came across.

This morning, the armada had everything working in their favour. The D’Qar ships had not noticed them in time, enabling the Hux clan's ships to sneak up on them and surround them. When the lookouts up in the high main masts finally realized what was happening, it was already much too late. Saying a final prayer to the Goddess of war, and her sister Death, the Northern ships attacked.

~*~*~

Once the first drop of blood had hit the salty waves beneath the ships, it was as if the Goddess had reached out and touched them all, for the skirmishes came one after another for the next few days. The battles were vicious, the losses were great on both sides. The waters were stained red for leagues around the remains of the battlegrounds, mangled, burned, and bloated bodies floating among the wreckage of ships from both sides – scavenger birds fighting each other for the best
pieces of the dead soldiers, and the giant beasts of the deep would flock towards the battles even before they were over, in hopes of catching their fill.

It was a rare thing for any side to gain an advantage this early, and losses – though painful – were nothing but the expected and normal consequence of both fleets testing each other’s strength, looking for weaknesses, assessing the risks, and frenetically trying to come up with the strategy that would lead them to victory. But the North could take the losses, because they were still moving further South with each new sunrise, which meant that – as strong as the Southern fleet was, and it was strong – they were so far unable to stop the Northern ships, or delay them. But, the captains and commanders all knew, it was too early to celebrate yet. That day might still come – was likely to come, even – and when it did, they needed a plan to break through the blockade. The South favoured that tactic, that much was widely known, as it put the heavy Southern ships at an advantage that even the Northerners struggled to counter. Their own advantage was their ability to travel on rivers, reefs, and shallows as easily as they did on open sea, allowing them to hide large numbers of ships and attack seemingly out of nowhere. And neither were they as dependent on winds as the Southerners; every sailor had a designated seat by an oar, and their lighter ships were easier to row than the Southern ones. But they were at a disadvantage if they headed too far out to sea, and every last adjustment of the tiller was made in full awareness of that.

It was a delicate balance, but the Northern sailors relished the feeling – it was, after all, what they lived for. They were no less warriors, no less thirsty for blood and battle, than their landlubber kinspeople. And, unlike them, the sailors of clan Hux could not retreat and hide in the woods if needed be. No, once the battle had been called, they were in it to the end. Victory or death, there were no other options, and they took pride in it. Even the warchief had had to prove himself, back in his youth, before he had even had a full beard; if he wanted them to obey, he had better show them why they should. But Braith Hux had proved himself, had been mad enough and battle-hungry enough to gain their respect, and now they sailed in his stead, knowing he would have been right up by the railing with the best of the men if given half a chance.

The ships sailed on, deathly silent – like a pack of wolves on a hunt – down the coast, searching tirelessly for the next ship to sink in the name of their warchief and their Gods.

~*~*~

Rey had begun to doubt that they would ever make it back home to D’Qar – visions of her being tied to uncle Chewie forever haunting her even in her sleep – but she still found herself embarrassingly unprepared for running right into the royal army, where they had taken over a village a few days south of the Middle Lands. It filled her with such dread it made her stomach turn to realize the army had already marched. Convincing her mother- No, her Queen, to stop and turn around now would be even more difficult. But she still had to try. Identifying herself and her uncle to an officer, who looked at them as if they were some manner of ghosts or demons, she asked to be taken to her mother, preferably as soon as possible. She did not have to ask twice; the guards got into a tight formation around them and all but ran towards the inn where the Queen and her high command had set up their temporary base.

Despite the severity of the situation, Rey nearly sat right down on the floor and cried in happiness when they entered the building, and she could feel the warmth from the fireplaces seep into her body. She had begun to fear she would never be warm again after all these weeks on the road. It felt so good, and before she could think about what she was doing, she had sat down as close to the open flames as she could without burning herself, refusing to be moved from her spot. The heat from the fire felt sharp, almost prickly against her skin after so many weeks of nothing but blistering cold, but it was welcome nonetheless. It was only with the greatest reluctance that she stood up and faced her Queen as she entered the room, accompanied by members of her high
command. She knew them all; old and greedy, soldiers with too many winters behind them, yet too much hunger for power to know when to step down. But there was one face missing. Uncle Luke was not here. There was a Dove among the people in the group, an older woman whom Rey had met in the palace many times. Her eyes were as hard as flint, and Rey had always been wary of her. A fanatic, Uncle Luke had said once. Someone whose devotion had taken a bad turn at some point. Why was she here instead of him?

Before she could ask, or, indeed, before she could say anything, Leia had swept her into a tight embrace, and then she found herself wrapped up in a thick woollen blanket and seated in one of the armchairs by the fire. Leia – the word ‘mother’ felt increasingly difficult to use – sat down in the other. As much as Rey had wished for this conversation to be just the three of them; her, Leia, and Chewie, she knew that she would have to do this in front of an audience. It was hardly the first time, but she did not usually have to bring topics this difficult to the table. But before she could do that, there was something she needed to know.

“Have—… Father, or Poe, or Finn… Have they come back?” she asked, fearing the response, but needing it all the same. “Have you heard anything? Are they alive? Please, do you know anyth—”

Leia interrupted her with a gesture.

“Poe and Finn found their way here two weeks ago. They’re on their way back to D’Qar now. They’ll be tried for treason as soon as I return.”

“What?” Rey stared at her queen. “Treason? Poe and Finn? You can’t be serious! They haven’t done anything, why would you—?”

“They should have kept you safe, and they failed to do so. Instead of searching for you after that alleged shipwreck, they tucked tail and fled South. They left my heir for dead, and that is to me as serious a crime as if they had killed you themselves.”

“What?” A burning, boiling feeling rose in her blood, and Rey could do nothing to stop herself from raising her voice enough for the gathered people in the room to stare at her in shock. “Poe and Finn Dameron have done nothing but protect and care for me this entire time! They did not ‘leave me for dead’ any more than me and Uncle Chewie left them or father for dead! How dare you do that to them when they have never been anything but loyal and devoted to this house?”

Now that she had begun, it was hard to stop, and the dumbfounded looks on everyone around her only served to make that burning feeling stronger. There was a tight coil in her mind, years of swallowing worry, anger, sadness, and when Leia gave a dismissive snort, it snapped. Years of unheard words demanding space, demanding recognition, were flooding to the surface, and Rey could do little to hold them back. The ordeals of the last few months had been too much. All the things she had seen, all the things she had learned. All the realizations she had had about her life and the world she thought she knew and understood. She was bound to say something she would regret, but there was nothing for it. Perhaps that was exactly what was needed.

“Watch your tongue, young lady,” Leia said. “Think very carefully on what you are saying right now. Those men are arrested on suspicion of treason. You are the Crown Princess of D’Qar. It’s deeply inappropriate for you to show sympathy for such people. It makes you look weak.”

Rey stared at her for a moment. She suddenly struggled to recognize this woman as the one who had tucked her in a night when she was little, sung soft lullabies and told her stories. Now, Rey could not stop herself from thinking, she recognized more the woman they spoke of in the North, the woman they hated in the North.
“Weak? We were in a shipwreck!” she shouted. “I don’t know if you know, but they are rather chaotic! We’ve worried this whole time that Poe, Finn, and father are dead! We had to leave the shore, or the cold would have killed us! We had to find our way back to tell you what happened – and I know Poe and Finn well enough to know that they would have done anything to find me if they thought there was a chance I was alive. And you just go and condemn them to death like that! Just like you did with Ben!”

There was a moment of dead silence in the room, then Leia’s palm made impact with Rey’s cheek – hard enough to make her almost fall out of the chair. Rey was not sure what hurt the most; having her mother strike her not even an hour after having been reunited, or that Leia did not seem fazed by doing so. She merely straightened her jacket, and fixed her heir with a stare that would have had her cowering a few months ago. But this was no longer a few months ago, and Rey stared back, refusing to yield. She may be young, but she was no longer the innocent, naïve little girl they all thought of her as. No, she had seen the world, and she knew now how many lies she had been spoon fed all her life. Too many. But no more.

“Be quiet, child!” Leia ordered. “You speak of things you know nothing about. The laws must be upheld. That bastard murdered over a dozen children – death is the least he deserves. Poe and Finn, too. The law doesn’t care about the soft heart of a spoiled princess. They will be made an example of, to discourage all the others from letting their cowardice and selfishness get the better of them.” Leia rose to her feet again. “I strongly advice you to bury that soft heart deep. You’ll never live to bear the crown of my country with such a weakness on display for all to see.”

“You have to stop the march,” Rey said just as Leia turned to leave. Her queen paused in her step. “You will bring death and ruin upon this entire army if you don’t! The North knows you’re coming. This is madness! They know you’re marching – and I think… I don’t think they will settle for just meeting you on the battlefield. You’ll get your whole army killed. You have to turn back.”

Leia shot her a glance over her shoulder.

“All these years I spent raising you,” she said, something like pity in her voice, “and you turned out a coward. I have my God’s blessing. No matter how much blood I need to spill on the way, I will conquer the North.” She turned to her guards. “See to it that she is cleaned up, then put her in a room and make sure she stays there.”

Chewie’s large hand landed on Rey’s shoulder in a comforting gesture as tears of anger, frustration, fear, began streaming down her face. Her cheek still stung, it felt warm and sore to the touch, and she hid against her Uncle’s broad chest – the only place that felt safe in the world now. Uncle Chewie gently gathered her in his arms, holding her close and letting her cry. The guards could do nothing but wait – Chewie might not be able to speak, but the look on his face said everything they needed to know of what would happen if they came near the Princess before she allowed it herself.

~*~*~

It happened in the early hours of the morning.

The sun had yet to rise from its resting place, and even as far South as they were – only a fortnight’s march from the Middle Lands – it was pitch black. The pale light of the crescent moon and her sisters, the stars, reflected off the endless cover of snow did very little to combat the tarry blackness of the winter night. But this did not deter the Hux clan, used to the long night of winter as they were, and they had already broken camp, now standing ready to march as soon as the order was given.

But Hux himself was waiting for his Crows to give the go-ahead. They sensed something, had
been feeling a deep sense of unease, of something creeping closer, since early the previous evening, and Hux was no fool. His were the most powerful Crows in all the lands, and if they were worried, then they had reason to be. The birds felt it, too, and it took all of Errís, Kylo, and Maul's combined effort to keep them from going off on a screeching fit that would upset the troops, while also scanning through the minds of the troops in case there was unrest brewing within their own ranks. None of them had slept all night. Sílass and Vílya had been taking turns with Gaius and Chava to patrol the perimeter of the encampment, in an effort to locate some sign — any sign — of what this sense of impending danger could mean. Aví had been hard at work collecting their siblings reports, such as they were, and attempting to come up with a plan of defence. Or attack, if that was the better option. The lower ranking Crows had been discreetly positioned among the troops, so they would be close at hand, should anything happen.

Hux, Rurik, and their generals had watched the Crows work with a strange mixture of worry and pride. But, as Rurik had pointed out as he and Hux took a break from worrying to share a pipe of Hux’ favourite leaves, they all knew the march had gone far too easy so far. It was bound to turn to pig shit at some point – at least for a while. It always did. Hux had grunted in agreement, and remarked that it may be so, but that still did not mean he had to like it.

Now, the warchief and his chieftains watched the Crows talk animatedly amongst themselves in their own strange tongue. Someone had had a realization – it was hard to tell who, since their minds were so closely linked to each other that it was rarely even a heartbeat between their reactions. Then they all went quiet, their eyes closed, focusing on something. Then Kylo let out a curse so foul Rurik choked on the water he had been drinking.

“Braith, ready the men,” Kylo said, the urgency unmistakeable in his voice. “They're coming for us.”

“Southerners?” Hux asked, then turned to his present chieftains and generals and barked: “You heard him! Prepare for battle!”


No sooner had he said the word before the first screams came from the far back of the gathered army. Then all the Crows were grabbing their weapons and running in the direction of the noise.

Now, Hux had seen Kylo angry before – the man had a temper like a badger with a scratched snout – but nothing like this. Not with his adopted father and siblings sharing the same wrath, each of them amplifying each other's emotions through their bond, until the very air around them was crackling from the barely contained Force manifestations. Maul, usually so mild and serene, had never looked more like some spawn of the Seven Hells than he did now – his golden eyes seemed aflame, his tattooed features locked in an expression so terrifying that Hux found himself barely able to look at him. The soldiers threw themselves out of the way of the black-clad storm of fury, not wanting to get in the way of their holy ones when they seemed close to a full on berserker mode.

Then they arrived at the scene, forced to come to a stumbling halt as half a soldier landed right in front of their feet. The other half landed further away, scaring one of the pack horses into a stampede. But the Crows did not let themselves be stopped; they had finally caught sight of their foes, hiding in the cover of the near impenetrable darkness between some trees close to the side of the troops. They were avoiding having to engage in close combat with Hux' warriors, instead electing to send whatever birds they commanded to attack, and to single out and tear the warriors apart with the Force. It was no battle; it was carnage, pure and simple. The ground was already littered with body parts, innards, and tattered remains of clothes and armour. Another mangled
corpse came through the air, its head coming off and almost hitting Errís in the temple. With a snarl, he sent it flying back towards the trees with a sharp flick of his wrist – his face a mask of absolute disgust.

There were quite a few of them lurking out there; the Knights and their subordinate Crows were outnumbered by far, but even to them it was difficult to discern any exact figures as the enemy Crows were hard at work concealing their Force presence. There could be thirty of them, or three hundred, and the severity of the imminent battle would depend on how quickly the Knights could dispose of their opponents. There was precious little time to think; the screams now came from a second, and then a third direction – making it obvious they had been lured out into the open on their enemy's terms. This battle would begin at any moment, and it would be a horrendous one; the Knights may be the most powerful of Crows, but when the opponent is of their own kin, the advantage is not always as great as one would think. The other Crow would have every reason to go into the battle with all their might, to ignore all rules of combat, and forget they had ever heard the word 'honour' – because going up against a Knight of Ren meant having everything to lose. And if the Knights were up against two or three times the number of themselves and their subordinates, even they would have to give it their all. No Knight worth their name and rank would ever allow themselves to be bested by a lesser Crow. And no Crow in the world would ever allow harm to come to what they considered theirs.

This army, this clan, every single soldier, every single Crow in this camp belonged to Kylo Ren, and thereby to all of them.

They would not stand for this.

"Phasma, Mai!" Kylo barked as the warchief and his closest caught up with them. "Get Hux and the other cheiftains back into the center! Get all your guards around them, and do not let your guard down for a split moment!" Hux looked as if he was going to object, but Kylo pointed back towards the center of the camp. "Do not argue with me! Get them back there, now!"

Phasma was a wise woman, and knew full well that it was better to be shut in a tight shield cage with her affronted cousin and his equally affronted chieftains, than to be subjected to the wrath of their Crow if she let his warchief be harmed.

"Aya!" Kylo called, not even looking away from the edge of the forest. "Go with them, and take a hundred or so of the birds with you. If anyone comes near that group who is not one of us, you kill them. Do you understand? No hesitation, no mercy."

Aya, pale but determined, nodded, and hurried after the others. Once she was gone, Kylo whispered orders to the other Crows in Eira's little ear, not willing to risk anyone overhearing them if he simply reached out through the Force. He knew some of their former siblings were quite skilled at eavesdropping on conversations through the Force, and a few of them could very well be here with them now. Eira took off, in what looked like a simple, restless stretching of her wings – heading for the safety of Hux' armoured shoulder.

"Sílass," Kylo said, "head south-west. Aví, south-east. Gaius, I want you to go straight east, and Chava, you go straight west. Errís, you take north-east, and Vílya, you go north-west. Go around towards north. Maul and I will go straight towards the open field two leagues back, and we'll meet at the half-way point." He glanced around that the terrified, but determined faces of his clan. "We need to lure them away from this army, at any cost. I am not going to give them the pleasure of setting the rules for this fight. If we can get them even just half a league away, we will have the advantage, and I do not intend to fight fair.” He paused, sighing. “I say this now, not as your brother, but as your commander. These vile creatures have forgotten our gods, have forgotten our
ways, and our bonds. They are traitors and impostors, and for them there will be no new dawn. Their lives are forfeit. You will go, and you will slaughter every last one of them like the pigs they are. No mercy. No hesitation.”

“No mercy. No hesitation,” the Knights echoed back. Kylo nodded, drawing his sword.

“No, go. Remind them just who it is they thought they could best with cheap tricks played in the dark.”

They wasted no time, being so used to fighting together, and having used this tactic many times before, that further words were unnecessary. Instead, they headed off in their designated directions – their black battle-robes swallowed up quickly by the darkness, until there was no sign of them ever having been there.

The soldiers looking on worriedly did not quite know what to make of their sudden disappearance, until they realized that no more of their kinspeople had been taken. The officers wasted no time in getting them back into closed ranks, tightening the gaps between the divisions and watching the area around them for any sign of movement. They would not budge, the officers reminded the troops. No matter what. Until their warchief told them differently, they would stay right where they were. Clan Hux does not run away from danger. Clan Hux faces it, head on.

At the centre of the army, Hux was struggling to reign his temper back in. Those vile, treacherous, despicable creatures had dared, actually dared, to attack his men in such a cowardly, disgraceful-… Words failed him, and he resorted to swearing up a storm, until his chieftains looked as if they would rather take their chances with the enemy Crows than stand too close to their warchief. It was not very dignified behaviour, Hux was aware of that, but it was all he could do to release the anger he felt. It also irked him to be herded back into the centre and hidden by a good hundred shields, spears, swords, and bows, as if he was some frail child. This was his clan! He would not stand for any attacks on those who bore the Hux name, and to be denied what he considered his rightful vengeance was infuriating. It did not help that he knew perfectly well why Kylo had done what he did. Hux was a brilliantly skilled and strong warrior, but even he would have been torn to pieces as easily as if he had been but a slip of paper if those creatures had gotten their hands on him, and he hated feeling so powerless. Not even Mitaka, whose gentle nature usually helped him regain his composure before he made a fool of himself, managed to bring him out of it.

In the end it was Eira and Aya who got him to stop driving himself into a frenzy. Eira landed on his shoulder, cawing worriedly at him, and attempting to groom his hair – which was what she often did for Kylo when he was in a poor mood. Hux could do many terrible things, but he could not bring himself to be angry at her, and instead he caught himself taking her off his shoulder and holding her close, stroking her little head. She had a soothing effect on him – on all of them – like nothing he had ever encountered, and he was grateful.

“I understand your anger, my lord,” Aya said as she watched him with Eira. “You are possessive of what you consider yours, be it people or vengeance.” She gave a hint of a smile. “We Crows are much the same. I know why I am not out there with the others now, and part of me would feel cheated out of my share if I did not know that there is no higher honour for us regular Crows than to be the one assigned to guard our master's beloved.”

Hux nodded.

“It's never easy,” he agreed. “Not when you're used to being the one on the front line.” Scratching his beard, he looked towards the part of the camp they had just returned from, sighing deeply. “Can you feel them? Do you know what is happening? There's no more screaming, but I don't know if that's a good sign or not.”
The Knights are pursuing the enemy, my lord,” Aya said. “We have been given orders, but for their safety, and the safety of your soldiers, we cannot reach out to them now. The others... We are taught how to eavesdrop on other Crows. We cannot risk it.” Seeing the worried looks on the faces of the warchief and chieftains, she hurried to add; “There is no need to worry, I assure you. There is none better equipped to handle this than them. They will be alright.”

It would perhaps have been more convincing had she not also been glancing worriedly towards the end of the camp.

~*~*~

Every new crumb of information Han had picked up from the people he met and traded with on the road to the South had him swallowing down hard on the growing lump of dread that sat heavy and nauseating in the pit of his stomach. The Northerners all seemed to be in a hurry, horses, wagons and sleighs packed, faces grim and the faint sound of chain-mail and plate discernable from under their heavy winter clothes. There were more visible weapons hanging on their hips and backs than Han could remember seeing on Northerners travelling the trade routes – it had always been considered bad form, as traders were well thought of due to them bringing vital supplies and information to the people they passed. Very few of these Northerners seemed to be traders. They tended to travel in small groups, often families, but never more than perhaps five or ten people. The groups Han passed, and occasionally interacted with, seemed to never be smaller than fifteen or twenty people. These were not travelling traders, he realized, these were soldiers – no doubt on their ways to either join an army on the march or to patrol the lands to keep them free of any Southern scouts. They seemed to be heading in all directions, all with the same focus and determination, and they were not keen on speaking to Han, whose Southern heritage was glaringly obvious the moment he opened his mouth.

The Southerners on the road were a different matter altogether. They were going South as fast as their horses and mules could carry them – long caravans stretching leagues of nothing but hurried, anxious Southern traders and their stressed animals. Some of them, Han learned, had been living in the trading camps and towns scattered around the North, and had woken up to a decree from their local warchief or chieftain that they were to leave immediately, or be made to leave. Others, mainly those who had permits to travel all around the North to sell their goods, had begun travelling South even earlier than their settled peers when they had begun to notice a drastic change in the Northerners' attitudes to them. The North was closing it's borders to Southerners, and none of them wished to remain for a split of a moment longer than necessary, because once the North gathered around a purpose it took all the might of their Gods to make them abandon it. They did not know what was happening, and they did not care to. All they wanted was to go home and wait for whatever this was to blow over.

If only they knew, Han had thought to himself, that the South was no more likely to be peaceful and safe in the months to come than the North was.

The farther he got to the south, the more Han came across word of a Southern army marching to the North, until he came across a D'Qarian soldier – a scout, he had guessed – who after some hesitation confirmed everything he had been hearing. Queen Leia was marching, intent on claiming the North, and she would not stop before she had. The scout did not know anything about what officers or Doves travelled with the Queen, but they knew that the Queen's advisor, master Luke, had been tasked to rule D'Qar in the Queen's absence.

It had been days, since that conversation, and it had not ceased to gnaw at him that Leia had left Luke behind. The two of them did not always get along, he knew, but he could not remember a time in all the years he had known them both when Luke had not been the one person in Leia's life
whose presence and advice she valued the most. If he was not with here, then who was? And why had she left him behind? Luke was a Dove; he had no worldly authority, no training in handling the delicate and yet often terrifyingly brutal realm of diplomacy and politics. He simply could not fathom why Leia would leave him in charge rather than her steward, or even her royal council. After all, that was what she usually did, since Luke always came with her.

It made no sense at all, and that was exactly what worried him.

He also knew that if a scout was already past the Middle Lands, the army would not be far behind, and he was right. Not even a week later, late in the afternoon, he found himself stopping in the middle of the road to take in the sight of the campfires shining like stars against the snow, flickering as soldiers passed in front of them. It was a massive camp, but still smaller than it should be if it was Leia's entire army. No, this was most likely the vanguard, but that still meant that Leia herself would not be far behind. The only problem now was that Han's face was not known to every soldier in the D'Qarian army, and he was still dressed in Northern style clothing. Somehow, he must approach them in a way that would not end with him shot or stabbed. Or thrown in chains again, for that matter. He had had quite enough of that on the way to Skye Castle.

The decision was taken out of his hands before he had a chance to make one, as a group of soldiers approached him, and within moments he found himself surrounded by an uncomfortably close ring of spears. He made sure to sit as still as he could, and waited for their leader to speak first. It seemed the wise thing to do.

"Identify yourself," the leader, a woman around Han's own age, with a very determined set to her jaw, ordered him. She spoke slowly and clearly, as if doubting he understood her. Given his appearance, Han did not blame her; he would have assumed a person dressed this way was a Northerner too.

"I'm captain Han Solo," he said. "I'm Corellian by birth, D'Qarian by loyalty, and a long-time companion of Her Majesty, Queen Leia."

The leader studied him, pondering his answer. She did not seem entirely convinced, but Han had been around the world enough to know just how many strange stories people would try to tell in order to be let into places they had no business being in. Hells, he had done it himself more times than he could count. And he had no official court standing; he could come and go as he pleased in the palace, because they all knew him. To expect the regular troops, or anyone outside the palace for that matter, to know his name and face was simply unrealistic.

"Well," the leader said, sighing as if Han's appearance had just ruined her entire shift, "you're not a Northerner, that's for certain. Those Corellian vowels are too civilized for those cold tongues. I don't know about the rest, but I can find out." She turned to her soldiers and barked an order to have him brought to the camp, where the higher-ups could deal with him and his story.

Soon Han found his horse being led away by a frowning and disapproving stable master, who glared at Han as if he had caught him trying to beat the poor creature, but before he could say anything, he was taken to a tent where the quartermaster was waiting to feed him and size him up for a change of clothes, and before he had even swallowed his first bite of food, the officer in charge of the vanguard – an old, wiry man with uncomfortably sharp eyes – had appeared in the tent and sat down across the table with a bowl of food of his own.

"We're not as formal around here," he said by way of greeting. "And I haven't had time to eat all day, hope you don't mind." He took a bite out a chunk of cheese, then seemed to remember something. "I'm Commander Navid," he said. "I'm in charge of this lot here."
“I'm-”

“Han Solo,” the commander said, “I'm aware.” He gave a humourless chuckle. “I don't know if it's a good or bad thing that you're not dead, my friend. The Queen has lost her bloody mind – I never said that, alright – and last I heard, she's carting the Princess back to D'Qar to put her in house arrest or something, and she's having people sent back to be scheduled for execution and whatnot. No one even knows what they did wrong, you know? She thinks you're dead. Thought the Princess was dead too, the way I understood it, and let me tell you that it has not been a nice march up here. I signed up for the vanguard just to get away from all of that. She says God told her to take the North. You ever heard something so dumb? It's got to be an impostor, if you ask me. Queen Leia's always been a bit on the murderous side, we all know that, but she's always had a good and solid reason for it. Now she's dragging this whole army, that hasn't ever marched, much less fought, in this sort of climate, all the way up North, because God told her to? She a Dove or a Queen, is what I'd like to know.” He paused, looking sheepish. “You didn't hear all that from me.”

Han could not help the laugh that escaped him, despite the severity of what he had just been told. The nervousness he had felt coming into the camp was crushed rather efficiently by the informality of Commander Navid's greeting. And even more importantly, the Commander had just given him the best news he had heard in months! Rey was alive! His sweet, brave daughter was alive, and had already reunited with her mother. Had Han been a man of faith, he would have thanked the gods, but he was not, and instead he let the thankfulness sit like a warm, solid weight at his core – beginning to chase away some of the coldness that had begun to seep into his heart after thinking both his children dead. Kylo was still gone, and that wound would never close, he knew, but at least his precious Rey was still in this world. At least she was still here, where he could hold her close and never let go of her. Where he still had a chance to be a father to her – a proper father, this time around. He had learned his lesson. He would not lose his one remaining child, not to anything.

“I won't tell a soul,” he promised, tears glistening in his eyes. “But I cannot thank you enough for letting me know my daughter is safe. I've been so worried, ever since the shipwreck – it's been eating me alive.”

“Oh, she's a brave one, our princess,” the commander grinned. “She stood up to the Queen, she did. Tried to get her to stop the march, they say. Tried to get her to turn right back around and go home.”

“Given that you're all still here, I take it she wasn't successful.”

“Not even a little. But she still tried. Half-frozen, sick as a wreck, barely able to stand, and still she tried to do what she felt was right. She'll make a good Queen, that one. She's got it where it counts. A backbone like none other. My brother's on the Queen's war council; he saw it all, told me about it.”

“I'm glad he did. It will be hard enough to face Leia as it is; I've been gone for months, and I would rather not be face to face with her without knowing anything of what has been going on here.”

“You're a brave man, captain Solo. You might a be a little bit stupid, too, for even wanting to face her as she is right now, but I guess you kinda have to, don't you? What with being her... uh, whatever title you use for that. You've got obligations.”

He said the word with such profound distaste that Han couldn't help but chuckle again. There had to be a tale to hear about that, but he knew that as nice as their conversation was, it was about business. And Han's business was to make it to Leia as soon as possible, and try not lose his head for failing to keep Rey safe, while also attempting to stop her from marching further. After all,
there was no point anymore, was it? Kylo was dead. The fact that he did not die by Han's hand did not make it any less true. This whole story of some sort of divine vision sat wrong with him, and he did not know what to make of it, but Leia had previously always lived her life by way of logical and practical reasoning, with every decision carefully thought through and analysed before finalizing it. It was true that she was deeply devoted to her faith and her God, but not long ago she herself had spat on the mere thought of those deranged people who did the strangest of things because they thought their God had told them to. Now suddenly she was going to war on the same grounds?

Something was deeply and terribly wrong.

~*~*~

This was far from the first time that Kylo, Maul, or the Knights had stalked an enemy through the quiet dark of the night. The Gods had sent them to the strangest places in pursuit of those who had angered them, and it was not uncommon for the Crows to be tasked with avenging unjust deaths and other crimes by ordinary people. The laws stated that anyone whose health or financial status would not enable them to seek their vengeance by themselves were allowed to ask for a Crow to go in their stead. The Crows were not allowed to deny any such request. Only those who could afford it, and were physically able to do so, were turned down. Crows were murderers when they needed to be, they never denied that, but they were not mercenaries. There was a difference in killing in the name of someone who had no one else to turn to, and killing because someone else was unwilling or preferred not to dirty their hands. Though they would laugh and joke about it amongst themselves, killing was in itself no laughing matter, and they would not extend their services to those who treated it lightly. The Crows could laugh and joke, because they had seen more death, had a deeper understanding of it, than almost anyone else. Many a Crow had felt the Goddess embrace them before sending them back to life. They understood.

When they stalked their prey, they were quick, methodical, calculating. They knew how to avoid detection, how to ensure that no sound would reveal their presence, how to determine exactly when to strike. An ordinary human would never know they were being followed until it was already too late.

Today, though, it was an entirely different situation.

They stalked through the dark, at once both predator and prey, every step carefully placed, every breath hidden by their cowls. A hand on their swords, eyes searching for the slightest hint of movement. Who would find who? Who would be the first to strike? Whose blood would spill first? Time seemed to stretch out in an endless, suspended moment, as if nothing existed apart from the Crows moving through the darkened forest until the inevitable confrontation finally occurred. It felt like the eerie still span between lightning and the thunder that follows, like holding an arrow on a pulled back bow while waiting for the order to release. It was not the sort of moment Kylo enjoyed; it made him feel like a hound biting at the leash, desperate to spring free from his restraints, to act. If Maul felt the same, he made no sign of it; what could be seen of his face was as serene as always, though he knew his father to be a master at concealing any emotion he did not deem appropriate to show in that moment. He was, however, no less on edge – that much was clear.

They were not entire sure where they were; the forest looked much different without an army of people marching through it during the day, but they knew it was not far, and that was precisely what bothered Kylo. It was too easy. They should have made contact by now. Perhaps the other Crows had sensed them and decided that Kylo Ren and master Maul were not a pair they would risk attacking on their own. Perhaps it was simply that there were two of them, whereas the other
Knights set off alone. Kylo knew his Knights could handle the challenge they were facing, or else he would never have allowed them to go out in the forest by themselves, but it still made him worry for their safety. He had hoped that his and Maul's presence would lure most of their former siblings into following them, so that the Knights could come in and take them out from the flanks, but it seemed as if his plan had failed.

As always when one believes one knows how things will go, the situation changed rather quickly not long after Kylo had finished that thought. A dozen or so of their enemies threw themselves at them, swords drawn, none of them choosing to wield the Force against two so obviously superior Crows – but Crows had never depended on the Force in any battle; there was not a Crow, living or dead, who had not been as skilled with a blade as they were with any of their other tools. Sword-work was also, at times, much less draining than fighting with only the Force as a weapon. Whether this choice was made in order to preserve their strength, or if they had already drained themselves too much while shielding their presence, Kylo did not have time to ponder as he drew his sword to parry a blow coming at him from a Crow nearly the same size as Gaius.

He grinned despite the seriousness of the moment, finally free of the shackles of waiting. Here it was now, the time of blood and death, and it was here more than anywhere that Kylo Ren felt at ease. The song of battle sounded through his veins, through his heart, and he followed it in a dance as familiar to him as the drawing of breath. The other man was a skilled fighter, and Kylo would never expect less from a former Crow, and he had a considerable advantage in terms of sheer physical strength; his sword out-sizing and out-weighing Kylo's own. Though Kylo had his own advantage in his improved sight, his wiry build and quick reactions, they both struggled to get the upper hand on the other. The others would also take any chance to attempt an attack of their own – their larger number being both an advantage and a hindrance as it meant both that they had a better chance at tiring their former superiors out and thus kill them more easily, but it also meant not all of them could attack at the same time as they would just as likely kill each other as they would Kylo or Maul. Making use of the moment he dodged another sweeping blow to break a kneecap out of its socket with the pommel of his sword, he used the motion and the moment of confusion from his opponent to swing his sword around and cut the giant man's stomach wide open, blood and entrails splattering his face and robes as they fell out onto the snow. The man’s face paled in pain and confusion as he seemed to struggle to understand what had happened. Kylo wasted no time cutting his head clean off his shoulders, then kicked the headless body forward, forcing the new attackers to move out of its way and thereby giving himself time to prepare for the new attack. Behind him, Maul was making good work of his own opponents, having both his sword and his dagger out and spilling blood with seemingly every move or his hands. His face no longer looked serene, now looking more like a demon freshly crawled out of the seven hells; wide, vicious grin and glowing yellow eyes a disturbing contrast to the dark of his tattooed skin. When they had control of the fight, as much as one ever can control such a thing, Maul and Kylo began steering their opponents in the direction of the meeting point, hoping that the ruckus would lure as many of their enemies that way as possible.

Errís was the first to join them, pursued by a large number of their enemies. He was bleeding from a cut to his forehead, seeming half-way into a frenzy if his mad grin and gleaming eyes were any indication. He barely seemed to notice the blood running down his face. While Errís berserker tendencies could get them all in trouble every now and then, it was only to their benefit in the present situation. They could calm him down later; right now, his two swords and legendary skill at wielding them was a blessing, even if they knew they had to avoid coming too close to him. His weapons were dripping blood, chunks of unknown matter stuck to the blades, and he tore though the enemy groups as a particularly mad fox through a hen-house. Next after him came Vílya – the skin-flaying insults and swearwords announcing her arrival even over the loud noise of weapons clashing and blood spilling. Her sword and axe were moving almost too quick to see; red arches spraying across herself and the enemies and the ground in equal amounts as she hurled profanities
at anyone within her line of sight. It was good: when Vílya went quiet in a battle, they knew she was about to join her brother in the battle frenzy that seemed to run high in their blood. It was bad enough when one of them went off; when it was both, it was terribly difficult to calm them down as they usually leaned on each other for stability.

Chava and Aví arrived together, herding a large group of former Crows between them. Had they not been mid-battle, Kylo would have laughed at the sight of Aví running ahead, pulling the group with them as they taunted them in between vicious sweeps of sword and morning-star, while Chava was tearing into the rear with her sword and a terrifying knotted whip that their former siblings were quickly learning she was deathly accurate with. Aví and their morning-star had always been a combination that anyone with some sense in them would avoid encountering at all costs. Aví may be small, childlike, in many ways, but they were a Knight for a reason, and what many forgot was the amount of cruelty that could be displayed at the hands of children. It often took longer to make Aví draw their weapons than any of the Knights, but once they committed to the fight, it was near impossible to make them stop; Aví would fight until the last drop had been spilled, and they were as likely to show mercy to their enemies as a hungry wolf to an easy prey. Chava was limping slightly, suggesting an injury to her leg, and even in the dark there was an obvious swelling beginning to show on her cheek, but she made no sign that she was even aware of it as she methodically cut and whipped her way through those who had once been her family.

When Gaius arrived, they were already badly outnumbered, and his group of pursuers were the most energetic so far; Gaius did not even bother fighting them as much as keeping them off him while he headed for the meeting point where he would be in a better position to fight. His quarterstaff was at a disadvantage in the thick forest, and even with his sword, his room for movement was more limited than he wanted. In open terrain, Gaius was a battering ram all on his own; his massive body, frightening strength and alarmingly wide reach made him a nightmare of an opponent – but surrounded on all sides by trees and thick undergrowth, and unable to use the Force, he was vulnerable. He had been injured: Kylo could see glimpses of something glistening wet around a tear in the side of his robes, and blood was dripping from his left arm, though the source was not obvious. It did not stop him from fighting, though. Gaius was a Crow, after all, and they were all taught how to push through the pain, to fight until the fight is over and only then acknowledge any pain or discomfort they may feel. Silass was perhaps the worst for wear when she joined them; her robes so soaked with blood they hung heavy around her body, her hair sticking to her face where blood had splattered it, and her right arm was hanging in an odd angle, hand tucked into her belt. It had clearly been broken – and her limp was even more pronounced than Chava's, but she fought with the same determination as always. Her face was a mask of fury and distaste all at once, and every strike with her sword had an air of righteous contempt to it.

When the battle was finally over, many hours later, and all their attackers dead in the snow around them, the Knights finally let out a breath of relief, tinged with pain. All of them were injured in more than one place, bleeding and sore, and yet what hurt the most was the sight of the dead bodies in the snow around them. Midnight robes and tattooed skin soaked in red, faces they had all known frozen in the terrified expressions of their final moment and already beginning to freeze in the blistering cold. Some of these Crows had been close to them; fellow hatchlings, shy first experiences of romance and intimacy away from the watchful eyes of their mentors or frequent ritual partners. Some had been people they had admired, some people who had admired them. Some had been close friends, voices and hearts and presences they had come to consider as vital a part of their lives as the House and the Order themselves.

This had been their family, their world. And they had killed them all.

Though they knew better than to regret it, it did not make the loss less painful.

As they made their way back to the camp, sun already climbing high in the sky, they came across a
few groups of former Crows hiding or attempting to flee – no doubt in order to report it to the Raven as soon as they were in a safe place. They killed them, one by one, without a word. There would be no survivors today. Crows did not suffer traitors to live. Crows had no mercy for those who betrayed the Gods and turned their backs on the sacred vows they had made.

No mercy. No hesitation.

Chapter End Notes

You thought I'd abandoned you, didn't you? ^^

Leia continues to be the scariest ever. No Mother of the Year Award to her. Han seems to be discovering the presence of some sort of backbone in himself, which is a nice development - gives Rey at least one moderately sane and responsible parent. Hux does not appreciate being sent back into camp like an overly-curious kid, but hey, sometimes you gotta do as you're told - even when you're the warchief. Battles aren't fought in a few minutes - our Crows had to work real hard to win that fight. Hux will probably yell at them (Kylo) for being careless with themselves, and then father-hen them all for a few days while simultaneously being too proud for his own good about having Crows like them in his clan.

In other news?
Well, life is still weird, but I am recovering, and I'm so happy to be back in the game with this fic, because I have plans for this story. Big plans. And since I'm no longer in the fandom, and no longer on tumblr as ficlet-machine, I've been looking for ways to keep in touch with you all about the fic and the future of it. What are the plans, you ask? Well, how about me being in the process of turning this thing into an original story? If you have questions, feel curious, or ju want to yell at me for being gone forever, please visit my current tumblr: artofmischief, where I will throw every bit of information and plans I have at you. I can't say much more on here, because the rules says no, so if there is anything you want to know, just holler at me on tumblr, and I'll tell you everything about all the plans!
I'm not even going to try promising a new update schedule, as I'm re-learning how to brain still, but do know that I have more determination than ever to finish this, and even if it takes a while between updates, I'm working on it :) Thank you so much to everyone who's stuck around during this long wait, and thank you to each and every single one who have left kudos or commented during this time - it has meant more than you'll ever know to know the fic is still being read by someone <3
Hux had been both relieved and worried when Aya had gotten that vacant look in her eyes that he knew meant she was listening to her fellow Crows. He studied her face closely as it changed from a concentrated frown to a relieved smile, and then to a determined little nod of her head. She had looked almost embarrassed as she came back to herself, only to find that she was the center of attention of not only the warchief, but every single chieftain and warrior within sight.

"The threat has been taken care of, mylord," she had told them, pride in her voice. "But we cannot linger for even a moment. Please tell your army to move out. A battle like that will not come alone, and it's master Kylo's wish to make it as far South as we can before the next one."

Hux did not need to be told twice, and in a surprisingly short amount of time the army was once again on the move. It worried him that Kylo and his Knights had told them to move out before they had rejoined them, but since their reunion his and Kylo's Force bond had deepened to a point that now allowed him to feel Kylo's Force presence like a small flame in his heart and mind. It was not strong – Kylo said that it would take time – but it was there, and he could feel it. And as long as he was able to feel it, he knew that his beloved was alive. After everything that had happened, it was all he would ever ask for; having felt that bond torn apart was a sensation he would do anything to not have to feel ever again.

When the Knights and master Maul finally rejoined them, the army had already arrived at their camp for the evening; the bustle of camp life going silent and still as they strode into camp – limping, bruised, bloody, with battlerobes torn and hair undone from their intricate braids – but with their heads held high, triumph evident in all their faces. The other Crows had quickly gathered around them, the strange melody of the Crows' own tongue filling the cold evening air as they all disappeared into their assigned tent. Hux had not had a chance to say a word to Kylo, but instead had to resign himself to waiting more or less patiently for his loved one's attention. There were probably rituals that needed observing, he mused as he made himself comfortable in his chair, sipping mulled wine from a small wooden tankard while watching Rurik and another chieftain play a game of dice as they waited for the Crows to join them for dinner. After the very first battle he had seen Kylo fight – early that summer when he had only just arrived to Skye Castle and Hux had not even known if his new Crow would survive long enough to bond – when he was done taking care of the injured warriors, Kylo had spent hours in solitude as he went through ritual after ritual to cleanse himself of the remains of battle. Now, when the battle had been against people he had no doubt known since the day he became a Crow, it would probably require even more cleansing before they could consider themselves ritually pure again.

He only hoped they would be allowed to eat first. His was not the only stomach in this tent that was currently voicing rather strong opinions.

It had taken longer than he expected for them to run into hostile forces, and he was almost relieved that they finally had – things had been going far too well so far. The messenger birds had informed
him weeks ago that his fleet was already seeing battle on an almost daily basis as they made their way South to attempt to take D'Qar from the sea. The Southern coasts were generally easier to land on, as they tended to be mostly sandy beaches and low cliffs whereas the coastline of his lands was an unforgiving wall of cliffs and treacherous underwater rocks and shallows that required years of learning and a precision in navigating that only those who spent their lives on the equally unforgiving Northern waters could hope to achieve. Mostly, he knew, because there was little choice; if you wanted to survive, you had better learn how to navigate properly. Hux was proud of his fleet, and often mourned how rarely he had time to go around the coast to see them. Those two years he had spent by an oar in his youth were ones he remembered with fondness. No, he was not worried for his fleet – they were more bloodthirsty than anyone else in this clan – but he was worried for the situation on land. A few more weeks and they would be well inside the borders of the Middle Lands, his vanguard had little to nothing to report so far, the spies had only delivered the sort of information he had already expected to hear, and for the main troop to have only encountered a troop of hostile Crows so far was unheard of.

Hux had been to war many times. Borders were fleeting things in the North, and war chiefs only ruled for as long as they were stronger than those who opposed them, but never before had he marched for longer than a couple of weeks without running headfirst into the other armies. It was so common it was considered a lucky sign to have had your first battle within one month of marching out, and his army was now closing in on two. It was not natural, and it made him worry. The worry made him somewhat testy, but at least he knew his chieftains understood. They did not like it either. Rurik had taken to carving notches into a stick he had found, counting the days religiously, and every new notch was generally followed by much muttering and swearing – not only by him, but all the gathered chieftains. Hux would have asked him to throw the blasted thing away, but he had also known Rurik since childhood, and knew that if Rurik did not have some way to channel his frustrations he would become downright unbearable to be around. Though he appreciated a good fight as much as any other Northerner, Hux had no intentions of rolling around in the snow, exchanging blows and kicks, dressed in only his trousers and undershirt in front of his clan because one chieftain could not keep his composure. Not to mention that such a fight would likely give him a cold, and no commander – no matter his reputation – was a very inspiring sight while all wrapped in blankets, with a beard full of snot.

No, it was all going rather too easy. He would have to call for a proper strategic meeting once the Crows had finished with whatever it was they did during those rituals of theirs. Something smelled wrong about all of this. They needed to look over their plans again; Hux would not risk the lives of his clanspeople by walking a step further blindly. He had seen his father lose battles, wars, and countless lives by being so focused on the promise of glory that he failed to consider any options or plans that were not based on his complete and triumphant victory. Hux had watched, and learned, and he was a far more intelligent man than his father had ever been. And contrary to his father, Hux considered all of his clan to be his family. Hux was there to protect them as much as he was there to lead them, and that meant he had a duty toward them to always keep the safety and well-being of his clanspeople as his number one priority. They would bleed and die for him if he asked them to, and it was a terrifying weight of an honour to carry. Hux would rather die than ever abuse it. They looked to him for answers, and he would give them – even if they broke his heart.

~*~*~*~

In the tent belonging to the Crows, there were no rituals, but nonetheless the mood was somber. The stitching of wounds and setting of bones was child's play to them all, and it was quickly over and done with. They had fared better in the fight than expected – with the exception of Sílass, who would need both rest and help for the next few weeks. The fracture to her arm turned out not to be the only one; she had taken a nasty hit to her head on her unprotected side during the battle, and she was already clearly suffering the side effects of a concussion. What had caused her to sustain
so many injuries was so far unknown, but they all felt her pain through the bond, and though they knew that whatever it was had been a matter very close to her heart they would not pressure her about it. Sílass would tell them when she felt ready, and until then all they could do was show her love and understanding.

The others had many injuries to heal as well, but thankfully none of them would be much hindrance to them. Erris would have to rest and be careful with himself over the coming days, as he had finally snapped mid-battle and gone into a berserker state. Vilya had managed to calm him down before they made it to the camp, but the frenzy wore on him, and it was not uncommon for him to injure himself simply due to being unable to feel any pain while in its grip. It also made him gloomy and melancholy, prone to heavy drinking and shutting himself away to wallow in a mixture of self-pity and anger at his own loss of control and the results of it.

All in all, it was the same as after most battles they had fought in their days; Crows never celebrated a victory, not the way others did – it was not a matter they considered worth the loud feasting, singing and boasting of one's triumphs in the battlefield. A death was a death, no matter which shape it came wrapped in, and if they did not celebrate deaths in childbirth or from disease, then there was no reason for them to celebrate a death they had caused. The Goddess did not discriminate between stillborns and soldiers, so neither did they. But even so, they would lie to themselves if they said they had not been more shaken by this than any previous battle. Whatever hope they had had of being able to convince their former siblings to surrender or join them had been extinguished. Snoke's influence had clung to their minds like heavy chains; they would most likely not have been able to break free even if they had wanted to. It shook them also to know that these traitors, as many as they had been, would not be the last ones they would have to face in battle. Their order had always been large, the Crows counting in the thousands – all ages, all genders and origins, and all levels of power; from the ones who could only tap into the surface of the Force, to those like Kylo, Maul, and the Knights, whose mastery and connection of the Force ran so deep and true that they themselves could not estimate its full depth. Many had died at the House, hatchlings and adults rotting away together – killed with no discrimination – but so many more had left alive.

They could only pray that they would come across Crows loyal to them, to the Gods, and not to Snoke, because there were too few of them to battle groups this large every time they encountered them. They knew their limits, and they knew that no matter their strength and skills, half a battle was down to pure luck. And luck was not the domain of the Gods. It could not be negotiated with, it could receive no sacrifices or prayers, and it could not be changed. In every moment, every situation, you either had luck on your side or you did not. Luck was like the winds; it changed directions without warning, without logic, and even the Gods could not control it, so the Crows did not trust in it. Someone would be killed, and that was a risk they could not presently afford to take – this battle had been a brusque warning about that.

And in the end, despite everything, they also grieved for those they had once loved, protected, laughed and cried with. With every midnight clad enemy they slaughtered, they were destroying their own world, the way of life that was all they knew. They were in free fall, walking the threshold between past and future, between one order and another, and there was nothing in their teaching or training that had ever prepared them for this. It was a frightening time, and it was only like this – where no one else could see them – that they allowed themselves to feel it, to show it. The others must never know. They looked to the Crows for answers, and answers they would give – even if the truth was a secret they could not afford to share. Crows did what was necessary, and lies were sometimes better than the truth – but they knew better than to tell anyone that.

“We're gonna have to have some sort of strategy talk with the war council,” Vilya said as she tucked Erris in under a heavy woolen blanket, letting him rest his head in her lap. He was trembling.
badly, face pale and worn, clinging to his sister's robes like a frightened child. “We got lucky this time. Next time we might not, and I don't know about the rest of you, but I am not prepared to lose any one of you, and I want to make sure we are better prepared to handle the situation next time this happens. ‘Cause it will. We all know that.”

Murmured agreements came from the other Crows, and Kylo nodded.

“We were caught off guard,” he sighed. “Which should never have happened. Our attention has been far too focused on locating Snoke, and because of it, we’ve allowed ourselves to be snuck up on like this.” Fiddling with the fastening on the bandage covering his forearm, he paused for a moment, biting his lip. “We must come up with a better strategy. This cannot be allowed to happen again.”

“We gotta figure out what to do when we get to the Middle Lands and the South too,” Avi said while helping Sílass sip some water. “Cause we gotta go off and find Snoke at some point, and I don't wanna leave the army all unprotected, and we're also gonna come up against Doves and things. And Snoke's probably got guards and traps and stuff all around him.” They made a rude noise of frustration. “There's too bloody few of us, that's the problem. We'd need a hundred more of us to do this right. Why the hells did we have so many idiot siblings? Don't they ever speak to their Gods? It's like they don't even remember what we are.”

“They're right,” Chava said. “This whole situation is a pile of pig shit. And like you said, Vilya, we can't afford to lose a single one of us – but especially not Kylo or Maul. The Goddess said you were needed to fix this, and if she stated it that clearly, then we know it's not up for discussion.”

“I wonder how many hatchlings survived,” Aya muttered, more to herself than the room, but the others all turned to look at her nonetheless.

“What do you mean, sister Aya?” Maul asked. “How are the hatchlings relevant to our situation, besides making our duty to punish the traitors even more pressing?”

“It's a terrible thought,” she admitted, “but this is a terrible situation, and I think we will have to abandon many more moral convictions than we have so far before all of this is over.” She finished wrapping a bandage around Avi’s foot and got them back into their boot before continuing. “The hatchlings are young,” she said, “and not fully sworn in. Snoke's grip on their minds is barely existent – or, at least used to be. The hatchlings look to older Crows for guidance, and until the day they take their vows the Raven is merely a name they hear mentioned. It's always been that way, we know that – I mean, we all grew up in the Order. Did any one of you, sans master Kylo and you Knights, ever see or hear Snoke yourselves before the day you took your oaths? Did you ever name the Raven as your hero, or the one you hoped to grow up to become?” They all shook their heads, beginning to have an inkling of where she was going with this.

“Hatchlings' faith and loyalty are frail,” Maul said slowly. “And that is only natural; they are children, after all. That is why we guard them so closely, why we keep them from worldly things. They cannot tell a bear trap from a music box, and they should not be expected to.” He looked at Aya. “You believe Snoke has recruited them too?”

She nodded. “I do. I saw many bodies of children when we fled the House, but I very much doubt it was all of them. If I was Snoke, I'd want them on my side, to raise and train to be loyal to me and me alone. A child's mind is so malleable, it would give him a whole new generation of servants without enough knowledge of themselves and the world to question anything until it's too late. If they ever do at all.”

“So...” Chava scratched her head. “Where do we come into all of this? I think I know where you're
“We go for the children,” Aya said, shrugging. “If we can lure them back over to our side, the side of their Gods, then we will not only be able to keep them safe, but the older ones can help out in battles as well.” She frowned. “It’s a vile plan, I know, and I’m not proud – but we need more Force wielders. We cannot afford to be picky about who we recruit.”

The tent was silent as the Crows thought it over in their own minds, and then all eyes moved to Kylo, waiting for him to speak his first. After all, he was the one who had the final say in any matter under their jurisdiction, his opinion outweighing theirs many times over. It was usually a better idea to let the one with the highest rank speak first – it saved time and discussion, and the Crows all knew that in their present situation, time was a luxury they did not have. The next assault could happen at any moment. Should happen any moment, if their former siblings had remembered even half of their training. Kylo stood up from where he had been sitting on a wooden chest while his wounds were tended to and adjusted the thick jacket he had put on instead of his torn and blood soaked outer robes. None of them would be wearing their full-length robes for a few days as they had to somehow be mended – only the outer layer, the thick leather surcoat, was wearable, and even that needed some needlework – but at least the heavy woollen jackets and trousers they had been gifted by the warchief and chieftains were black, which made them feel a little less uncomfortable.

“I agree with Aya,” Kylo said once he had deemed himself presentable. “There were a good three hundred hatchlings between fourteen and eighteen winters old at the house – at least as many little ones – and quite a few of them were very talented. We could use that talent, and in the long run we could certainly use more Crows who are loyal to the right side. This war will end one day, and then we will need to rebuild. No matter how I look at it, I can't escape the fact that we need those hatchlings.” He sighed. “And gods know we need every single adult Crow we can persuade to join us, too. As much as I hate having to subject children to this, Aya is right; we can't pick and choose. We are outnumbered, wounded, and with more than fifty thousands soldiers to watch over – with more joining every day. We need more Force wielders, and I frankly cannot allow myself to care where we find them. Should we happen upon a violently inclined Dove, I'd welcome them too.”

“What do we do if we encounter little ones?” Gaius asked, a worried wrinkle on his forehead. “It doesn't sit right with me to use them – they barely know how to control their bladders at those ages. I hope we're not actually discussing using them as soldiers too? I can do many things, but not that.”

Kylo shook his head. “We'll protect them,” he assured his sibling. “Ideally, I'd have them sent back up North as fast as possible, to keep them out of harm's way, and keep them from distracting the troops. But at the very least, we can make sure they're kept in the camps, away from the battles. They can help with the chores; they're already used to that, and it will save us from having to keep watch on them. We have other things to do, after all.”

“This is gonna go over real well with your warchief,” Erris managed to comment, voice thin with fatigue. “Given he's a father himself and all that.”

“He won't have a choice,” Maul said with unusual bluntness. He was always far less gentle than normal after a battle, and this had been a more harrowing ordeal than almost any battle they had ever fought. “This is Crow business. This is outside the realm of his power, and he can hate it as much as he wishes. They all can.” He looked at Kylo. “Are you prepared to handle a quarrel with your beloved over this?”

Kylo snorted. “Like you said, this is Crow business. I have the final say in this, and we all know this would be far from the worst thing I have done in my life. Braith knows that, and even if he's
mad at me I am not changing my mind. We will tell them next time we have a meeting. But the troops must never know the severity of this situation. Mind your tongues around them. We can't afford to have them worrying about anything but being prepared for the coming battles.”

They went on to discuss the issue of how they would find some way of luring their former siblings back to the side of their Gods if the opportunity presented itself. It was not a matter they found palatable, and it was the general opinion that they were traitors and as thus deserved only death. It was, after all, the way of the Crows; the rules dated back several ages, had been taught to them all as an undisputable, unbreakable law. But so had the rule against harming hatchlings, the rule against obeying any mortal leader over their Gods. Even if they saved all surviving hatchlings, there were precious few of them left to rebuild and continue their Order. The knowledge tore at their hearts, though they tried to push it aside. The discussion had not gotten far, however, before Mitaka made his presence known at the opening of the tent – bowing in respect, an apologetic expression on his soft features.

“I truly apologize for interrupting you,” he said as he looked around the tent with a worried frown. “I understand that you have much to discuss, but the chieftains are worried about you all.” He paused, seemingly attempting to find the right words. “There is also the issue of supper, which Lord Hux wished me to remind you that you sorely need, and... ahem, so do the chieftains. Lord Hux included. They are becoming somewhat testy.”

“Never come between a chieftain and his food,” Aya chuckled, shaking her head in fond exasperation, and Kylo could not help but join her – the tension in the room easing its grip on them a little.

“Tell them we will be there in a moment. Sílass needs someone to sit with her, and half of us still need to finish dressing.”

He did not mention that they mostly just needed a moment to steel themselves so they could make it to the other tent without letting anyone see how much in pain they all were. Maul did not appear to look forward to sitting down at all, and Errís could barely stand up without immediately falling over. Mitaka nodded and left them, and Kylo was thankful for the lack of questions. Mitaka had an impeccable sense for when to leave things alone, and this was undoubtedly such a time.

He helped Vilya put clean clothes on Errís while she held her brother upright as his knees threatened to give way. Chava declared with unusual firmness that she would stay with Sílass, but that she would appreciate if someone could come over with a bowl for them both. No need to give Sílass one of her own; she would not be able to hold it, much less finish it anyway. It was better that they shared. Avi wasted no time informing them that they would be more than happy to eat Sílass’ bowl, so it would not go to waste. Gaius commented as they made their way out of the tent that Avi would have to take that up with the chieftains – they were hungry too, and would probaobly not decline an extra helping either.

~*~*~*~

Commander Navid had been a good, if somewhat unconventional, host for a full two days while he brought Han up to date with everything that had happened while he had been up North. The commander refused to believe Han had spent so much time alone with Northerners without being hacked up and boiled into soup – something he was adamant that Northerners did to foreigners caught out travelling alone – but he had believed, and agreed with Han that this whole invasion was folly. The Northerners went to war all year around; they lived their whole lives in this unforgiving climate, and the population had not only survived but thrived in it – to them, marching South to burn and pillage during the darkest of winter was child's play. The Southern army had no survival
training, no equipment, no knowledge of these conditions – frost covered the ground in D'Qar perhaps once per generation – but the Queen drove them in front of her as if they were a pack of hunting dogs, not people, without any concern for their health or lives. She had never been very concerned about her subordinates, but she had at least always been able to provide good reason for her actions and demands. The commander confessed to not being the only one who thought that a vision, no matter how divine, of victory and glory was enough reason to drive her army up North into the waiting jaws of the Northern beasts.

Han had learned a lot more than he had wished about the situation during his time in the camp, but he still could not shake the feeling that there was more to this than any of them had managed to puzzle together so far. There were so many loose ends, and if there was one thing Leia had always hated, it was loose ends. After all, she was the very woman who sent the father of her only son to kill him, just to make certain that there would be no loose ends. When commander Navid informed him that they were breaking camp to push a league or two farther North – deliberately taking it slow, so that they would not be too far away from the main army if there were battles coming – he gave Han back his horse, provided him with what provisions they could spare, and unceremoniously shooed him off in the direction of where the main army should be located, unless the God of Mornings had hauled the Queen off somewhere else, as the commander had muttered under his breath. Han had travelled enough of the world and met enough strange people to take the sudden farewell more or less in stride, and had been on his way before the soldiers had finished dismantling the camp. Once again, he was travelling alone – only his horse for company – but he did not blame the commander for not sparing a soldier or two to escort him to the main camp, even though it was customary to do so. The vanguard, or this section of it at least, was not very large, and while the soldiers seemed to have been chosen from the ranks of those with plenty of experience to call upon, half of them looked frozen halfway to death already. Their eyes were hard with exaustion and resentment, hands trembling so ferociously in the cold that some of them struggled to bring food to their own mouth. There had been frostbite on some limps already, Han had noticed, though Navid had refused to acknowledge it. Their uniforms were the warmest ones the D'Qarian army had, but still a far cry from anything that would have been even remotely sufficient for this cold. No, commander Navid did not have any soldiers to spare, and Han knew they would keep getting fewer with each night the farther North they came. He did not know if it was a mercy if they died from the cold rather than the sharp blades of the Northerners – it seemed as thankless a situation as choosing between the levels of the seven hells. Perhaps, he thought to himself, death by a blade would be kinder, after all. It would be quick, and they would at least have a chance to defend themselves. There was no defence against the cold, dark nights in this frozen land. The God of Mornings had no power here.

The thought, unsettling, and profoundly disheartening even to a non-believer like Han, stayed with him for the entire journey as he made his way South as fast as his horse could manage. It sat at the back of his mind, chafing like ill-fitted armour, nagging at him constantly until he felt like screaming in frustration. The God of Mornings had no power here; what implications did that treacherous thought carry with it? Queen Leia of House Organa was marching here, claiming her god had wished it, claiming that her victory had been promised to her by her god. But what if her vision was wrong? What if her god would not follow her across these borders? What if her god was not with them? She was marching her army to death and suffering – what if it had all been for nothing? He could not bear to think about it, stopping himself short each time the thoughts began swirling around his head again. Nothing made sense anymore, and he found himself dreading the moment he would see Leia gain. They had been together for so long – Kylo had been nearing his twenty seventh naming day when he died – and while their relationship had never been stable or peaceful for very long, they had never doubted their love for one another. Leia was bull-headed, arrogant, ambitious, too intelligent and too used to getting her way. Han shied away from responsibilities and expectations as if they were the plague, hating anyone who dared tell him what
to do, and preferring to handle hardships by not handling them. They had been together so long, he
knew even though he preferred not to think about it, mainly because they were never under the
same roof for long enough to start chafing at each other. But she had carried his child, been proud
of her growing belly even when the laws dictated she should have terminated it and buried the
secret deeper than the depths of the ocean – that she should have gone to the temple and begged
forgiveness for her scandalous behaviour. She had loved Kylo so fiercely; the boy had not even had
a cot of his own when he was an, instead she had kept him close to her every night for those first
months of his life, her eyes glowing with love for them both in those moments she watched Han
hold his tiny son. She was capable of love. Han knew that better than anyone. She had once had a
gentle, caring side that Han would go across the universe for in an instant. It hurt more than he
ever expected to wonder if there was enough of that woman left now to hear him out, to save the
lives of many, to not execute him for his failure to murder his own son.

When he finally did happen upon the army, he was recognized instantly by Chewie – who had
apparently been helping the guards patrol the perimeter of the camp. The relief and joy of seeing
each other alive and well was shortlived, however, as Chewie asked if he knew what had been
going on during these last few weeks. His frown had deepened when Han shared the information
he had gathered during his journey there. He did not tell Chewie about Kylo's death. Despite
everything and all the years that had passed, it felt wrong to tell anyone else before he had brought
the news to Leia. Somehow, somewhere deep down, she was still the one who birthed him.
Besides, the mere thought still had him fighting back tears; the pain and grief tearing at his heart
and mind like poisonous claws, and to speak the words out loud was still a terrifying idea. Saying
the words would make it real. Too real for what Han's heart could bear just yet, and still he had
little choice in the matter now. His grief was not important enough in the great scheme of things for
the world to show him the mercy of remaining silent until the pain had become easier to handle.

“All these years,” Chewie signed as they walked through the camp, “and I've never seen her this
bad. Not even when you had that row about the boy being executed. She says her god speaks to her
now, too. You're walking into the lair of a real monster right now, beware of that.”

Han looked around at the state of the army and its temporary home. They seemed to fare
marginally better than the soldiers in the vanguard, but their eyes had that same dull coldness to
them. Fear, Han realized. Fear and resentment and hopelessness in one dangerous mix. They were
too well trained to begin entertaining thoughts of mutiny just yet, but Han feared it might only be a
matter of time. Leia had always been a respected and feared leader in the field, but the respect had
always outweighed the fear, and her troops had been proud to follow her. Now, though, fear had
the upper hand, and that was a dangerous situation.

“I'm beginning to understand that, yes,” Han sighed as he gave his old friend a tired look. “Met
some troops on the way here. The commander told me everything, and I could tell none of them
are doing this because they believe in her anymore. They do it because they fear what she will do if
they disobey.”

“She can't execute all of them,” Chewie shrugged. “And she can't march up against the North all
by her own royal self. There's going to be a mutiny at some point, and it will be all her own fault.”
He looked disgusted. “Sorry, my friend. I don't think I like her much anymore.”

“I don't blame you,” Han said, shaking his head sadly. “I'm not sure I do either, but I can't afford to
decide just yet. I have to see her first. Try to fix this whole stinking pile of pig shit. Then we'll see.”

“You might both be dead by then,” Chewie said, and Han – though he refrained from opening his
mouth – knew he was right.
Perhaps, he thought, it was no more than they both deserved. But he did not have time to think more about it, or to say anything to Chewie about his growing trepidation, because now Chewie was holding open the entrance to Leia's tent and motioning for him to get inside. There were voices coming from inside, and he could recognize Leia out of a crowd of a million if he needed to. She was there, just on the other side of the entrance, and he was not ready. Han had never been ready for most things in his life to happen, but this... For this there was no preparing, no sense of being ready to face a situation as it was. On the other side of that entrance was the woman for whom he would once have given up everything – had given up everything – and he did not know if he could look her in the eyes. He did not know if there was anything left of the love he had held for her, and it terrified him that he could not be sure when or where it had gone away. A lifetime of loyalty, now as dried up and brittle as an old papyrus scroll left in the sun and heat too long; it would not withstand even the gentlest touch. Leia's touch, he knew, had never been very gentle.

Steeling himself, he let out a deep, resigned breath, and stepped inside. The entire tent went quiet as he did, conversations halting mid-word, and the hustle and bustle of planning around the large maps ceasing to the sounds of pens and measure sticks dropping onto the hard surface of the table. Normally, Han loved being the center of attention – thrived in it, even – but now he would have given anything to be granted invisibility. They looked as if they had seen a ghost. Forcing himself to look around the room, he saw her stand at the gavel of the table, her deep, dark eyes fixed on him – her face an unreadable mask, but those eyes.... He could still see the young woman he had loved, that look in her eyes everytime he had been gone too long, when she had worried herself sick about him. Relief, anger, thankfulness, and resentment all tangled up together into something he could not name, but still somehow understood. There used to be love there, too. So much love it had frightened him at times. He could not see it this time – instead a hint of that haunted look he had seen in Kylo's eyes when he was little, when he tried to tell them about the man speaking in his head. The difference here, at least at first glance, seemed to be that Leia did not look the least bit afraid of it. She looked proud, determined, even smug.

“Leave us,” she commanded the room, not breaking eye contact with Han for even a moment. “You too, Chewie. I need to speak to Han alone.”

With a light pat on his shoulder, and a sympathetic look, Chewie followed the rest of the Queen's war council as they vacated the large tent. Leia waited until they were finally alone, and then walked up to him, cupping his face between her calloused hands. He endured her searching look, mostly because he did not know what else to do, but still found himself surprised as she pulled his face closer and placed a soft kiss on his lips. Before, she would have been dragging him to their quarters now, berating him for his recklessness, his long absence even as she divested him of his clothing. There was none of that now, and he did not believe it was simply because they were both older now. Leia was fire, no matter her age. No, this was another matter; a distance between them he now knew was not only his imagination. To think they had not even been apart for long, this time.

“It's good to see you,” she said, letting him hug her as it had always been his first impulse to do. She still fit so well there, in his arms. It hurt to think about. “I've been so worried. I prayed for a sign you were alive, but God would not give it. I should have had more trust in him.” She breathed into his jacket, as she had always done; convincing herself he was truly there. “You all made it back alive. I am so grateful.”

“Rey?”

“She's still unwell, but getting better. She'll be going South as soon as the doctors allow it. You'll see her soon.”
A shaky breath, half sob, half laugh escaped him before he could stop it. She was here! He would hold her soon, would be able to protect her and care for her again. But first, he must make it out of this conversation alive. Gently prying Leia off of himself, and guiding her over to a padded bench by a large brazier, he sat them both down and took her hands in his.

“I don't know how to even tell you this,” he began, “and I am afraid of what will come of it, but I have news. About Ben.”

“Go on.” Leia had sat up straight, her full attention fixed on him, hands squeezing his with strength many would not believe them to possess.

“He is dead.” As much as he hated the way his voice broke at the last word and the way the tears escaped his eyes like water from a collapsing dam, he could not stop either of it. It betrayed him, he knew, and there was nothing he could do about it anymore. Leia, blessedly, remained silent as he mustered courage to continue. “There was something happening among the Crows. A power struggle of some sort. Their leader, he killed him. Ben is dead, up at that big old house they have all the way up North. He's not coming back, Leia. He's not a threat anymore.”

The silence seemed to stretch out forever, her face as unreadable as a statue. Then she nodded once, letting out a small sigh.

“Good,” she said, getting to her feet and going back to the table, eyes already moving over the maps. “Then we have one less obstacle in our way. Once I've gotten Rey back to the palace, she'll be safe, and her incessant outbursts won't disturb my troops further.” She smiled, seeming content, and it froze Han to the core to see. “I think it's best, though, that you go South as well. You've been alone up there for a long time now, and I know how easily you befriend people. It's better for everyone if you don't remain up here where your loyalty can be lured off in all directions.”

“Before what?” Han's voice sounded uncharacteristically small in the massive tent, but only for a moment, before coming back as loud as ever. “Don't you dare!” he growled. Anger had always come as easy to him as it did to his son. “Don't you dare call my loyalty into question this way! Thirty years, Leia. For thirty years I've been loyal to you, and you alone. I left my homeland, my family, my friends, my not so insignificant naval career for you. Because I loved you. Because you asked me to. I've done everything you ever asked me; things so vile I barely dare think about them – because you asked it of me! Because I vowed to you that I would be faithful and loyal to you alone for the rest of my life.”

The anger welled forth, rising from depths in him he had not been aware existed, surfacing like a volcanic eruption; thick, ugly, burnign so hotly he briefly wondered how it did not incinerate everything within ten steps of him. He felt as if his heart and mind had turned to melted, burning rock, unstoppable, annihilating. From her spot by the table, Leia raised one perfect eyebrow – a challenge he would not, for perhaps the first time, not back down from. He would never win, not against a woman whose status came with an indisputable right to the last word. But he did not need to win; he only needed to stand his ground, just this once. He needed to do this for his son, whom he had betrayed in the worst of ways, and for his daughter, for whom there was still a chance of a bright future. Han himself had no rights to a happy ending to his life, and it was not a fact he mourned. He deserved whatever was coming to him. But his children did not, had not, and that was all that mattered now. Was all that had ever mattered, even though he had been too blind for too long to see it until it was already far past the point of what could be mended.

“And yet, when alone with the warchief of clan Hux, you did not take the chance to kill him,” Leia said, something pitying playing at the corner of her mouth. “He was injured, weakened, and you let him live. Then you met his mother, his children, and you left them alive too. A threat to everything
we are, everything we have fought for, that you could have eradicated once and for all. But you let them live.” Her gaze turned to steel as she looked him dead in the eye. “Just like you would have let Ben live if we had not been fortunate enough to have him put down by those despicable creatures he sided with. Your loyalty, Han, is most definitely in question. Love is not a defense to hide your weakness behind. I love you, and I love our daughter. But I will never love anything more than I love my God. Humans fail. God does not.” She barely even seemed akin to the woman he had fallen in love with as she stood up straighter, pride radiating from her like sunlight off a polished jewel. “If I am to choose between you two and my God, my choice will always be my God. He leads me, supports me, and most importantly: he does not betray me.”

“I had a child taken away from me,” Han said, voice full of such fury it burned as cold as the winter landscape outside. “My child, whom I held in my arms even before his mother did, whom I loved more than the waking world and still betrayed in more ways than I can count. I had my son taken from me, Leia. My sweet, gentle Ben, who only ever wanted to belong somewhere, who never needed me to be anything other than his father. You took him from me. You imprisoned him, had him executed. Hunted him down like an animal. For eleven years I’ve regretted it. I’ve watched you raise Rey as if Ben never existed, as if you don’t even remember him. But I do. And the pain I’ve lived with for your sake, Leia... You couldn’t carry it for a day. And now you tell me I should put another man through that grief?” He shook his head, standing up and walking up to her, towering over her, eyes never leaving hers even as tears streamed down his face. “I refuse. Braith Hux is a terrifying man, as bloodthirsty as the gods he worships, yes. But he is loved by his people, by his children – and by Ben. And he loves his people. He cares for them and protects them. Which is more than anyone could ever say about you.”

She moved to strike him, and for the first time ever he caught her hand, not letting it make impact. “I don’t think you love anything more than power, Your Majesty. And I will not be part of it any longer. Stick to your god, and use him to explain to your people why you let your troops freeze to death, why you let D’Qar be conquered by the very people you told them would be easy to defeat. Tell them your god let it happen. The North is marching, Your Majesty, and they will slaughter you and your army so easily you won’t even know what happened.” He let he go, mouth curled in tired disgust as he moved towards the tent opening. “If you truly cared about your people, you’d head back to D’Qar as quickly as your feet could carry you. But I’m beginning to think you wouldn’t even mind ruling over a kingdom of carcasses, so long as you get to rule over something.”

Leia would find a way to punish him for what he had just said, Han knew that, but as he exited the tent and went in search of Rey he found himself caring little to none about it. Because for the first time in three decades, he had stood up to Leia and walked away from it. It was a pity that it happened when their relationship finally met its somewhat anticlimatic end. There would be no going back from here. Truths had been spoken that could not be taken back; truths that Han now realized had been looking for a way to be voiced for a very long time. Everything they had faced together, everything their relationship had withstood... and in the end, it was Ben that ended it. No, Han thought to himself, not ended. Ben had set him free. Even in death, his son continued to be a better man than his father had ever been. But Han was grateful to him, nonetheless. Now he could focus on doing whatever he needed to do to turn this whole situation in a direction that would not end in genocide on either side.

~*~*~*~

Luke swayed slightly where he sat, kneeling in front of the altar of his sister's private chapel. He had been praying since the previous evening, unceasing, unmoving; desperate for guidance – any guidance – from his god. Leia had been gone for weeks now, and Luke could scarcely remember ever feeling quite so lost. He was the one who had inherited their mother's soft, gentle nature, and
he abhored nothing so much as violence and lust for power. Leia had always been his opposite; steely, bullheaded, powerhungry to a degree that had sometimes frightened him. She had fought
children twice their size for picking on him when they were little. He felt the call from God, she
felt the call from the sword. They had always known their lives would take them in different
directions, but he had never fully understood how different until now.

Royal advisor he may be, but Luke was far from the wisest or highest ranking Dove in the South.
He was mediocre, and he had never minded it for a moment; it seemed that exceptional power or
talent always came with equally exceptional problems. Mediocrity bred mediocrity, and that
meant a quiet, contemplative life free of distractions. Or so he had thought, until the day their
mother died and Leia took the throne, naming him her official royal advisor. She had done things
during her rule – both on the battlefield and off it – that gave him nightmares at the mere memory,
but he had done what he had been taught, forgiving her and reminding himself over and over that it
was not his place to judge.

But only once before had he been in such crisis of faith as he was now, his heart and mind in
pieces, his soul drenched in some dark desolation, unable to hear his god – his prayers going
unacknowledged and unanswered. He had spoken on Ben's behalf during the farce of a trial he had
been given. He had taken the blame for causing the build up of whatever emotions and thoughts
that had led Ben to commit such a deed – had placed blame on all their shoulders for failing the
boy in such an inexcusable, unprecedented way. He had pleaded on his bare knees before his sister
and the court to send Ben into exile – banish him for life and let him live out his days on some
other continent where his name was not known and no one had heard of the Doves. But Leia had
refused to listen. He had never seen such coldness in her before, and he remembered thinking
before he could stop himself that he was glad their mother was not there to see it. It would have
destroyed her to know what her daughter would become once power was hers.

Now she was marching to conquer the North, to colonize and oppress its people once more,
claiming that God had given her visions and spoke to her in her mind. She would not listen when
he told her that God did not speak directly to anyone, apart from a precious few Doves in history
whose souls were so pure, so holy that no other living creature could compare. Not even the Great
Mother, or the Great Father before her had even heard a whisper during their whole lives. When
Luke had gone to see her, to tell her what Leia had told him, the Great Mother had been so shocked
she had fainted. When she woke, she had been outraged that the Queen would make such
blasphemous claim, and Luke could do little else but agree. This was not Leia's claim to make.

But Luke carried another burden on his shoulders now, too; another set of troubles to weigh on his
mind like nothing he had known before. Every last citizen of D'Qar that had not gone to war, and
they were a considerable number, were now under his rule. They all depended on him for
guidance, protection, and safety. What a cruel irony it was that Luke himself was woefully ill-
equipped to rule over anything, that there was nothing more contrary to his nature than this.
Watching from the sidelines was a poor education in the art of politics, and he was being made
aware of it in every choice he was forced to make. Even the choice of breakfast food had
seemingly become laden with political undertones and the possibility of consequences. He did not
have much of an appetite anymore.

If only he could have relied more on the support from his order, but with each day that passed more
and more Doves seemed to take sudden interest in politics – the palace was positively swarming
with them, and they were all suddenly surprisingly friendly towards the members of the various
councils and ministries. Power, it seemed, was a temptation the Doves could no longer claim
themselves to be above. At the moment they did not seem to have much influence, but who knew
what conflicts it could cause if they managed to gain it. It worried him deeply, but his concerns
went unacknowledged by those above him in rank. One had even questioned if he was loyal to his
order or to politics first. It was a terrifyingly lonely place to be, and it wore on him.
“Master Dove,” came a quiet voice from behind him. “I am sorry to disturb you, but you are needed in the council room. The Royal Council session cannot begin without you.”

Luke finished his prayer, slowly rising to his feet. His entire body screamed in agony at being made to move after so many hours in one position, but he did not let it show. He had learned that from Leia. *Never let it show*, she had said, *no matter how tired you are. They will eat you alive*. So Luke acted as if it did not bother him, merely nodded and thanked the servant for coming to find him. He needed to change his clothes, and then he would join the council members. The servant nodded and hurried off.

The Royal Council. Luke tried his best not to judge, to always forgive, to seek to understand. But they frightened and appalled him in equal measure, and he found himself often feeling somehow tainted merely from being in their presence. What was worse; he was not entirely certain he felt ashamed of it. They were by far the most arrogant, selfish, greedy, and power hungry collection of people he had ever encountered. Other people meant nothing to them. The world meant nothing to them. They prayed to God only because it was expected of them, entering the temple only out of obligation. The only love in their hearts was reserved for the power they held and the power they could still gain. If Luke slipped even a little in his pretense to know the art of ruling, they would waste no time in riddling themselves of him. After all, it would take months before Leia could come back to punish them, and by then it would be too late. They would take D’Qar for themselves without worry or regret, and the people would suffer the consequences of it.

As he strode into the room, masking his insecurity behind his most serene priestly expression, Luke surveyed the state of the council. Only ten of them were in attendance today, for which he would have been glad if not for the fact that it told him they did not take him seriously enough to even bother showing up. It also told him they were absent because they were busy, most likely planning actions they would never have dared to think about had Leia been here. But she was not. When the warden is absent, the prisoners steal the keys – that was an old saying, and he found it fitting. Luke was no warden, but if he could not hold on to the keys, then God help them all.

“Council,” he greeted as he sat down in the massive chair at the head of the table – a symbol of pride he had taken an oath never to let himself feel. “Do excuse my tardiness, but I must tend to my religious duties as well. I'm sure you understand.”

They did not, he could feel it in the air – along with something more, something sinister.

“Master Dove,” the council greeted, not even half of them giving the nod his royal blood demanded, and none of them bothering to look him in the eyes.

“I know we all have many duties to attend to,” Luke said blithely – forcing a facade of confidence he did not feel, “so let's not waste more time than we need. I believe we left the issue of distributing rations of drinking water in case of a siege for today when we parted yesterday. I assume you've all had a look at the situations in your respective districts, so let's go around the table and see where you are on that.”

It was petty, and he knew it, but feeling their collective annoyance was currently the only enjoyment he had. Soon enough, he would have to make decisions that would most likely destroy his very soul. God would surely forgive him for this small indulgence. He had, after all, forgiven far worse crimes than this – Ben's execution coming first to mind.

~*~*~*~

A week or so after the first battle against the former Crows, Kylo and his Knights had had to fight another two groups of Snoke’s underlings. While these had been smaller skirmishes, quickly dealt with, and resulting in only minor injuries, they painted a glum picture for the remainder of the war.
Snoke knew where the army was, thus he could send his loyal, bloodcrazed followers to chip away at their strength and health whenever he so desired. The Knights and the Hux Crows had no choice but to fight; if they did not, their enemies would go after the troops they protected.

It was, perhaps, not such a terrible thing that a blizzard had erupted the previous day – effectively forcing every living being in the entire region to hunker down and wait for it to pass. It was impossible to move outside the tents, and although the Northerners knew how to set up camp to prevent it from hindering their daily chores, no one – human or animal – would be able to walk more than a few steps in the snow and winds without risking death from the exposure.

At the heart of the giant labyrinth of tents and tunnels, in the large tent where Hux along with all his chieftains and Crows had squeezed together to preserve what warmth the cold, the rustling of maps and scraping of wetstones against blades could be heard. With this extra time on their hands, safe in the knowledge that if they were not moving, then the Southerners were most definitely not either, Hux had called for a strategy meeting. They had been at it for a few hours already, and the mood was not cheery. The Crows had delivered their rapport, along with the plans they had come up with thus far – and a very good explanation as to why in all the Gods names there were now a dozen children in the camp – and it had not been well received. Hux and Kylo had clashed over it with intensity as Hux' own paternal instincts caused him to almost violently reject the entire idea. He was revolted that they would even think of such a thing, worried about what it would do to the troops to suddenly be in charge of the strange, grey clad children. His army did not, and would not, employ child soldiers – it was a stain on everything his clan stood for, and he was deeply offended that they had done this without consulting him. Kylo had waited out his outburst, standing as patient as a rock in a storm, until Hux had had to catch his breath, and calmly – coolly – informed him that this was not his jurisdiction. They children were not soldiers, but even if they had been it would not have mattered – Kylo was currently the highest ranking Crow still loyal to their Gods. This decision was his, and his alone. He had the responsibility to ensure the survival of his order, and Hux and his chieftains could rant and rave all they wanted. They had no say in this matter. None whatsoever. The children would stay with the army, would help with the chores and earn their keep – and when the war was over, they would continue their training. Or did Hux prefer to see them come under Snoke's control once more? Would it soothe his conscience to see them conditioned into soldiers for the creature who not long ago had forced Kylo to make the ultimate sacrifice? Besides, the children were far from defenseless. If an enemy soldier attempted to attack them, it would be a most unwise decision.

It was such a rare sight for Hux and Kylo to disagree about anything at all in front of others, that their heated exhange had been met with a stunned silence on both sides as the others in the room watched their glaring match with the look of small children witnessing their parents arguing. Rurik was the one to find his tongue first, and bravely placed himself between the two as he suggested they move onto the next issue. If they continued this discussion further right now, master Kylo would probably set Hux' beard on fire with the force of his stare, and as welcome as the extra heat would be, it would not help their cause to have a lump of coal for a warchief. It broke the tension, laughter replacing the silence, and slowly everyone gathered around the maps.

“I know I've said it before,” Rurik said as he helped himself to some of the heated wine a servant had just brought in, “but this just isn't normal. I'm running out of stick to notch at this rate. The soldiers are getting itchy.”

“I know you've said it before,” Hux grumbled. “This entire army knows you've said it before. And as far as I'm concerned you can shove that stick somewhere stinking. Trust me, I am painfully aware of the situation.” He ran a hand through his hair. “There's is no need whatsoever to keep repeating that statement. The question is, what we can do here and now, in this situation as it happens to be. And for the Gods sake, don't say anything that's already obvious! You're not trained
birds."

"I'd say we need to split up," Mai said, looking thoughtful as she stuffed her pipe. "There's not many left to join us now, so I'd say we're as big an army as we're going to be, and we're too slow, too easy to find as it is now. We're not Southerners; we don't need to march this way. We could move a lot faster in smaller units." She gave a little smile. "And I know most of that was obvious to you, Braith. But it still needed to be said."

The other chieftains studied the maps for a while, muttering to themselves as they mulled it over. Hux nodded as he accepted the bag of leaves she handed to him, patting his jacket to see where he had put his own pipe. The Crows remained silent, waiting for the chieftains to speak first on the matter. It would not matter much to them what the decision was; they would adapt as easily as they always did. All they needed was the direction in which to tell their birds to fly.

"Lady Mai has a good point," another chieftain, a short, sinewy woman said – eyes still on the maps. "This is not to our advantage if we meet the Southerners. But... We haven't gotten through the Middle Lands yet, and I think we need to worry about that first. They know how we fight. And they know we're coming – there's no way in the seven hells they don't. So how do we handle them? No telling what they think of us now, what with half of them worshiping our Gods, and the other half praying to that Southern bastard. Could get messy, I think." She looked over another chieftain. "Or what do you say, Aed? Your home's close to here."

The chieftain, Aed, pursed their lips, scratching their head.

"Like I said when we joined you, my lord," they said to Hux, "I think we have to expect trouble. There's been a lot of movement going on down here, a lot of restlessness among the border garrisons. They've been moving troops around like they've all got ants down their trousers, and the traders more or less stopped coming. Seems to me they're not going to act friendly when we show up in their lands with an army in tow."

"They've got a frightfully good cavalry," Rurik added. "Let's not forget about that. I'm really not happy knowing we have that to deal with, too. And I'm not sure if splitting up the army is a good idea before we're further South. Might make us an easier target. I mean, we're all on foot. Our archers are better in mixed terrain, they're very vulnerable on open plains."

"That was a hundred years ago," Mai reminded him. "As far as we know, they haven't been at war since. We don't know if they're still as good as we remember."

"I don't think we should think so poorly of the archers," Phasma shot in. "Lady Enna's archers are all used to fighting in open terrain, and so are the archers from Helmby, from Rookwood – I could go on. They know what they're doing, and I trust them to do what we need them to do, no matter the terrain. Horses are big targets; there's no need to aim for the riders when we can bring the horses down right on top of them. Free meat, too, which can hardly be a bad thing if we're going to keep taking in little ones."

"We are no-"

"We are."

Hux sighed, throwing his hands up. Kylo nodded to Phasma to continue.

"I agree with the suggestion to split up. We'll move much faster, and we'll be able to move through terrain that is currently inaccessible to us. But I also agree that we need to have a plan for dealing with the Middle Landers. Their last war was with the North. The clan might not be around
anymore, but I doubt they care. We're not their friends, and I wouldn't let a former enemy use my homelands as a front door like this – no matter who they're fighting on the other side of it.”

“There is a chance they might consider Queen Leia a worse foe than us,” Rurik said. “If that's the case, they might prefer to be friendly with us in order to avoid being forced to obey her. Like you said, Aed, they're not all followers of her god. There always used to be more of them that shared gods with us. Maybe we can use that?” He directed the last question to the Crows.

“Perhaps,” Kylo said, Maul nodding slowly in the seat next to him. “But might I remind you that sharing Gods with us means they also have Crows. Which means that what happened to us has also happened to them. We don't know how much damage their faith has suffered.”

“And moreover,” Maul added, “we don't know if it will be a disadvantage for you to have us with you here. Would you trust the good intent of a warchief coming to you with so many Crows in his company if Crows were those who betrayed your people?”

“Worse still,” Vilya said from her spot near a brazier, “would be if the clans we encounter here are under the rule of those Crows. If Snoke has influence over entire clans... We will be in very deep trouble, and that is a possibility we cannot afford to overlook. I'd go as far as to say it's an absolute priority, but I trust my brother and master Maul's judgement on this. They have never led us wrong, and for me that's enough. I understand if it's not as easy for you.”

None of the chieftains, it seemed, had thought about that possibility sans Hux, who had only sighed and nodded.

By nightfall, they had still not reached as many decisions as they had hoped, and it was agreed that they would start as early the next morning to continue. They could not afford to waste even a moment if they did not have to. A few of the chieftains had wanted to continue, but as they all got more tired their tempers got shorter and their focus suffered. After Mai and Aed had nearly traded blows over a standstill in the discussion about which clans should be given responsibility for which part of the preparations, Hux had forcefully put an end to the meeting. He still needed to settle matters with Kylo, and he wanted to have at least a few hours of sleep before the morning. The rest of them needed to sleep, because none of them were making much sense anymore, and Hux did not need more children to deal with than the ones already brought to camp. Chastised, the chieftains and their Crows trotted off into their respective rooms in the tent.

Only once they were alone, Hux looked at Kylo, who had moved over to the table to study the maps. Coming to stand next to him, Hux focused on obliging Eira's request for scratches while gathering his thoughts.

“I cannot sway you on this, can I?” he asked eventually. Kylo shook his head, bringing his hand up to gently stroke his bearded cheek. A soft reassurance that this conflict was between their stations, not between them.

“No, you cannot,” he said. “This is what it means to be a Crow. We are not good people, Braith. We do that which needs to be done, we make the decisions no one else can make.” He sighed. “You have to understand, love. The hatchlings are a part of my order; they are not children in the same sense as Caelin and Mara are children. The hatchlings are Crows to be, they are the continuation of our traditions, our religion. They are assets – both to us and to Snoke. The ones we managed to rescue, if that word feels better for you, are old enough to have some basic control of their abilities. They have basic weapons training. Their minds and hearts can be shaped in whichever way their teachers wish. Therefore they are of more value to both Snoke and us than all the gold in North.”
Hux considered this, worrying his lip between his teeth.

“This goes against every drop of humanity in me,” he admitted. “I can't accept that this is a decision you have made. Maybe if I wasn't a father, I'd have an easier time, but I am struggling to bring myself to even consider the possibility of putting any child through this. We don't let children go to war in the North, Kylo. There are ages old laws against it.”

“I know.” Kylo looked him, green golden eyes full of sympathy. “But as I said, this is not up to you to like or dislike. If these children cannot be brought over to our side, they have to be killed. We cannot afford to lose even one of them to Snoke.” He sighed deeply, pulling his cowl tighter around his shoulders. Hux could see the tension in his jaw.

“It's against our laws too,” he said, eventually, not looking at Hux. “But for us there is more at stake than land and titles, or the safety of protected borders and a mighty kingdom. Our entire existence is at stake.” He looked pained. So very pained, and so tired. “To our current knowledge, the Crows you have here with you, are the only existing Crows who are still loyal to the Gods and not to that madman. Our Gods have tasked us with the restoration of our order, the protection of our way of life. The laws are all broken, Braith. We are in freefall. We cannot afford to care about anything other than to ensure the survival of the Crows – at any cost. It doesn't matter how much you hate it, or hate me for it, I will not change my mind. I am the highest ranking Crow in the world right now, Braith, and I am obeying the will of my Gods. Snoke is no longer a Crow, and neither are the one who follow him. The decision is mine, and mine alone. So is, for what it's worth, the burden that comes with it.”

“If I could,” Hux said, voice rugged with emotion from seeing the way his beloved simply accepted the responsibility for what was asked of him, how he bore the weight of it even as his knees buckled under it, “I would have this weight taken off your shoulders. You know that. I- I didn't understand the severity of it. I suppose I should have, and I'm sorry. Tarkin, he never shared much about your life or your order. Your world is so complicated, love. I keep forgetting just how complicated.”

“I would never otherwise put children in harm's way,” Kylo said quietly, a note of sadness tinging the words. “You know that.”

“I know.”

“I respect that you can't accept my decisions. Just- Just, please, don't think me wicked because of it.”

Hux said nothing, only pulled him as close as they could get, kissing his hair. No, he could never think Kylo wicked. He knew him far too well, if such a thing could ever be said about a Crow. They were complex beings, and Tarkin had been right – they warped the very fabric of the world around them, drawing it in, making it as complex as they were. Simple solutions were a luxury for the common mortals, not for the Children of the Gods.

“I will tell the quartermasters to put the little ones to work,” he said against the soft dark curls, an admittance that Kylo was right. This matter was not his to decide. “If one of your Crows can provide a list of chores they are used to.”

“Thank you.”

“Your wishes and needs are my duty and privilege to fulfill, master Crow. Surely you understand that I, a mere fool in love with your radiant self, could never say no to a chance to make my Crow happy?” The jesting note to his tone made Kylo smile, he could tell. It set a massive weight free
from his heart. As long as he could make Kylo smile, they would be alright. “Also, may I humbly share my admiration and awe for the most sublime beauty that is you when you put us lesser men in our place?”

Kylo responded by sighing in exasperation and smacking him across the back of his head. But he did not stop smiling.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back again! Told ya I'm back to work for real! ^^
And I come bearing some really big news.

Those of you who hang out on Tumblr will have noticed that my blogs are gone. I didn't get purged - it was my decision to delete my Tumblr presence after they announced that the purge was going to happen, because it went against a lot of things I believe very deeply in, and things I didn't under any circumstances want to contribute to. So, in the end I deleted and moved on, even though I knew it would make communicating with you lovelies would be so much more difficult. Unfortunately, Tumblr's timing was spectacularly bad, since the previous chapter had just gone up here, and I didn't get much of an opportunity to edit chapter notes or anything due to Real Life also acting up. I am really sorry about that.
This leads me to the other news. The big ones.
You see, here's the thing:

A Song of Crows is, as of the previous chapter, being continued, edited, and re-formatted with a clear goal of publication as a fantasy trilogy.

That's right! It's official! This nerd is writing himself a bunch of books :D I have spent the past weeks setting everything up to make the process run as smoothly as possible, and I can't tell you how ridiculously excited I am about this! Being a published author has been my dream since I learned how to spell, and now I'm finally working on making it happen! This is scary and awesome and wonderful and hard and just about the coolest thing I've ever done, and I can't wait to see how this will go. There is a ton of stuff planned/in the works that I can't wait to share with the world :D
All information about the fic will now come from either my Twitter (MxCabal), and/or my Instagram (artbyartofmischief) - and you can dm me in either place there's anything you want to talk about. There you will also find all necessary links and info about the project that I can't share here due to Ao3's ToS, (because the platform I'm working from now is a commercial one). I'm pretty active both on Twitter and on Instagram, so it should be as easy to reach me there as it was on Tumblr! So please don't hesitate to come poke me - I'm the same awkward nerd there as I am everywhere else :)

With all that said, I hope you've enjoyed this chapter, even though it was heavy of the Feels ^^
As always, I love hearing what you think about both the story and my news - I did kinda drop a info bomb on you, after all - so do leave a comment if you have the time.
Thank you <3

EDIT 16/2-19: I just wanted to make sure you know that right now, and for the
foreseeable future, this fic will not be going anywhere! All new chapters will keep being posted here as always, and should that ever change, I will let you lovelies know well ahead of time! So for now it's business as usual :)
This had to stop.

It seemed that any time Luke turned around there were more Doves in the palace, turning up seemingly out of nowhere to involve themselves in all sorts of conversations and plans regarding the future of D'Qar. He did not know what sort of knowledge they believed themselves to possess about ruling a kingdom, but they seemed more than happy to spread it in every direction – regardless of whether they had been asked for it or not.

They were worse than tomcats in spring.

If they really possessed such advanced political knowledge, he mused, should they not first and foremost be sharing it with him? He was a fellow Dove, after all. They were siblings in faith and vows; their loyalty should lie with their order, not with greedy and selfish aristocrats who hardly knew what the temple looked like on the inside. Not to mention that they had all taken vows not to involve themselves with worldly matters in this way – Luke was granted exemption only because of his relation to the queen, and her absolute demand that he be allowed temporary rulership of the kingdom. He was, after all, a prince by blood even if he had long since given up his claims to the title. None of the other Doves had any such claims to make.

And yet, here they were.

Perhaps it would have irked him less if he had had some semblance of support from those further up in the ranks. But it seemed that even the senior Doves had been inflicted with a sudden need to dabble in politics. Earlier that week, he had gone to the Great Mother to ask for her help in disentangling his peers from their new favourite pastime, but instead of help she had given him a stern lecture about the duty and responsibility of all servants of the God of Mornings to lead those of weaker faith on the right path, even if that sometimes meant going against their own creed. The people of D'Qar obviously did not know what was good for them, and so it was clear that the Temple must take over and lead them through this dark time so that God's glory would shine all the brighter when morning would finally come. Lead by example. Apparently, the vow now also included state politics.

But Luke had heard the rhetoric before. Being an avid student of history, he had learned well what could, and usually did, follow such grand statements from people in positions of power. With Leia already on the march with her army to conquer and crush the North under her boot once and for all, it would only be a matter of time before the Doves were sent for in the thousands to demand the Northerners to denounce their gods, embrace the one true God, or die. It had happened with every campaign Leia had led. It had happened with so many D'Qarian rulers before her too, and if there was anything Luke could not come to terms with about his order, it was that. The Old Gods were as real as the God of Mornings, they all knew it, so why did petty mortal beings think they had the right to decide what gods were worthy of worship? He had also learned early on never to voice these questions aloud – some days he still ached from the time he learned that lesson.
Of course, with the Temple holding the leash on D'Qar and its citizens they would have far more influence over the way politics were conducted once Leia returned. She would not like it, but she would be forced to take them into account on a much broader scale than than before – and if they were able to convert at least most of the North, they would truly be a force to be reckoned with in matters large and small.

It seemed that God's will was of less importance than the chance of worldly gains, and Luke wondered how they had come to this, how no one could see the hypocrisy of it all.

The weather in D'Qar was dreadful that day. From his seat in the steward's chair by the royal throne, Luke could see the clouds gathering; dark, towering, and ill-boding. Though unusually warm for the season, the air seemed to stand still, cloying in its humidity, and there was a pressure in the air that had everyone tired and irritable, rubbing their temples and dabbing their foreheads. The stormclouds had been building out at sea for days, mocking the suffering people of D'Qar with their distance and the promised but never given relief of a proper storm. From the look of it, Luke believed it would be a quite a terrifying one if it ever decided to make landfall. He wished it would, because even he had not been able to find a way to alleviate the sharp, tight pain in his head, and it made reading through Leia's reports and keeping the opportunistic elements in the palace from usurping him unnecessarily difficult. He did not have what it took to rule, and he was beginning to think they were all becoming aware of it faster than he could learn new ways to trick them.

Glancing around the room, he groaned inwardly at the sight of Órban, the count of Avaríe making a beeline for him as fast as his round legs could carry him. Once a brilliant naval officer and married to one of Luke and Leia's cousins, a mistake at sea had cost him not only his husband, but six ships and crews, and his entire career and reputation. Órban had not handled it well, but instead taken to wallow in self-pity in the company of younger men of questionable reputations, drinking heavily, and importing horse-loads of illegal substances from the neighbouring continents. Leia had sent him back to his estate in Avaríe a few years earlier to live in house arrest after he had caused too many scandals at the court. Luke had not granted him any pardon, had certainly not sent for him, and yet here he was – looking worse than ever, but with eyes clear and calculating in his otherwise swollen, sickly yellow face. Luke been able to avoid him so far, but it seemed that he had now run out of luck.

The smell of a body whose liver could no longer burn away the alcohol it consumed – a sharp, tangy smell with the sweet note of something rotten clinging to it – reached Luke before the count did, and Luke had to force himself not to visibly gag.

“Master Dove,” Órban greeted, voice booming and slurred. The smell was infinitely worse up close. “So you're in charge now, huh? Pretty thankless job, no? Trying to stay on top of all of these power-hungry old, wrinkly asses – metaphorically, of course. I wouldn't dream of insinuating that the revered Master Luke would deign himself to engage in depravity with members of the court. That's best left for those with a talent for it.”

“How can I help you, Órban?” Luke sighed, rubbing his temple. This headache was becoming unbearable already. “Apart from arranging a swift transport back to Avaríe, that is. You haven't been pardoned; I could have you down the dungeons before you could count to three, and there's nothing you can say about it.”

“One, two, three,” Órban counted, then smiled. It was a terrifying sight to behold. “Oops! Seems I'm still here.” He gestured for a servant to bring a seat over, and barely waited for them to put it down before he poured himself into it, pulling a bag of dried fruit out from the folds of his clothing. “You really got to learn to make threats, master Luke,” he said, offering some of the fruit, shrugging when Luke declined. “Now your sister, she can make threats! By God! I've always said, you know, Queen Leia, she can make threats that'll have my cock crawl back up my belly and take
my balls with it – and that's no small feat, that is.” Laughing at his own vulgarity, he patted Luke on the back with surprising strength, and ate some more fruit. “We both know you're a sinking ship. That's why I'm here.”

“If you think I'll hand over power to you – or anyone who is not my sister or niece – then you are gravely mistaken.” Luke sat up straighter in his seat. “I may not be a politician, but I am of House Organa, and even with my vows, I outrank you by my mere birth. I guard the throne, because it is mine to guard – and if anyone attempts to claim it, I will make them regret it!”

Órban studied him for a moment while slowly chewing on a dried apricot, which – given his dental status – was not an easy task, nor a pleasant sight.

“You know,” he said when he finally swallowed, eyes closed as he savoured the last of the flavour, “I almost believed you there. Almost.” Stretching out in his seat, wood creaking in protest, he clasped his hands over his belly and looked thoughtful. “When Leia sent orders to put everyone in arms, I lost all of my soldiers, and a whole awful lot of folks who thought maybe they could get a share of all that glory and power she was going on about. I couldn't keep them at home, I had no right to – not with a formal drafting order – but I've been to war with her before, more than once, and something's smelling really rotten about all this.”

It took everything in him for Luke to resist pointing out that the only rotten he could smell was Órban.

“It's not our place to question our queen,” he said instead, causing Órban's piercing gaze to fixate on him once more, making him feel very much like a prey animal stuck in a trap. “She has her reasons, and all we can do is obey.”

“No no no, come on now!” Órban shook his head, tutting at him. “You were doing so well until you said that. Now I know exactly how you feel about all this-”

“You know nothing of my feelings.”

“Yes, I do. My body may be rotting away, but my mind's as sharp as ever. You are alone, outnumbered, with no allies, no back up, no experience of ruling, and – most importantly – no wish to be a part of any of this. You don't believe in this war, that's why you're not up there with her. You've been put in house arrest just as much as I was. You told her you disagreed, so she planted you here, told you to sit and stay.” He stood up, a slow and painful looking process. Once on his feet, he paused, grimacing as his body got used to standing. Then he looked Luke in the eye, deep brown eyes still glittering with intelligence and ambition, just like they had in his younger, better days. “You don't like me. That's fine. I don't need you to like me. But you are gonna need someone on your side. I'll go back to Avaríe and rot there once her majesty comes back, but until then I intend to stay here and get to the bottom of everything that's going on here. This is my homeland, and I don't intend to let it go to shit because the queen turns into a religious fool and invades the North mid-winter.”

There was not much Luke could say to that.

“Just...” He sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Just try to keep your... appetites at bay, yes? No scandals. I really don't have the time to deal with that right now.”

“No worries about that,” Órban said cheerfully. “Can't get it up anymore anyway. Last lad I shagged, I nearly had a heart attack. My doctor keeps me from everything that might be fun, but I do feel a little better now, so I suppose I can put up with it. For now.”
As he walked off, Luke hurried to fish out a bag of dried lavender from his pocket. He usually carried one to use as a means to alleviate headaches and gloomy thoughts, but now he needed it to clear his nostrils of the smell of sickness and decay that had hung as heavy around Órban as the stormclouds in the sky. Even though he wished it was not true, Órban was right; Luke's role was essentially that of a guard dog, chained to his master's property, and told to bite anyone who came near it. He could not leave D'Qar, nor could he allow himself even a moment of rest, because if he did someone would have the throne out of his hands faster than he could say 'God Allmighty'. You could not rule a kingdom all on your own – not even Leia could – and Luke had no allies to lean on at all. Órban was a sinner, shameless in his depravity, proud of his excommunicated status, with few cares and fewer scruples. He was ruthlessly ambitious, with a personality less pleasant than a pile of horse shit. It was not a mix of traits that anyone with some modicum of refinement – or sound judgement – would ever wish to be seen in close proximity to, and with Órban also being so clearly deathly ill, it would be quite a stain on Luke's reputation to associate himself with the count. Many people might take him even less seriously, and some might simply lose a lot of their respect for him, and that could prove disastrous.

But if there was one thing about Órban that had never, ever been called into question – not even during the trial that had cost him everything – it was his unwavering love and loyalty for D'Qar. To keep his homeland safe, Órban could go to lengths others would never dare or dream, and Luke needed an ally with those qualities since he himself possessed not an ounce of them. If he could find some way to balance out Órban's negative sides, while making good use of the man's positive qualities, they might just manage to swing this terrible situation around. They had a common goal, after all; the safety and prosperity of D'Qar and all its inhabitants.

Leia might have both their heads for it when she came back, but that, he thought, would have to be a bridge to cross when they arrived at it. He had enough worries as it was. For now, his sister would have to forgive him for making the best of what he had been given.

~*~*~*~

Han had not spoken to Leia since their argument more than a week ago. He had been prohibited from entering the royal tent and the tent where the warcouncil convened during the days, a petty punishment that he had faced many times before. But this time he had no desire to play Leia's games, and did not even bother going to that part of the camp. This time, he had vowed to himself, he would be a father first, and everything else second. Rey needed him more than Leia had ever done, and he wanted to do right by her while he was still allowed in her life. She was, after all, not his in anything but his heart – it was only Leia who was her legal parent. While Rey had declared, as fiercely as her current condition allowed, that he was her father, and that anyone who tried to take him away from her would regret it, Han knew that they could only wait and see. For now, at least, they would be together. It was a long journey back to D'Qar, and they would simply try to make the most of it.

It was a sorry lot that stood gathered in the southmost end of the camp, waiting for permission to move out. Injured and sick soldiers mixed with a few prisoners Han wondered where they had come from – younglings, all of them, bruised and bloody, but defiant – and a worryingly small troop of soldiers to guard them. Rey had been given a large sleigh to travel in since she still could not sit up on her own. It was a massive piece, made to be pulled by two horses, bedded with thick layers of straw, furs and blankets, and its typical Northern design informed Han that it had most likely been stolen. After all, Southerners had little use for sleighs. He had been glad to see that it had a small roof, and fastenings for curtains so Rey would not have to endure too much wind and snow on the way. Chewie would be behind the reins, while Han, Poe and Finn would position themselves around it. Rey refused outright to let any of the other soldiers near her, and in the end they had to allow her two guards to travel with her rather than among the other prisoners –
something they had both been very grateful for.

Reaching down to gently scratch a spot on his restless horse's shoulder, Han felt a moment of pity for the injured soldiers around them, whose transports consisted of stretchers being carried between the horses their more mobile peers rode on. They had little protection from the elements, and he could only hope all of them would make it. The prisoners were on foot, but were so far the only ones who did not look miserable at the prospect of moving through the unforgiving landscape. The soldiers were already in formation around the group, waiting for their commanding officer to return with the permission to set out, and Han worried they would freeze to the spot if they did not get to move soon.

“You think mother will come say goodbye?” Rey asked, peering around her as much as she could.

Han sighed, shaking his head. “I wouldn't count on it, sweetness. We're not her favourite people at the moment, and she-... Well, she does this. Ask Chewie, he can vouch for it. She's done this to us hundreds of times before.”

“It's cruel.” Han was not certain if the look on her face was one of sadness or tiredness. A little bit of both, perhaps. “We could be attacked on the way. We could die in a blizzard. She doesn't know the future – so what's she going to do if we die and she never got to say goodbye, huh? And, I mean, she could die too. This is war – is she not going to let me say goodbye to my mother one last time? It's just... It's so childish.”

“I think we can all be glad your mother wasn't here to hear that,” Chewie signed. Then he scratched his head, looking thoughtful. “Pity your uncle went and got himself tied up with those Doves; he's the level-headed one. He'd never let himself get roped up in a mess like this.”

“I miss him,” Rey admitted. “Didn't realize how much until now. It'll be good to see him again. I don't like that he's all alone down there – he's so kind. People will try to use him, and I don't want to see that happen.”

“He'll be overjoyed to see you come home,” Han nodded. “And he'll have you back to full health in no time at all, you'll see.”

“Alright, you lot!” the troop commander called as they came marching back towards the waiting group, adjusting their cloak as they did. “We've got a lot of ground to cover, and it's not going to get warmer around here! Move out!”

As the camp became smaller and smaller behind them, Han swallowed down a wave of disappointment he knew better than to feel as he dared a glance back. Of course Leia was nowhere to be seen. He was not certain why he had hoped she would be – three decades, and she had never been the one to budge first, why would she now? Perhaps he had hoped she would at least be better than that for her daughter, but that was in itself a ridiculous notion. She had never shown Kylo any such kindness, not even when he was a little one. Rey, being a few scant months away from her majority, could expect even less. He might have been less upset about it if he had not seen the way Rey tried to hide her own hurt; blinking away treacherous tears, head held as high as her current position and state of fatigue would allow. There was steel in her, that was certain – though Han wished she could have been spared having to go through all of this for them all to find that out. Her strength was a soft one, a kindness and love for life and all things in it that far too few people in the world possessed, and he hoped with everything in him that she would come out on the other side of this war with that softness still intact. In fact, he intended to do whatever it took to ensure it.

It did not take long for the motions of the sleigh to lull Rey off to sleep, and Han rode up to the driver's seat where Chewie was smoking a pipe, reins held casually in one hand.
“You think D'Qar will still be there when we arrive?” Han asked quietly. “Luke is a good man, but he's not a leader.”

Chewie snorted. “If he can't hold onto power, then he shouldn't have tried to claim it in the first place.”

“He didn't really claim it, you know. Leia handed it to him.”

“Her mistake, then.” Chewie shrugged, adjusting the reins. “You don't make a wolf out of a rabbit by sticking fangs on it. I don't see why you're so concerned about all of that. It's not your problem anymore. Not your country, not your queen.”

“How would you have liked it if your father lost all your lands because he put someone in power who was unfit to handle it?”

“He did.” Chewie put out the pipe, cleaning the tobacco out before continuing. “Went and got himself all enslaved by the drink, and let my uncle make all the decisions. Fool, he was, and when clan Moragh came and took over he bloody well deserved to get knocked out on his drunken arse. A ruler belongs to their people, not the other way around. Leia loses her kingdom, she didn't deserve to have it.”

Han was taken aback; Chewie had never told him any of this before.

“Is, er, is that why you ended up in the South? They threw you out, too?”

“I was his son, wasn't I? I loved me a drink, too, and I never did know when to shut up and do what I was told – and the Moragh warchief didn't take risks. Took my tongue and threw me out on my arse right next to me father. Made my cousin chieftain instead. Good chieftain she was, too. Don't know if she still lives.”

“Nearly forty winters I've known you,” Han said, shaking his head. “And I never knew you were a chieftain's son.”

“It didn't matter anymore.”

There was not much Han could say to that, and for the next few hours they carried on in silence. When the soldiers gave order to stop and make camp for the night, Han and Chewie had their hands full assisting in the raising of tents and gentle moving of injured people from stretchers to beddings in the tents. The camp was small. Prisoner or soldier – everyone were put as close together as possible to preserve warmth – and thanks to the unusually fearless army medics, the warcouncil had allowed the troop to bring some of the higher quality food supplies. This did not necessarily mean the food was very good, but it was at least somewhat more filling than the regular rations. It was only due to the crown princess being part of the transport that the warcouncil had given in, but they were all thankful for the small kindness.

The next morning it began snowing, huge, heavy flakes that came down at just the right angle to make themselves an absolute nuisance. Despite having their hoods pulled up, and shielding their eyes with their hands, no one could see clearly more than a few steps ahead, and the soldiers in the front were becoming visibly frustrated with how quickly the snow was obscuring the road. They had to dismount, and tread carefully – poking the ground with the blunt end of their spears in the hopes of locating where the deep ditches were so that the horses did not stumble and break their legs. Chewie had been quick to fasten the curtains on Rey's sleigh, and she was soundly asleep under a heap of blankets, oblivious to the unpleasantness of the weather outside. The rest of them were not so lucky, and the injured soldiers on the stretchers were especially miserable as they had
no real way of preventing the snow from falling in their faces and turn them into living snowfigures where they lay. The Northern prisoners seemed endlessly amused by this, laughing amongst themselves in their own tongue.

“We're never gonna get anywhere if they keep being silly,” Chewie signed, annoyed frown on his face. “It's only snow. I can see the road just fine – I don't understand why they're being such children about it.”

“They've never seen snow like this,” Han reminded him. “But if you want to take the lead, I can let them know. I don't think anyone'll mind moving a little faster.”

The commander did, apparently, mind moving faster if this meant that someone who was not a soldier was in the lead. It was especially bad if it was the crown princess' sleigh, as this would mean that she was unprotected from attacks. Han pointed out that Chewie was built like a walking wall, and that he was both wearing armour and carrying weapons – making him a rather excellent protector of the crown princess. Besides, Han had said, who in their right mind would think it to be a good idea to attack a sleigh with Chewie in the box seat? Just one look at him should make the absurdity of that idea perfectly clear. The commander coolly informed him that they were soldiers of the Royal Army of D'Qar; they were trained professionals, and they would rather die than entrust the protection of their crown princess to a Northerner. They had to allow Chewie to drive the sleigh, since he was the only one who knew how to properly manouever the thing, but that was as lenient as they were going to be. Han had many things to say about this attitude towards his oldest friend, and in the end the two had to be separated by Finn and Poe before they came to blows. The commander remained unswayed.

“Don't waste your breath on that one,” Chewie told him once Han had calmed down some. They were watching the soldiers test a rackety-looking bridge over a narrow but deep stream. If the sleigh got stuck there, it would be difficult to get it back out, so for now they did not mind the extra wait. “They're not the first one to have opinions 'bout me in this army. Hardly the last. I've heard worse, and the opinions of Southerners don't concern me. Never did. But thank you anyway.”

“They're dumber than a seagull,” Han said. “If they had any sense in them they'd realize you're the only one with the skill and expertise to get us all back South safely and in one piece. I'm not sure I could do that, and I've got more experience than every last one of these fools.”

“I'm thinking we can wait for a better opportunity, and then go our own way. We'll travel faster that way, and I don't want to risk the girl's health any more than we're already doing.”

“I agree. I don't like how she's looking at all, and I'm beginning to think we shouldn't have moved her.” Han peeked through a gap in the curtains. Rey was asleep, face flushed with fever, body moving restlessly as she dreamed. The illness had taken a toll on her; her usually soft face and round cheeks was sunken and hollow, and her clothes hung loose around her thinning frame. Han sighed, worry clawing at his insides, twisting his guts into something tight and aching. “I'll let Poe and Finn know. We owe them a safe return, too. They kept her safe all the way up here – we can't just leave them on their own.”

“How 'bout we get the boys on the ship with us, provided she hasn't been destroyed already, and take them in as crew? With a death penalty hanging over them, they can't stay in D'Qar a moment longer than necessary.” Chewie was quiet for just a moment. “To be honest, my friend, I don't think we can, either.”

“Not if we break away from this transport, no.” Han straightened up in the saddle. “I'm ready when you are.”
“How about we go in the morning? They take too long getting ready, these soldiers. We can be long gone by the time they get their trousers on.”

“Then let’s make sure we are.”

~*~*~*~

Braith resisted the urge to hit Rurik over the head with the rolled up map he was holding under his arm. They had been going over the same issues every day for a week now, and Braith was fed up with listening to Rurik reiterating the same standpoint over and over, usually finishing with a statement along the lines of “it just needs to be said”. What needed to be said, according to his chieftain, was that if they finally decided to split up into smaller units, they needed to get a move on, because there were several large mountain passes coming closer every day, and if the army did not break up in time, they would all have to march through them, and that was like asking for an ambush by either enemies or the weather.

“Rurik,” Braith interrupted his monologue, voice strained as he tried to keep it level. “I don't know where you got the idea that I don't know how to plan the movement of my troops, but I suggest that you get rid of it very quick, because if I hear one more word out of your mouth, you will be spending the rest of this march tending to the latrines. By the Gods, I will sew your mouth shut if I have to. Don't think for a moment that I won't.”

Behind Rurik, Mai was doing her best to keep a straight face, and Phasma had already given up and was leaning on Mitaka, face hidden against his shoulder in an attempt to conceal her laughter. Braith and Rurik always bickered during meetings when they were in the field, usually because of something like this. And Rurik was currently more irritating than usual; a little revenge for Braith having thrown his stick with all the notches away when he had been pondering the acquisition of a larger stick to continue with, since the Crow fights they had seen so far were between the Crows, and not technically a battle. Braith had forcefully wrestled the stick from his hands, broken it across his knee and tossed it onto one of the cooking fires. While Braith usually never minded the bouts of immaturity that broke out among his officers – immaturity he himself sometimes participated in – he did have a limit. Rurik was the only one who dared come near it, but once he crossed it, it would instantly become clear who the warchief of clan Hux was.

The faces of the rest of his war council as they watched the exchange were a mix of amusement and worry – they knew their warchief, after all, and when he made threats he always followed through on them. Rurik, realizing he had most definitely crossed the line this time, shut his mouth with an audible clack of teeth, turning to Kylo – who had just entered the tent – giving him a pleading look. Kylo snorted, patting him on the shoulder as he passed him to have a look at the maps.

“Don't worry, Rurik,” he said. “Braith couldn't sew through your lips if his life depended on it.” Rurik brightened immediately, but then Kylo added: “I will be doing the sewing.”

Rurik deflated.

Braith rubbed his temples, breathing deeply for a moment. It seemed the whole clan had suddenly decided to reawaken their at times rather spectacular habit of stating the obvious, and he was more than a little fed up with it. He had been in the field regularly since the first soft fuss of beard growth had shown on his face. He had won more campaigns than just about any other warchief in their part of the North – hells, he had conquered most of the other warlords in their part of the North – so why in the seven hells and all their demons' arses had his chieftains once again decided that now was a brilliant time to start behaving like a bunch of utter fools?
“Alright, you lot,” he said, gesturing to his assembled council. “For the sake of my sanity, can we all pretend for a moment that you all remember how to perform your duties?” They nodded.

“Good. Now, the issue here is not whether or not we're splitting the army up. Of course we are. We are too large a group, and far too vulnerable to attacks. Splitting up, sticking to the tactics we know well, will be our best weapon at this time – even with the danger of more attacks from Snoke's Crows. Now, while you've been busy bickering and behaving like children, I was planning. I had to make sure we split at the right time, and that the routes I send you all on will not lead to your ruin before we meet the Southerners. We're all aware that this campaign has started very differently from what we're all used to, and you've allowed it to get to your heads. This stops now. This is a campaign like all others. You are chieftains and officers of clan Hux. Behave like it.”

The warcouncil collectively shuffled uncomfortably on the spot, reminiscent of children being told off by their teacher. They nodded, mumbled “yes, my lord” could be heard among them. Braith gave another irritated sigh.

“What was that?”

“Yes, my lord!” they called in unison.

“Thank you.” He gestured for them all to gather around the maps. “Now that you've all remembered how to be soldiers; here is what we are going to do.” He pointed to the little iron figurine signifying the camp. “Tomorrow, we're going to march down and make camp outside Three-river. That puts us at about four days march from the foothills of the Four Mothers.” He pointed to the map as he spoke. “Mai, Áed, Vídar, I want you to take your officers and head West, then Southwest, when we break the camp at Three-river. I need you to march down as close to Springfall as you can, and head for D'Qar as close to the coast as possible when you've come that far.” They nodded. Braith moved the tip of the stick he was using to another point. “Dina, Jára, Alfr, you and your officers will follow the other division West until you're able to march safely South on the western side of Mother Mára's foothills. You will be marching down the middle. I want you to go through as many of the woods as you can. Make use of the landscape. Stay down and low, and you should be able to reach D'Qar from the Northeast side, which lets you use the main trading roads for the last stretch.”

The three officers nodded as well, regrouping by one corner of the table to have a better look at their particular route, and preparing to discuss matters with the other group. Phasma looked at Braith, a small smile playing at the corner of her mouth.

“I'm assuming that me, Rurik, and everyone else will be going with you straight through the pass?”

“Correct.” Braith took a moment to refasten a runaway braid before pointing at the map again. “We'll be taking the largest group with us. I want lots of banners, drums, songs. We're going to keep their scouts busy shitting their breeches in fear of the army marching through the pass. I don't want that frothing fanatic of a queen they've got to consider even for a moment that there are other units marching for her lands.”

Jára paused in the middle of gathering her long, flaming red hair into one braid – a leather string stuck between her teeth, waiting to be tied around the end of it. She nudged for Mai to take the string so she could speak. Her eyes glittered with curiosity and something like pride.

“I'm getting the feeling you've gone and gotten bit by that sneaky bug you got from your mother's blood again,” she said, coming around the table, still braiding her hair, to elbow him lightly in the side – their armour clinking as she did. “Come now, it's been years since I got to see my favourite nephew bring out his mother's side so blatantly. I like your mother. She's more warchief in her left tit than my pig of a brother ever was in his whole body.”
Murmured agreements came from Mai and Dina. Braith's aunts had adopted Bríghid as one of them the very moment she had first come to clan Hux all those years ago. To be compared to Bríghid was the greatest compliment one could receive from Jára, and it was well known – though not spoken about – that Mai and Bríghid had found solace in each other after Brendol's death. Braith smiled, nodding as he rolled out the map he had had tucked under his arm.

“I'm hoping,” he said, brushing away some breadcrumbs as he flattened it out properly, “to keep that Southern queen focused completely on my section of the army, to march towards us while missing the other two branches. That way, those two branches can circumvent her armies and sneak into D'Qar behind her back.” He illustrated the marching routes with his stick. “The Southerners usually leave very few soldiers behind to defend the lands. D'Qar is mostly villages, small towns, castles – that sort of thing. The cities are mostly on or near the coast, so they're for the fleet to worry about. Even if they are clever enough to burn everything and head for the larger cities, we will still be able to march more or less straight for the royal city with little to no opposition.”

“You're gonna steal Leia Organa's kingdom right behind her sagging Southern arse!” Jára cackled with glee, clapping him on the shoulder hard enough to make him wince. “I love it! Oh, we are going to have so much fun sneaking past those stroppy Southern arses!” She was rubbing her hands together in excitement. Jára Hux had always been more openly fond of warfare than her sisters and nephew, for good or ill. Sometimes it was a blessing – like now. She was a master tactician when it came to dealings of a more stealthy nature.

“Have you heard anything from Enna?” Dina asked, adjusting her belt and scabbard. “Is she coming, or did she just send her troops? It's getting very late in the march now.”

“She's taking her remaining troops to reinforce the defences in Whitehaven and Skye Castle,” Kylo said as he studied the map of the South, jotting down little notes in a small notebook of his. “That's actually what I came here to tell you. Lady Bríghid was having a bad feeling, so they have joined forces to make sure that neither Whitehaven nor Skye Castle will be conquered all that easily. Your mother sent word, it arrived just a few hours ago.” He fished a small, rolled up note from his pocket and handed it to Braith. “The archers and infantry Enna sent will be the only ones from Sunstride. But your troops more than make up for that, don't they, Lady Jára?”

“They sure do. Like I said when I came, we were lucky. Managed to round up more clansfolk of the right age than I initially thought.”

“The children?” Braith asked Kylo. The Crow smiled, but gave a small shake of his head.

“She didn't mention them,” he said. “But I believe that is probably a good sign. I cannot imagine she would neglect to inform you if something was wrong with your children.”

“Knowing those two,” Mai snorted, “the greatest problem will probably to keep Mára from trying to run off and conquer the South all by herself. Caélin will just make a nuisance of himself, trying to take over the tactical meetings.”

Braith looked sheepish for just a moment, then chuckled. He knew his children well, and he knew Mai had summed them up rather perfectly.

“Sometimes I wish they had both taken after their mother, but one out of two is still better than the poor luck grandmother had with all of you. I think aunt Isolde is the only one who wouldn't be halfway into her armour and heading out the door at the mention of war.”

“I don't think I've ever even seen mother hold a sword,” Phasma agreed.
“She's never been fond of it, no,” Dina confirmed. “If I remember correctly, she informed your father when they were betrothed that he would have to do the fighting, while she did the child caring.”

“Sounds like her, alright.” Phasma grinned. “But I don't think anyone can deny she's the best midwife we've got at skye Castle. Sans master Kylo, of course.”

“Your mother is a brilliant midwife, and I've learned a lot from her,” Kylo said with a little nod. “Lady Isolde is a blessing to this clan.”

“As much as I enjoy sharing anecdotes from our family lives,” Braith said, “we still have a lot of work to do, and very little time to do it in.” He put a gentle hand on the small of Kylo's back, and the Crow gladly leaned closer. “How's it going with your search for Snoke? Any luck at all?”

Kylo sighed, shaking his head.

“Snoke is a master at concealing his presence. He's had decades to build up the shields and illusions he uses to hide his location. Even for us, with the help of all the Crows in this army, it's very difficult.”

“How do you mean?” Mitaka asked. “Forgive me if it's none of my business, but I don't think I quite understand how any of this works, and I think we could all be of better help to you if we understood what you're actually trying to do.”

Kylo smiled, dismissing his apology with a wave of his hand.

“To be honest with you, Mitaka, my friend, I am not the best one to explain this,” he said. “To me, most things to do with the Force comes so naturally that I don't really think about what it is I'm trying to do – and that's not always a good thing. It tends to leave me unable to explain the workings of the Force in ways that are even remotely intelligible.” He bit his thumb, eyes narrowed as he appeared to think it over. “I think that it would be better to ask either Sílass or Maul. They're both excellent teachers, and especially Sílass has a penchant for studying the theoretical aspects of our craft. I'll ask them if they can explain it to you all after dinner.”

“Why not now?” Rurik asked.

“They're asleep.” Kylo gave a little shrug. “We pushed very hard today, too hard, and they need to rest after something like that. Sílass still isn't well after that first battle, and I won't let her over-exert herself. I need her whole and well when we do find Snoke.”

“You don't look very tired,” Rurik remarked.

“The good thing about wearing robes, chieftain,” Kylo retorted, “is that no one can see your knees shaking with the effort of keeping you upright. I am tired. I want to sleep. But we decided after that first attack that one of us must always be awake – just in case there is another attack. As soon as one of them wakes, I'll rest. But not until then.”

“But how can you fight if you are exhausted?” Áed asked, frowning deeply with worry.

Kylo raised an eyebrow, then made a small upward gesture with his hand. Not only Áed, but also Rurik, Mai, Jára, and the massive table lifted several feet into the air – hanging still there as if hung on threads from the ceiling.

“I said I was tired. I didn't say I was spent.”
He lowered them all back down with care, then nodded to Braith before striding back out of the tent – only the smallest hint of a wobble to his steps. No one in the tent was stupid enough to ever comment on it, or even claim to having seen it.

~*~*~*~

After dinner, Sílass and Maul came into the war council’s tent to deliver the lesson on Force searching. Kylo had slept right through dinner, and was being watched over by Erris, who had planted himself just outside the entrance to the Crows' own version of the war council’s tent – sword at his side, arms crossed over his chest, daring anyone to disturb his master. The soldiers were noticeably quiet as they moved anywhere near the tent.

“Gather some benches, would you?” Sílass ordered the chieftains before all of them had even noticed their arrival. “Let's sit in a circle. I'm not your teacher, there's no need for this to look like a classroom.”

The chieftains did as ordered, seemingly on sheer instinct; Sílass tended to have that effect on people. Behind her, Maul chuckled. He seemed more than happy to remain in the background for this, and Braith recalled that Kylo had told him that Maul had spent many years teaching their hatchlings. He was probably happy to let someone else do the teaching for once. Given the personalities of his gathered chieftains, it was probably a good idea to let someone with such an extraordinary amount of steel in her take the reins. During the time he had come to know Kylo's Knights, he had quickly understood exactly why Kylo had made Sílass his second; she had the same abilities to command, lead, and evoke loyalty and fear as she saw fit that Kylo did. But where Kylo was a raging firestorm – passionate, loud, extroverted, burning all in its path – Sílass was a blizzard. She was cold, anger building slowly before striking fast, silently, burying everything in her wake. Braith had vowed never to anger her; partly because of that, and partly because he had seen her spar with Vilya, and decided he would much rather be eaten by a black bear than stare down the sharp end of her sword. Of any of their swords, if he was quite honest with himelf.

Once the benches were in the order Sílass liked them, they all sat down, and Sílass gave them a once over that made all of them feel a little bit like schoolchildren again, no matter her earlier comments about that. Maul still seemed endlessly amused, sitting next to her with his hands peacefully resting in his lap and a serene smile on his face.

“Alright,” Sílass said, “Kylo said you didn't know much at all about the Force, but I'll try to make this comprehensive.” She took a moment to think, tapping her chin with a long, slim finger. “The Force,” she began, “is similar to a spider-web. You've all seen spider-webs, yes?” They all nodded. “Good. This is where it gets complicated. This great web, the fabric of the world that we speak of, covers all of the world, all of the universe. Every last grain of sand on the world's beaches, every star in the sky, every speck of dust and every last little fraction of your bodies is not only connected to it but a part of it. Everything has a Force web of its own that is part of the great web. This is what we mean when we say 'the fabric of the world'.” She paused to make sure they were still following. Once content that they seemed to understand, she continued. “When I say everything is connected, this also means the past, the future, higher and lower levels of our consciousness, other possible realities. The Crows have been researching this for generations and generations – there is too much of it for me to explain now. But this is the core principle. The Force is everywhere, is everything, is past, present, future. It's the story of the world as it is being written. Most importantly, the Force is alive – not as we are, but it is sentient. What people call magic, what we Crows do when we work, is the intentional, focused manipulation of the Force web and the swirls it makes as it lives and breathes.” She paused again, frowning as she took in their confused faces.

“Imagine the spider-web again,” Maul said, stepping in to give her some room. “To simplify it, we
can put it like this: A spider sits in her web. She feels every movement, every tug at every thread in that web. When a fly is caught in it, its struggle will cause that thread to move, and she will know where her prey is located. When we use the Force, we pull on the threads of the Force. Sometimes we force them to still, sometimes we make them bend in different ways, or we weave several together.” He looked around the ring. “We do many different things depending on what it is we are trying to achieve. Some things are very little Force, and much more the will of the Gods. But in this instance, you could say that we are the spiders. We are trying to feel a very specific fly land on a thread that is near us enough to allow us to feel the vibrations.”

“Only this fly knows how to weave threads together to hide behind,” Sílass filled in. “If you have a strong enough mind, and a strong enough picture in that mind, and you know the Force well enough, you can use it to create an illusion to hide behind. Every living creature has a Force signature that is unique to them, so to hide your presence from other Force wielder requires an ability to both control your own Force presence, but also the ability to weave a good enough net that will give the impression of an entirely different Force presence.”

“Unfortunately,” Maul said, “Snoke was always known for being remarkably talented at it, and since he became the Raven, he has had roughly eighty years – if my calculations are correct – to further perfect it.” He put a supportive hand on Sílass’ shoulder. “If it was any other Crow, we would have found them already. Kylo, Sílass, and the others are the elite of our order – you have to understand the significance of the fact that even they are struggling to find his trail.”

“How come it makes you so tired?” Dina asked. “It all sounds so abstract to me.”

“Our bodies are our tools,” Sílass said. “We use the Force web in our own bodies to manipulate, and to feel changes in, the great web. To manipulate Force swirls, to pull on Force threads, is very physically tiring. Maul, you explain this better than I do. What was it you told us when we were hatchlings?”

Maul pointed to Braith's armour, a cuirass, plate bracers and pauldrons over a heavy shirt of scalemail. “That is quite heavy to carry around, isn't it?” he said. The chieftains and Braith all nodded. “You had to get used to the weight, did you not?” Again, they nodded. “That weight is our Force web when we do little things like move objects, or render someone unconscious. The strain is similar to light sparring in a full suit of armour. When we work purely with the Force, it is like wearing a full suit of armour, with heavy stones tied to our limbs, while up to our necks in water and attempting to fight a battle. Some things are quite easy, even when it's pure Force work – but the farther you are from the threads you are attempting to pull, the heavier the weight is, and the greater the strain. Heavy objects are easier to carry when you hold them close to your body, no? It's the same principle here.”

“Snoke could be around the next bend in the road,” Sílass sighed. “Or he could be on a different continent. We don't know, so we have to pull threads in all directions, and as far as we can reach – and even then it's down to pure luck whether we find the right thread, or an illusion. Or worse; a trap.”

“You're saying he might be sitting like a spider in a web too, just waiting for you to pull the wrong thread?” Braith asked, worry raising it's ugly head again. “Would that be dangerous?”

“Yes,” Maul said simply. “Very dangerous.”

~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*

Two days after the army had split up at the village and garrison of Three-river, the vanguard of Mai, Dina, and Jára's sections finally broke the strange, battle-less pattern that had bothered the
army since they set out from Skye Castle. Camped out in the relative protection of a patch of forest on the leeward side of one of the lower western foothills was a large troop of soldiers bearing the sky blue of house Organa. A scouting division, no doubt. Their pitiful appearance made no difference to the clan, as they surrounded and attacked them – knowing full well they had nowhere to go. The Goddess would take their lives just as willingly as she took any other, and at least now they would be spared the undignified end of freezing solid in their sleep. They Southerners fought well for hardly being able to hold their weapons from how violently they shivered with the cold, and the battle did not end as quickly as Lady Jára had initially estimated. It did, however, end exactly the way she had predicted. A few losses on their own side, mainly young soldiers who were unprepared for the intensity of a battle against enemies with nowhere to run, but there had never been such a thing as a battle without loss. It would not be war if there was. But the D'Qarian soldiers were wiped out to the last one, their blood gathering into dark pools against the pristine snow and staining the fabric of their tabards and the banners that had fallen to the ground during the vicious fighting.

Having inspected the camp, Mai found Jára at the far end of the camp. Her younger sister was examining the remains of one of the more well preserved soldiers. Curious as to why Jára found it worth the time to spend time with a carcass – seeing as clan Hux had a tremendously strict law against looting from the dead – she came over and crouched down across from her, pulling out a rag from somewhere inside her cuirass to wipe her face as she did.

“You gonna make me ask?” The soldier was not very attractive, even without all the blood, and there was a smell to him that told Mai with every possible amount of certainy that he had both shat himself and vomited all over himself just before he died. “Ugh, he smells like an imp's arse. Be careful; he might have some sickness.”

Jára flashed her a crooked grin.

“Nah,” she said, “no sickness. Just the classic case of a Southern arse-brain trying to eat dried green beans without cooking them first.” She pointed. “The fires weren't lit, you saw that, right? But they had 'bout three bags of them. Two of them are mouldy, by the way, so tell our folk not to bring them. My guess is they've lost their tinder, or whatever they use to light fires, so they can't cook anything.” She looked grim as she gave her older sister a look. “We all know not to ever eat green beans without cooking them first because they're so bloody toxic. I don't think these people knew that. He's not the only one who was sick.”

“I know.” Mai looked around them. There was a certain smell to the whole camp that had nothing to do with the usual stench of battle. “I'll say it again; you gonna make me ask?”

Jára glanced around her, grimaced at the close proximity of so many of their own soldiers, and nodded for Mai to come a bit away from it all. They perched on a large, flat rock overlooking the Southern camp. Jára looked at the state of it and shook her head, spitting at the ground.

“That solider you saw,” she said. “I don't think he's had enough to eat in weeks. His armour was too big, he'd used a piece of rope to tie his trousers at his waist. Say what you want about the Southerners, but they've always trained and cared for their soldiers really well. This lot... Mai, they're starved half to death. And that's not even the worst. Did you look at his uniform. Actually look?”

“I did. Looked damned thin to me,” Mai grunted. “I think I understand what you're getting at. They're not equipped for any of this, are they? That self-righteous cow really did go and send her army up into this land without making sure they were prepared for it.”

“It gives us a tactical advantage like nothing else,” Jára said, “and I'm gonna make good use of it.
But I just... What sort of ruler does this to their own people? Not even Brendol did, and he was about as close to being Leia as a Northern man could be. Braith would sooner go to war alone than bring an army he could not provide for."

“She doesn't deserve that crown.”

“No, she sure doesn't. Not in a bloody lifetime.”

“Alright, let's go find the others. We need to send our lad a message. Maybe Rurik will give him some peace with his damned sticks.”

~*~*~*~

The bird arrived as the main army section were finishing up their short mid-day meal when Mitaka had finished reading the message from Jára to Braith, the warchief fixed Rurik with a powerful stare, causing his old friend to visibly shrink where he stood.

“Are we going to have any more issues with notches on sticks, or any other prophecies of doom and chaos?” he asked, steel in his voice.

Rurik shook his head. “I heard the message, my lord,” he said with a nod. “We are at war. I apologize for previous behaviour. It was unbecoming of me as your chieftain and friend.”

Braith put a hand on his shoulder. Say what you want about Rurik, but he always took responsibility, and always stood up and admitted his wrongs. Come hell or the world's end, Braith would no more wish to face it without Rurik at his side than he would Kylo, his mother, children, or aunts. Many times in his life had become bearable largely to having Rurik's solid presence to lean on, and their friendship was something he treasured deeply.

“All is well, my friend,” he said. “Now, let us see what we can make of this message. Jára doesn't get concerned easily, so I think we'll all need to think through the implications of what she is telling us.” He looked over to where the troops were getting back into formation, the officers looking anxiously over to the gathered warcouncil. “When we arrive at camp, I want all of you to have put some thoughts into this, and then I want us to have a proper discussion. We all know Leia is a monster, but there are usually limits, even to monsters. We need to be prepared for what this might mean for us.”

But it was a grim-looking group that rode in the middle of the massive column of troops. As much of an advantage as it was to know Leia's army might not be as dangerous an enemy as previously believed – in strength, at least – no warrior worth their title could feel at ease knowing they were marching against something like this. Half-starved, half-froze, sick, exhausted and desperate – it would not be battle, it would be a massacre. Knowing that the leader of that army was likely to be fully aware of the plight of her soldiers, and even likely to have known well before they even marched out... That was a heavy weight on their minds. A leader who could so easily sacrifice their own people for the sake of their own, delusional goal was a dangerous enemy. Such an enemy would stop at nothing to reach that goal, would go to any lengths, commit any deeds, and regret nothing.

But it was the mind of Braith Hux that bore the heaviest weight. He was the one who remembered being told about a young boy, born from the womb of a queen, and sacrificed for his difference.
Her own child, led to the scaffold, not even allowed a goodbye from his father. She had regretted nothing then.

It would be the worst possible folly to believe she would regret anything now.

Chapter End Notes

The whole chessboard situation I keep going on about sure keeps going on. But war is, after all, a stupider, large scale version of chess, so I guess it makes sense^^

Órban. I like Órban. No fucks left to give about anything, and definitely no scruples! He knows himself, and he knows the world, and he knows how to make things go the way they need to go. Luke should probably put his prejudice and dislike away and invest in some more lavender pouches. He's got no time for judgmental attitudes - he's got a country to lead! Or, well, attempt to lead. The Hux aunts are the most badass of badass to ever badass, and I love them all! In case anyone struggled to keep up with the names, these are his aunts: Mai, Enna, Isolde, Dina, Jára. Brendol was born in between Enna and Isolde. Mai is the oldest, Jára the youngest. And yes, Hux adores his aunts almost as much as he adores his mother.

I had a lot of fun writing this chapter, and I could squee happily for hours about things in it, but ain't nobody got time for that. I do hope you've all got time for another announcement, though. Because I have one: After chapter 30 is uploaded here, there will be no more chapters coming to Ao3. This is because I've chosen to close the first book with chapter 30, and start the editing process as soon as that's finished. It will be a while before I can continue writing the story itself, and it simply takes too much time and effort to work with two versions the way I do right now. So, when I start on chapter 31, it will be with other names, and with some parts of this story re-worked to break it even further away from the original Star Wars universe. While I think it feels very bittersweet to have decided this, I'm also extremely excited about the work ahead of me with this story. It's coming together in my head, and things are feeling more and more solid the more I write, and I do hope that you will like the final version (hopefully in the shape of an actual physical book), as much or more than you liked this story.

But don't worry about saying goodbye just yet! We've got two more chapters to go! Lots of cool/scary/suspenseful things are planned, and I think it's going to be a real nice final stretch of the journey.

For anyone who wants to know more about my plans for the near future, or yell at me about the story, or just be nerdy in general, I can be found on Twitter as MxCabal. I prattle on about this story rather a lot on there, and I keep a pinned post with whatever info is most important at any given time. Do come say hi! I am still the same awkward nerd I've always been, so don't be shy!

Now, if you have a minute, please let me know what you thought about this chapter <3
The surprise attack would perhaps have gone better for Snoke's underlings if they had been aware that the seven Knights of Ren and their mentor were spending most of their days subjecting themselves to the various rituals and practices that allowed them to immerse themselves in the great web of the Force. To start with, it would have allowed there to be a surprise attack. As it stood now, the group of a rough hundred or so of rogue Crows – minds wrapped up like helpless chickens in the powerful, slithering coils of Snoke's will, with eyes red from lack of sleep and lust for blood, robes stiff with worse things dried into the wool – found themselves charging head first into something for which they were not prepared. A darkness, not just that of the winter night, but one of the mind, of the soul – a blackness so complete they could not hear or see, or, indeed, make much use at all of any other sense.

The bloodlust gave way to fear.

Those of them who were older, having known more battles than their youngling comrades, knew it for what it was, and knew this battle had already been lost. They would die where they stood; they were little more now than spikes of wheat awaiting the sweep of the scythe. Still, with their master's grip on their minds, they found themselves driven forward, mercilessly – for when had Snoke ever been merciful? – into the waiting reach of Crows more powerful than they were. Their superior numbers was no advantage, not anymore, as they stumbled and shuffled forward, only half in control of their movements as Snoke seemed to sense their hesitation and was now making clear his displeasure. They collided with each other, tripping and stumbling, hands reaching blindly for something, anything, to guide them now that none of their senses could serve them. No one even knew how many of them there were anymore; every one of their comrades could have fallen, could be bleeding out right next to them, could be fighting for their lives, and they would never know. The younglings, some of them still wearing the grey, were wholly unprepared for the encounter with Crow magic of this level.

This was not Force work. No. This was old magic; bloody and brutal and terrifying.

Gripping their weapons tight in trembling hands, those still able to keep their panic at bay took their battle stances, and swallowed down the bile rising up their throats from the dread. Maybe, just maybe they would at least be able to take one swing, parry one blow, and die warriors rather than helpless cattle. They were caught, not just in this terrifying darkness, but between their master's brutal control, and merciless, inescapable death.

Clan Hux's war council did not know how to tackle the situation they were now witnessing; it went beyond anything they were trained to handle. Still reeling from the blood soaked ritual that had called forth this magic, nausea rolling through even their battle tested guts, they stood at a respectful distance from their black-clad ones, watching the situation unfurl with much trepidation. The Devouring Night, master Ren had called it – but they did not understand. They could see no night, only a strange mist, darker than normal, snake it's way across the ground from their Crow's
feet and envelop the large group of enemies that had been approaching the camp – appearing to have planned a surprise attack from the currently weaker rear flank. But as soon as the hostile Crows had stepped into the first tendrils of the mist, the effect of the magic was becoming apparent. Panic swept like a wave through their ranks, and the Hux chieftains and officers could only watch as they seemed suddenly robbed of all senses, panicking, reaching blindly around them, shouting, lunging at thin air around them as if they thought their enemies would be there. Some of them simply ceased moving at all, arms falling limp to their sides as their heads bowed in defeat.

The Knights of Ren, along with master Maul and the Hux Crows, made no move to attack or capture them – remaining still as statues, a wall of black-clad backs and silence. What were they waiting for? Casting questioning glances at their warchief, they were met with only a shrug or a small shake of his head. No, he did not know their aim either, and he watched, hand on the pommel of his sword, eyes barely straying for a moment from the scene playing out before them.

“You can take the council back into the camp,” Kylo eventually said to Braith, not even turning his head. “We have a long night ahead, and none of you can be of help with this.”

“Will you be alright?” Braith asked, still looking at the strange scene in front of them. He did not need to comment on Kylo’s dismissal of their usefulness; it was obvious that they would hinder more than they helped if they tried to get involved in this. They did not even fully understand what ‘this’ was.

The Crows were quiet for a moment, communicating among themselves.

“There will be many deaths here tonight,” Maul said. “But we want to save those who can still be saved.” He turned slightly, golden eyes reflecting the light from the torches being lit around them. “This will be a night of cruelty. Those who won't join us will be... put down.”

“You're saying this won't be a battle,” Braith said. It was clear he did not like this. “You're going to butcher them where they stand, when they can't defend themselves.”

“Yes.” Kylo turned to look at his beloved, and Maul turned his gaze back to the small field in front of them. “Allowing them to fight against us is too risky. They can afford to lose a few lives, we can't – we've taken too many risks as it is.”

Braith nodded, running a hand though his hair as he worried his lip between his teeth.

“I'm only going to ask this once,” he said. “Is there no other way?”

“No. We're Crows. We do what is necessary, not what is noble.”

Having heard that statement before, Braith knew there was nothing left to be said about it, and motioned for the chieftains and officers to follow him back into the camp.

“I'll make sure there are spare beds for those you can save.”

“Thank you.”

As the chieftains followed their warchief, some dared to glance over their shoulders, only to find the scene unchanged; the Crows stood as silent guardians, eyes fixed on the pathetic yet blood-curling display. There was a tension in the air reminiscent of the breath before the first strike of thunder that brings the storm. But this was a storm they would prefer not to witness.

~*~*~*~
It had been a long sail. Much blood had been spilled, many a horror witnessed. When the lookout in the front ship raised a pole with a green rag tied to it, signalling foreign beaches ahead, they knew it had been worth it all. But the Northern sailors knew better than to cheer just yet; they were still far out on open water, and beaches meant people. Instead they silently switched out the rowing teams and put away the drums. The waters were calm, the night sky clear and star strewn, and the rowers matched their rowing to their breathing, dipping their oars without a sound.

To anyone who would have seen them approaching, they would have looked like a fleet of ghosts, haunting the waters of travels long since ended. But ghosts they were not. The weapons at their sides were real, the calloused hands gripping smooth oar handles were warm with life.

No one saw them coming.

It would not have made a difference if they had. This was a small group, only thirty odd ships, but for the small garrison village they overtook in the wee hours of the morning it was more than enough. The soldiers fought bravely. Desperately, but bravely. It was no fault of theirs that there were simply too few of them to defend the garrison. Queen Leia's naval officers most likely counted on the warships patrolling the coastline to provide enough protection for the coastal villages. But those ships were either hunting Northerners far out at sea, or they were coming to their final rest far below the waves, their sailors dragged down with them. But that was a harsh reality of life on the coast; there were simply too many miles to cover and never enough soldiers to send out. Small villages and remote garrisons had to make do with what they had on hands while the larger forts and towns took priority. An easy mistake to make when one did not know enough about Northern naval strategy to know just how far they could travel upstream and into the kingdom if they could find a river mouth deeper than waist high. And the Northerners were hunting for rivers now. Rivers, and sleepy little villages such as this one, with few soldiers, and no one to spare to raise the alarm. They had waited for this chance to hit back at the South for generations; they had had ample time to prepare.

Once the fight, such as it was, was over, the Northerners rounded up the villagers to keep them out of the way while some of them got to work breaking into the garrison's main building to steal every last bit of information they could get their hands on. The sooner they could get their bearings, the sooner they could report back to let the other ships know they had found a possible way in. The closer to D'Qar they came, the harder the battles would inevitably be, but what were Northerners if not a people for whom hard battles were simply part of life?

~*~*~*~

Before that night, Luke had never seen a naval battle. Had, in fact, barely ever even set foot on a ship that was not safely moored in the calm waters of the royal harbour. Being a Dove, he had never gone through the mandatory military training, and thus never served so much as a day aboard a warship. Neither had Leia, when it came to it, but that had more to do with their mother's extreme fear of losing her daughter at sea than any refusal or inability on Leia's part. No, ships had remained largely a mystery to Luke, and now – seeing what he was seeing from the vantage point of his sitting room window – a renewed sense of terror seemed eager to replace all previous assumptions.

Sky and water were both alight from the flames of burning ships, the smell of scorched wood and flesh travelled on the wind along with the anguished screams of dying sailors and the heavy thumping sounds of catapults. It would not be long before they could launch their deadly cargo at the walls of his city, and he prayed that they would be stopped before that. D'Qar's walls were thick, it's harbour well protected, but if breached there was precious little defense to be mounted behind it. He could feel the Force spiking, distorting, writhing with the pain and despair emanating
from the scene – it nearly brought him to his knees, and it was all he could do to hold on to the window frame with all his strength to keep from falling.

How could this be happening? The last reports he had been given a fortnight earlier had indicated that the Northern fleets had not yet reached their waters, and that the Royal Navy had kept at least one armada stationed in the area outside the coast of the royal city to ensure its protection. How could the Northerners be here already? How in God's name did they travel so quickly? What dark magic did they employ to allow them to sneak up on the great D'Qarian Royal Navy and meet them head on as if they were somehow equals? It stood to reason that they were not!

Forcing himself away from the window, he hurried to dress himself and make for the throne room. With his personal guard scrambling to keep up, he walked as fast as he could without making it seem like he was running – the guards' armour clinking and creaking as they hurried to get in formation around him. They were the one elite division still remaining in the palace, which Órban had bullied him into reinstating after he nearly had a fit upon finding out Luke had dismissed the need for them, seeing as he was not the Queen – but now he was glad for their presence. As they made their way through the corridor, Luke grabbed every servant or courtier they came upon and sent them with unusually sharp orders to gather the royal council in the throne room post haste – with no excuses allowed.

Órban was already there when he arrived, overseeing his servants as they put a table together and rolled out a lesser heap of what looked to be maps. When the count looked up to see him approach, he gave a nod, and wasted no time waving Luke over to his side.

“I was just about to send someone to haul you out of that enormous bed of yours,” he said, “but you're quicker to react than I gave you credit for. Good. Don't know how much time we've got to organize ourselves here; if those demented Northerns bastards out there really are suicidal enough to go for the full frontal attack like that, then I'd say we haven't got much to worry about. We're gonna lose a few ships and a lot of men – and that's going to sting, no two words about that – but they'll have no choice but to retreat. But I've fought against them Northern sea monsters before, and if there's anything I learned is that they've got more tricks up their sleeves than an aristocrat got coins in their purse. Full frontal attack was never their style, and I could wager my balls the sneaky bastards are up to something. We got to be ready for anything, or there's not gonna be much D'Qar left for your lunatic sister to rule over when she comes crawling back home – pardon my bluntness.”

“If you weren't blunt, I'd think you ill,” Luke said. “Besides, I'm far more worried about what is happening out there.” He looked around before leaning in slightly, lowering his voice as much as he could without it seeming conspicuous. “You and I both know that this is not my field of expertise, but for once I feel confident that the same goes for most of the council. I trust your judgement of the situation, but I have a feeling the others will be harder to convince.”

Órban scratched himself on his bloated chin, a thoughtful look on his face. “Well, given past events and everything, they'd be fools not to be,” he admitted. “I sure as hells wouldn't take my word for anything if I were them. But luckily for me, none of that matters, because unlike all of you, I actually know the difference between the fore and aft of a ship, which makes me the resident tactical genius. It'll wreak bloody havoc with their pride, but if the choice is between that and D'Qar, I don't bloody care.”

“First thing first, though,” Luke sighed, fiddling with the maps, “it still remains to be seen if they take me seriously enough to actually come here immediately.”

Órban made a humming noise, eyes already moving steadily across the maps, looking for a plan –
or perhaps several – swollen fingers following the lines of defence works and waterways with a steadiness Luke had believed long gone.

“If they don't show up, you just hang 'em for treason,” he said, “and get yourself a council that actually gives a wet shite about this country.”

“I'm forbidden to use violence, my friend.”

“No worries, I can hang them for you. Just say the word.”

“I think we give them just a little more time before we start preparing the gallows, yes? It is the middle of the night, after all.”

“The middle of the night, and your city is under attack. You're in charge, but I was awake and in here within a quarter of the first whiff of smoke. If I can do it, they've got no excuses.”

“Órban.”

“Fine. We'll play by your rules. If they're not in here wihtin an hour, I'm getting my people to go get them. I'll lead them here in nooses if I have to, don't think I won't.”

“Let's just try to get started on some semblance of a plan for now,” Luke pleaded. “We'll give them the hour, and after that I promise you can do what you want. One more hour.”

“Fine.” Órban poured himself a goblet of weak cider – the strongest drink he was allowed to have after Luke and his personal doctor had joined forces to protect what little was left of his health – grimaced as he swallowed a gulp, then waved it carelessly in the direction of the maps. “Luckily, I think I know a few ways of handling this. You better listen closely, master Dove. This is complicated stuff.”

The hour passed, and Luke had to give in to Órban's wishes. While they had been poring over the maps, listening to the steady stream of increasingly panicked reports, the count's servants had been amusing themselves by making a collection of nooses, and Luke had tried his best to ignore how adept they were at it. He did not know where Órban found his staff, and he decided quietly to himself that he would prefer to remain ignorant for as long as he could. He was having enough trouble keeping himself upright and focused enough to do what needed to be done. The Force was in such turmoil, and being further inside the castle walls away from the waterfront did little to lessen the impact. Several times now he had had to force himself to remain standing when a new wave of pain had his knees buckling. The cold sweat was running all over his body from the nausea, and he prayed he would be able to stop himself from throwing up, though it was becoming more difficult to do so the longer he had to fight. He was in agony, but acutely aware of how many eyes were on him in this moment, how his every move and word was being judged against the standard of his sister's firm hand and cool head.

Órban gave a nod, and his servants quietly left the throne room – nooses in hand – and Luke prayed his God would forgive him for allowing the use of threats, and no doubt force, about to be directed at his Royal council. But for the sake of D'Qar, he had to do what must be done. No one would actually be hanged. Not today, at least. If he handled this situation well, it might help convince the people that he deserved their respect and allegiance, that he had what it took to rule. However, if he failed now, there was nothing to stop his council from usurping him and claiming the power for themselves.

As much as he hated it, this was his moment of truth.
The burden was his, and his alone; the choices made by Luke Organa would save or doom the royal city of D'Qar.

The realization became too much, and he lost the battle against the nausea.

~*~*~*~

"Those pig-fucking bags of sewage," Lady Bríghid spat as she lowered her spyglass, "they think they can sneak up on my coast without my noticing?" She took a deep breath, exhaling slowly before rubbing her temple in annoyance. "Lieutenant Gorm!" she barked. "Send word to every last garrison up and down the coast to prepare for assault. Including clan Winter; they've had weeks to prepare, and if they're not ready, they deserve to get beaten! The Southern plague is coming, and I want it clear that every last one of those monsters who set their foot on my land is to be killed without hesitation or mercy."

“Yes, my lady!” The Lieutenant saluted, and headed down the tower stairs to the waiting messengers.

Bríghid put the spyglass to her eye again. From the western tower of Whitehaven Hall, she could see leagues away – much further than any of the ships down on the water could even dream of. The night was cold and clear, with little wind, and no clouds. A gibbous moon shone brightly down over the inky blackness of the restless ocean. She could make out the silhouettes of the approaching Southern ships, and after a quick calculation she estimated that it would still be well past dawn when they came close enough to be within reach of all the nasty things she intended to throw at them. Good. Ample time to prepare, then.

She was born in clan Winter, and seafaring was in her blood. In matters regarding anything remotely sea or ship related, her son had made it clear that the final say was always hers. While her late husband, may he suffer neverending torment in the deepest pit of hell, had never cared to hear her opinion anything, Braith had always listened and learned. He gave her Whitehaven Hall as her seat, not only out of kindness, but also because he knew that as long as she was in control of their coastlines, clan Hux could rest easy knowing anyone who tried to invade their lands that way would die swiftly, and no doubt brutally. She intended to make sure the Southerners learned this too. This was her land. This was her son's home, the land where she was raising her grandchildren to follow in his proud footsteps. Four children she had already lost in her life; Braith was the only one to have reached adulthood. He and his children were her whole world, her greatest pride – two strong generations of warchiefs raised by her hand alone. She would be thrice damned before she allowed anyone to threaten what was hers.

“Alva!” She called, not even taking down her spyglass as the commander of Whitehaven's garrison, her cousin by marriage, came up to her – also looking out at the dark seascape. "Ready the trebuchets. Rocks, oil, tar, arrows – all of it. I want those rats burned and drowned before they have a chance to drop anchor.”

“Yes, my lady!” Alva nodded, and delivered some sharp orders to her subordinates, before turning back to her ruler. “With your permission, my lady, I want to start getting the civilians into the tunnels as soon as possible. Once we get them out of the way, everything will be ready for battle.”

Bríghid nodded. "Do it. Send someone to tell Gunda to get Caelin and Mara into their armours and down into the tunnels as well. Tell her to tie them up if she has to, but get them out of the way, and keep them there.”

“You'll break their hearts,” Alva said with a grim smile. “They've been carrying their swords for a fortnight already.”
“Their father wasn't allowed out of the escape tunnels until he was fourteen, and he was far more sensible than either of those two. I'd rather deal with their whining for the next five winters than lose them and have to tell my son I failed to keep them safe. That is one pain I will sooner raze the world to the ground than put him through.”

“Yes, my lady.” Alva put a hand on her shoulder in quiet acknowledgement. “I will have the catapult barges readied as well. The tar and oil are already being heated up. We'll be ready when they get here.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Bríghid remained where she stood for a few more moments, ignoring the blistering cold biting through her thick cloak and reddening her pale skin. Giving a few more orders, she nodded to herself and headed for her private quarters. It was time to put her armour on and make the coming battle official. It was well known that Lady Bríghid greatly disliked wearing heavy armour, always having preferred to be behind the oar of a ship, or manning a catapult barge, and over the years it had become a fond joke among her clanspeople that there was no call to battle more quickly heeded than the sight of her armour being taken out of its storage. Though she did not say it out loud, she was looking forward to strapping on her sword this time. It was a gift from Mai, given with a promise of a harvest wedding, during her last visit to the city before they marched out. It was a beautiful weapon, and Bríghid had every intention of putting it to good use. After all, she had everything to fight for.

And, as the Southerners were about to learn, she was a chieftain and Lady of the North – war was in her blood. Mercy was not.

~*~*~*~

When the screams finally stopped, some time just before dawn, neither Braith Hux nor his warcouncil felt any shame about their deep and visible sighs of relief. There had been agony in those voices, the like of which they had never thought possible from human mouths. They were glad to have been spared witnessing what had been going on out there in that field, but even just hearing had made the bile rise in all their throats. Phasma, to everyone's surprise, had had to excuse herself to go to her tent at the other end of the camp after failing to keep herself from throwing up – and she had always had a stronger stomach than most of them. Mitaka, clearly wiser than the rest of the council, had already excused himself hours earlier to oversee the preparations to accommodate new additions to their group of Crows. Braith and his chieftains had brought out a large keg of strong wine, and done their best to empty it before dawn.

It had been decided that the soldiers would be given a day's rest, to recover from the ordeal. They only hoped the Crows would deal with the remains, however much of those there were, by themselves. Rurik had pointed out that he did not think it would be good for the soldiers' morale to be exposed to that at the moment, and no one disagreed. Not to mention that the Crows themselves would probably need some time to rest and adjust to their new siblings' presence in the camp.

“I know you're probably gonna knock my teeth in for this,” Rurik slurred as he patted Braith on the back hard enough to nearly topple him off the bench they were sitting on, “but you are one brave man for laying with a Crow like that every night. I though Aya was scary sometimes, but you... Brave. Or stupid. Possibly both.”

Braith glared at him, wiping futilely at the wine he had spilled all over his front from the force of Rurik's friendly pat. “Thank you. I think.” He fixed Rurik with as stern a glare as he could muster,
and added “I'm too tired and drunk to punch you right now, so I'm gonna let it slide this time. But if you ever bring up the topic of what me and Kylo do in our private time again, 'specially in public, I'm gonna have him sew your mouth shut. Alright? I don't care two ways who knows or sees or hears, but he does. Understood?”

Rurik nodded solemnly. “You're a good man,” he said, patting Braith on the back again, much to the other's dismay. “So, d'you think it's safe to go sleep yet? 'Cause I think I need to get this night over and done with as soon as possible, and I'd rather not have time to sober up before I've had a chance to put a few hours of sleep between me and... all that.” He gestured vaguely in the approximate direction of the field. “If they start screaming again, I'll go mad.”

Nods and murmurs of agreement came from the other occupants of the tent, all of them looking just as miserable as Rurik. To their enormous relief, the Gods pitied them. Movement was heard outside the tent, and moments later master Kylo entered. He took one long, level look at their state and shook his head.

“It's done,” he said. “Erris, Vilya and Chava are preparing to burn the remains of those we could not save.”

“Please tell me you did save some?” Braith asked. “Please tell me all of that wasn't for nothing?”

“Twenty-seven,” Kylo said. “Sixteen adults, nine older hatchlings, two younger ones – which was more than we dared to hope for. But even if they had all died, it wouldn't have been for nothing. It's probably hard for you to understand, but death would have been the kindest gift we could have given them.” He was quiet for a moment, eyes closing and brows furrowing as if he was remembering something unpleasant. “We will keep them under close watch for a while, though. The process was not without cost, and they have suffered extensive trauma even before tonight.” He sighed, going over to Braith, taking his goblet and filling it for himself. After emptying it in one long swig, he ran a hand through his dark locks. “This will happen again,” he said, “but I will make sure we are further away from the camp next time. I am sorry you had to witness it, even if only by ear. Please make sure to give your soldiers some praise for remaining on their posts through it all. Unlike you, they did not have any wine to numb their minds with.”

The chieftains nodded, twisting awkwardly in their seats under his calm gaze.


“Who knows,” Kylo said with a sad shake of his head. “With time they will recover and feel better – that much I can safely say. But it will take time before the full extent of the damage is revealed. We will do our best to mitigate it, but they have been under Snoke's grip for months now, and as we all know, he doesn't remember the existence of the word 'mercy'.”

“But they are on our side?” one of the chieftains asked, brows furrowed in worry.

“Yes. They have sworn themselves to us, and having seen what we have seen of their minds and souls, we have no reason to doubt their sincerity. They just need time to come back to themselves, to remember how to be people again.

“You look tired, love,” Braith said, coming up to him and gently cupping his chin so he could study his face. It was evident he had spilled blood; there were specks of it on his neck and scalp still, and small traces on his face, suggesting he had wiped his face clean before coming into the tent. There were also dark circles under his eyes, and he was paler than he should be.

“I am,” Kylo admitted. “Magic of this kind is terribly draining, but I'll be alright after some rest.
From the looks of it, that goes for you lot as well,” he added to the rest of the room. “Come now, there is still much work to be done, and I prefer if you sleep the wine off first. You are terrible decision-makers when you're hungover, and I don't have the time to play judge in your bickerings.” He peered around him, as if he only just noticed something. “Where is Phasma?”

“Her stomach apparently couldn't handle the noise,” Braith said. “I've barely ever seen her throw up after she's been drinking, but it was like she couldn't even react to stop it. She's in her tent. She looked pretty ill – maybe you could ask someone to check up on her? Just to be on the safe side?”

Kylo nodded, tucking a stray strand of hair back into Braith's braids before straightening out his robes. “I'll go see her,” he said. “She's under my wing, so she's mine to care for. You get to bed, love. I'll be there shortly.”

“Please wash the blood off your face first,” Braith teased, his spirits lifted by the promise to put some sleep between himself and the memory of this night, and knowing Phasma was being cared for. “You look like someone poured a bucket of the stuff all over you.”

Kylo scoffed, but did not retort. Braith could have that little victory after all the times Kylo had poked fun at him for coming to bed sweaty or bloody from battle or sparring.

“Go to bed, chieftains. Let's get our rest while we still can.”

The chieftains did not need to be told twice, and the tent emptied quickly. Once alone, Kylo stole kiss and a moment of being held close, before shooing Braith off to bed and heading off to Phasma's tent to see to her. Tired he may be, but he was still the Crow of Skye Castle, and Phasma was one of its residents. He had a duty, and he had taken an oath to always put his people first. Phasma was one of the healthiest people in the entire town of Skye Castle – she rarely got hurt, and had not been ill since he came to clan Hux all those months before. For her to suddenly become so ill made him worried.

Entering her tent, he found her curled up and dozing on the bed, a bucket placed on the ground just beneath. It had clearly been put to good use, and he felt for her. Neither one of them had ever made peace with the experience of throwing up, and here she was – violently sick, not even in the privacy of her own house where she could suffer without everyone hearing it. He came up to the bed and put a hand to her forehead. She was pale and clammy, but her temperature was normal.

“You finally done now?” she muttered as she opened her eyes to look at him. “Or should I just replace the bucket?”

Kylo smiled. “It's done for tonight,” he said. “How are you feeling? Have you managed to drink any water?”

She shook her head. “I tried. It kept coming up.” Dragging a shaking hand through her hair, she carefully stretched herself out a little. “I don't know why this keeps happening.”

“Well, tonight's events would turn anyone's stomach,” Kylo said, helping her sit up a little before pouring some water into a bowl so she could wash her face. “You said 'keeps happening'. Has this happened before?”

“Only for a few days,” she said, looking embarrassed. She took a small rag from the table next to the bed, and dipped it in the water. “Mitaka thinks I'm too stressed. He knows I get nauseous when I try to eat when I'm stressed. But I never throw up – I just feel like shit for a while.”

“I see.” Taking the rag from her shaking hand and ignoring her half-hearted protests, he gently
cleaned her face for her – it was clear she was too weak to do it herself at the moment, and he would rather she preserved her energy. “Does it just happen suddenly, or have you been able to tell if something might have caused it?”

She shook her head slightly. “I don’t know. It happens every night a few times. And then again once or twice in the morning. It’s fine during the day. I get dizzy sometimes, but other than that, I’m fine.”

“I see. Have you gotten your bleedings as normal?”

“Well, they’ve never been very regular,” she sighed. “Half the reason I started taking the potions to begin with. Sometimes they come twice in the same month, sometimes not for several months in a row. It’s a bloody nuisance.”

Kylo smiled reassuringly. “Perfectly understandable. Do you remember when you had your last one?”

“Yeah. Just before the wedding. I was so nervous it wouldn’t have stopped by the wedding night – I don’t usually mind either way, and I know Mitaka doesn’t either, but I just didn’t want to bleed that night. That was what, about two months ago?”

“Sounds about right. Alright, I’m going to give you something for the nausea, so you can get some proper rest. But first I’d like to have a look at your stomach to see if it can tell me something more.”

Phasma nodded and carefully turned over on her back, pulling her tunic up to expose her belly. There was nothing in her outer Force signature signalling that anything was wrong, so he wanted to look deeper. He did have an idea of what the cause might be, but he needed confirmation first. Gently placing his hands on either side of her lower belly, he felt the flow of Phasma’s own Force signature – a steady, regular wave-like movement – prying gently at it until he felt something. It was faint: an tiny, wispy and only just emerging Force signature – present, but not yet entirely separate from hers. Focusing on it, he carefully moved his hands to follow the strongest pulses of it, until he found what he was looking for. This was going to be a challenge to deal with later, he knew. Phasma should not under any circumstances be allowed near the front line from this moment on, but as much as she would hate it, the risk would simply be too great. Still, this was a blessing.

“You’re smiling,” she remarked, and he opened his eyes, taking his hands away from her belly and helping her get under her covers before saying anything. “What did you find?”

“I have good news and bad news,” he said as he sat down on the edge of the bed again, getting a small vial out of the satchel he had brought, pouring a few drops of it into Phasma’s nearly untouched mug of water. “But first, I want you to drink this. It’ll stop you throwing up any more before I’ve had a chance to put together a better one, more suited to your longterm needs.”

“Ugh, I’ve had stale beer taste better than this,” she said once she had swallowed down the liquid. Putting the mug down, she studied him for a moment. “Alright, I’m ready. Gimme the bad news first. If I was deathly ill, you wouldn’t be smiling, so whatever it is, I think I can bear hearing it.”

Nodding, he straightened up, and took a deep breath. Telling Phasma she was not allowed something was about as easy as pulling teeth with a knitting needle, but there was nothing for it. He was the Crow; this was his decision to make, and his alone. It was not open for questioning or negotiating. That did not mean he was not fully aware that Phasma would not enjoy hearing it.

“Phasma,” he said, “I’m afraid I must hereby forbid you from taking active part in any battle we find ourselves in, from this moment on, for the next seven to eight months. I will inform the
warchief that you are to be given a position further back in the lines until it's safe for you to go back to the front.”

“What? Why? Like hell you can stop me from fighting just 'cause I've been a bit ill! That's a pile of pig shite, Kylo! I'm not some crippled old crone, I've been to battle with broken bones and concussions, and—” She stopped dead. Realization and suspicion in a strange mix spread across her face, and she reached out to grab his arms – holding him as if he was an buoy to keep her afloat in the midst of whatever thoughts were now flooding her mind. “The next.... the next seven to eight months? Seven to eight—... I haven't bled for two months and now you tell me I can't—…”

“Congratulations, Phasma,” Kylo said, smiling gently as he held her steady. “The timing is absolutely terrible, but the Gods have blessed you. Your child will be a warrior, like you.”

“My- my child...” Her hands went instinctively to her belly as the widest, warmest smile Kylo had ever seen illuminated her face, tears rising in her brilliant blue eyes as she looked to the sky. He made no move to wipe them away. These were good tears. “I'm... Thank you, Gods. I will protect this blessing, I swear it on my blood and all I hold dear. I will raise them in your service, to love you as I do. I—... Thank you.”

“We will prepare a sacrifice tomorrow,” Kylo said, standing up to leave. “And then I'll have Chava come see you, too. I've never met a better potion maker than her, and she can help put together something that'll make sure you keep your strength in the months to come.”

Phasma nodded, eyes on her belly, the warm smile still bright in the glum light of the tent. “Mitaka is going to be so happy,” she said. “And so proud.”

“He's a good man – and, speaking of him, I think he's on his way here now. I'll leave you to tell him the good news, but I need you to promise to drink another full mug of water before you sleep. And then you need to get some rest, alright? No marital fun tonight. I'll consult with Chava and the others tomorrow, and make sure we're giving you the best care.”

“With how sick I've been tonight I wouldn't be up for marital fun anyway,” Phasma chuckled. “And I'll drink the water, I promise.” She paused. “Will you tell Braith?”

“Do you want me to?”

After a moment, she nodded. “Yeah. I think he needs the good news. Tonight really shook him up. Shook us all up.”

“Then I'll tell him,” he smiled, before picking up the bucket and heading for the opening. “I'll get rid of this for you. No point in upsetting Mitaka – he's got enough to handle now as is. Good night, Phasma. May the God of dreams show you a beautiful world tonight.”

“Thank you.”

~*~*~*~

It had been several grueling hours since Luke was awoken by the smoke and spikes of agony coming from the battle, and dawn was fast approaching. He dreaded it; dreaded the way the pale light of morning would make clear the full cost of the night’s carnage – images of drowned men and blood spreading like halos around the burning, sinking wrecks of the ships. He never did have a stomach for these things, but he had no choice. Örban had made it clear to them all that they needed to see it themselves, to understand what was actually happening, what any little mistake of theirs would mean. The Royal Council had so far been unusually subdued and compliant. It
seemed that Órban's method had been a success – though he also felt that having the nooses hanging from the chandelier above the table where there was no missing them might have been a little too much. But he could not fault Órban no matter how much he disliked the man's brutal approach; they had never been this effective during a council meeting since Luke took over the role of ruler.

Messengers had been sent all over the city to muster up whatever defense they could manage to prepare for any attacks coming from the sea. Some older soldiers with experience manning the trebuchets, a few hundred archers and footsoldiers on the walls and ground to protect the seaside gate was what they had been able to gather so far. Leia, it seemed, had truly taken everyone with her. Whether by arrogance or stupidity, Luke did not even want to know, but he found himself appalled by her apparent lack of concern for the people in her country. This was not like her.

But things were looking better than they had been only hours before, Luke thought to himself. The Southern ships were slowly forcing the Northern wolves back out to sea, and the intensity of the battle had lessened as both fleets focused on fleeing and pursuing. Órban had been the only one who had not seemed relieved by the last few reports, instead his brows had furrowed deeper and deeper with the passing hours, his poring over the maps becoming increasingly agitated as he sent his own people running in all direction out into the city to make sure the situation really was as under control as they wanted to think. Luke, still ashen faced and trembling with nausea, had made a valiant attempt to reach out with the Force to see if there were any signs of things being awry, but it was impossible to find the strength and focus for it. Doves were not trained to do such things, after all, and Luke had only learned about the technique in theory. For now, all he could do was pray.

Surely, God would not allow his people to be harmed? The city that held his grand temple? No, he could not believe his God to abandon those who followed him at a time like this. He could not.

He prayed.

Then came his answer.

The massive doors of the throne room were thrown open, two of Órban's servants almost toppling over each other in their hurry to make it into the room. Luke recognized them as two of those who had been sent to the northern walls to investigate.

"The river!" they cried, voices broken and breathless, chests heaving. Had they been running all the way here? "They're all over the river!"

"What?" one of the councillors sputtered, confused. "Who's on the river?"

"The Northerners!" one of the servants managed. "The whole river, on both sides. They've got... It looks like catapults, and-.... ballistae." She turned to Órban. "My lord, we couldn't see so well, but it looked like-.... like they were preparing siege equipment."

Órban let out a string of curses that had everyone in the room cowering from the sheer thundering volume and vulgarity of it.

"How many?" he demanded. "How many ships?"

"We- we don't know for sure!" the other servant wrung their hands in distress. "They've made smoke screens. But... hundreds. There must be hundreds! They're fore to aft all around the city! The battle, my lord, it must have been a ruse."
“Of course it was a bloody ruse, you dimwit!” Órban snarled, then made a gesture of apology when the servant flinched as if struck. “Of course it was a ruse,” he repeated, more levelled this time. “Those deceitful, badger-fucking, bloody fiends – I should have known. I should have seen that one coming. Of course they came by the rivers, like the hell-fiends they are.”

With a roar of renewed frustration, he slammed his fist down on the table hard enough to send things flying.

“Lord Órban,” one of the councillors pleaded. “Please. What does this mean? Should we send the soldiers up to the northern gate instead?”

“It won't make much of a difference,” Órban said, sinking into a chair, grimacing in discomfort. “You heard what they said. They're not going to risk themselves by trying to strike down these walls if they don't have to. And, that's just the thing; they really don't have to.” He ran a hand over his face. “I'll bet my cock that in another hour or so, we'll get reports that there are Northern ships moored by the seaside gate as well.” He turned to Luke. “They've got us trapped, my friend.”

“Are you saying we're under siege?” Luke asked, sitting up straight in his chair. “Are you honestly telling me they've put D'Qar under threat of siege in one single night?”

“I'm not saying anything until they give us the formal message,” Órban shrugged. “But that's what I would do if I could use the rivers like my own private roads. We built this city in a river delta, master Dove. Water is everywhere. It's only a matter of time before they are, too.”

“What do we do?” the councillors asked, the severity of the situation coming to them like a bucket of cold water dropped over their heads. “What can we do? Are we going to die?”

As one, they all turned to Luke.

“We must ensure the safety of our people,” he said, with a firmness that was built on little but air. But here was his moment, and he would not shame his house, or his God, by having it paint him a coward. “Have the food supplies collected into the palace storages – we will ration it out from here. Everyone will be fed, and fed equally. Make sure the water supplies are well guarded and kept clean at all costs.” He got up to have a look at the map. “Tell everyone to draw back to the palace area and the surrounding streets. If the Northerners take the city, we might at least be able to defend the palace grounds.” He looked at Órban, cursing his ignorance about these things. “Would that work? Can we fit everyone in here? The palace walls are not as high as the city walls, but it's better than nothing, don't you think?”

“It'll do,” Órban nodded, “but not for very long. A few weeks at the most. With all the people, the animals, all the shit and garbage, we're going to be really bloody vulnerable to illnesses – not to mention fights and all of that – but yes, we have a chance to defend to those walls even with our limited numbers. At least for a while. Long enough to die heroes instead of helpless cattle.”

“I'll send word to my sister,” Luke said. “We will hold D'Qar for as long as we can, but this is her city. Her people. She will turn back to defend us. She has to.”

“Let's hope so.”

A few hours after sunrise, the message came. No one was to enter or leave the city of D'Qar, under pain of death. Any attempts to attack or drive off the Northern soldiers would result in the razing of the city to the ground – with its people in it. Just as the tyrant queen Leia had showed no mercy to those whose lands she violated, the North would show no mercy to those who called her their leader.
The people of D'Qar vacated their homes, heading for the relative safety of the palace grounds, their prayers echoing off the walls of the houses as they passed.

Surely their God would keep them safe? Surely their queen would come back to save them? The morning offered no answer but silence, and the distant sound of Northern war drums.

Deep inside the palace, in the seclusion and solitude of his chambers – with no one to witness or judge his emotions – master Luke Organa of the Doves sank to his knees and cried like a child.

How could it all have gone so wrong?

~*~*~*~

The new Crows were nothing short of a blessing for Kylo and his Knights as they worked tirelessly every day to navigate the endless web of Force swirls that connected all life. So many times now had they thought themselves closing in on Snoke only for their final push to prove fruitless – only illusions, or nothing at all, to show for it. But as soon as the newest additions to their ranks had had a chance to rest and come into themselves again, several of the adult Crows offered to let themselves be used as focal points, or reversed prisms, to follow the lingering traces of Snoke's presence in their minds, in hope that it would enable them to pierce through his shields. It was a dangerous undertaking; their already worn out and tortured bodies and minds would have to endure the full weight of not only the Knights, and master Maul's, immense Force presences, but also that of a good dozen of the other Crows – none of whom were to be considered weak in the Force. If they even survived the ritual, who knew what the cost would be?

"Are we absolutely certain there is no other way?" Gaius asked Maul. The older Crow had taken the Knights with him to the warcouncil's tent to discuss the matter in private, after the situation had come close to complete eruption among the gathered Crows. Accusations had been levelled in all directions, questioning both the intentions of the newest siblings and the trust and willingness of master Kylo and his Knights to let them prove themselves. "I know there was a time we wouldn't have so much as blinked at the suggestion we do this, but now... There still aren't so many of us that we can afford the loss of anyone. I don't like this at all."

Maul ran a hand over his scalp, nails raking across tattooed skin as he gave himself a moment to ponder his answer.

"I wish there was, little one," he sighed eventually. "I've been racking my mind, trying to remember if I've read about anything that could be a better option, but I'm afraid that nothing comes up. Maybe if we had more time. More time, and more of us to keep the search up while others are resting. But the reverse prism method is well-tried. We've used it for so many generations – we know it works."

"Yes," Erris grunted. "It works frighteningly well. But at what cost. Half of them can still barely stand on their feet. If we focus all of our will and intent right through their minds, it will probably kill them. And what if we don't succeed the first time? How many of our siblings can we sacrifice, even with time running out?"

"Kylo?" Maul looked at his child. Kylo sat in Braith's chair by the bracer, Eira on his knee – his eyes distant, the hand gently stroking her soft feathers seemingly moving mostly on its own accord. He frowned deeply, teeth worrying his lower lip.

"I don't want to do this," he said, a pained expression flashing across his ashen face. "Erris and Gaius are right – allowing them to be our prisms will most likely kill them. But our new siblings are, unfortunately, also right: it's the most efficient method we've got – the only one we haven't
tried, and with time running out on us, the only sensible one. We can keep searching for weeks more, months even. Maybe we find Snoke tomorrow, maybe we never do.” He moved Eira to his shoulder as he stood up, pacing restlessly across the thick rugs. “There are enough of us to provide a shield to ensure Snoke won't be able to hit us back through them, while also giving us of their power. If we can spare a few to keep the prism stable, we might have a chance at succeeding without losing them. Snoke's presence in their minds is so fresh I can taste it in the air around them.”

“So you're saying we should do it?” Erris asked.

“I wish to all the Gods and their love that we didn't have to, brother,” Kylo said. “But I think we do. And I think we should not deny our new siblings this chance to prove their loyalty to us if it is so important to them that they're willing to risk dying for it.”

“We've all had him in our heads,” Sílass said. “And I know we all still have nightmares about it. If I'd had to endure what these poor souls have endured for all these months, I'd be willing to die to ensure no one else ever had to. I'm with Kylo; this is bigger than all of us. These are our siblings. They're as much Crows as we are. They know what it is they're offering to do. I say we honour them. If they die, they die heroes and saviours, and we'll write their name in the songs so no one will forget them. But the decision has been made, and they made it.” She looked at the others. “Let's not fool ourselves by pretending this was ever our call to make.”

“This is madness,” Ávi muttered. “All of it. The whole lot. But their deaths are theirs to choose. So let's get on with it.”

Maul got to his feet and put his hands on Kylo's upper arms, looking him in the eyes. “I can hear your fears in my heart, child,” he said. “But allowing this to happen will not make you like him. By letting them choose for themselves, you are proving that you are nothing like him. You love your siblings, and trust me when I say that your siblings know this. You are not requesting anyone's sacrifice. You are respecting their wishes and their right to make their own choices. Even now, you are kinder than he ever was.”

Kylo nodded, letting himself be crowded and held by all of them.

“Tell everyone to get some rest. The first volunteer to act as prism will need to be prepared, and I want three Crows to tend to them throughout the ceremony. Two Crows to each one of us, and the rest to act as shielders. Seven hatchlings for the drums. We will begin the ritual at dawn.” He straightened up and adjusted his robes. “I want you all to meet me here with the first prism at midnight – until then, do whatever you need to do to balance yourselves and gather strength. I don't intend for this to need a second attempt.”

As soon as the others had left the tent, Kylo put Eira down in her little nest by the largest brazier, and went inside the private quarters he shared with his beloved, closing the door-flaps firmly. Braith was at his personal desk, pouring over some letters, but the annoyed frown on his face instantly smoothed out into a soft smile as he looked up to see Kylo approaching.

“Unusual to see you here in the middle of the day,” he said, standing up and holding his arms out. “Did it go we-oomph!” He got no further, as Kylo grabbed the front of his jacket, crushing their lips together with enough force that Braith back into the desk, nearly toppling it over. As his first instinct always was these days, he wrapped his arms around Kylo, pulling him flush against himself, deepening the kiss. It was not the most common occurrence for his beloved to be so forceful in his need, but Braith had come to cherish every occasion that allowed him to taste the fire in him. Still, it was in the middle of the day, and as much as Braith enjoyed where this was going, he was also somewhat befuddled by it.
“What... what brought this on?” he managed when they parted for air, even as his hands continued their impatient work trying to peel Kylo out of his robes.

“Do you love me?” Kylo whispered, voice hitching as Braith kissed his way along his jawline, down onto his neck.

“You know I do,” Braith soothed in between kisses. “More than anything in this world or the next. You are my life. My world.”

“Always?”


“Not now. I just need you to do something for me,” Kylo whispered urgently against his hair, while his hands busied themselves with pulling Braith's heavy jacket off his shoulders, going to work on the lacings of his undershirt.

“Anything,” Braith swore fervently. “You know that. Anything you need, my love.”

“I need you to love me. Give me everything. Everything you've got. Let me forget that anything exists but you and me. Let me forget everything but you.”

“Gods, Kylo. Anything you need, sweetness. C'mere, let me take care of you” Something had obviously got Kylo very upset, and Braith could not help but feel a sting of foreboding, unease. It may be months in the past now, but the memory of their first night as lovers would never be anything but fresh in his mind; the sense of urgency, Kylo's unusual forwardness about needing everything Braith had to give him, the desperation in his usually so graceful movements. But then Kylo had him down on the bed, his trousers and breeches gone, replaced by Kylo's soft hands and warm mouth on his cock, and all thoughts stopped dead in their tracks. It was hours before they left the bed again. Supper had come and gone while they were sleeping closely intwined under the heavy furs. Kylo had barely allowed him to pull out for long enough to change positions, long legs and strong arms keeping them together, tearing climax after climax from them both until they were both painfully spent and drained, sinking into blissful sleep between one breath and the next. Every last touch, every last kiss, groan, soft whisper, or roll of his hips – Kylo had drank it up with a fervour that was bordering on the primal. He had not even managed to keep his voice from rising to levels Braith knew he would normally be deathly embarrassed about. But for every drop of himself, every last little inch of everything he was that Braith gave, his beloved gave back in equal measures. There was no heaven, no reward, nothing in the world like being in Kylo's arms, to see him so greedily and unapologetically revel in their love for each other. Kylo had asked for everything, and Braith gave it.

Braith woke up first, slightly disoriented, to the sound of Mitaka's worried voice on the other side of the door-flap to their quarters. He needed to see the messages Braith had received earlier, but also did not wish to disturb them in their private time – if the warchief could perhaps just hand him the papers in question under the door-flap? Also, they really needed to eat something, didn't they? Taking pity on his poor scribe, he reluctantly untangled himself from Kylo, and called for him to wait a moment. Giving himself a cursory wipedown with a small towel, he got in his trousers and undershirt, grabbing the papers and handing them over to Mitaka, who blushed furiously at the sight of his dishevelled warchief and the equally dishevelled, sleeping Crow in the bed behind him. Once Mitaka had taken the papers, and handed over two bowls of, now cold, stew, Braith went back to bed. He did not want to be gone when his beloved woke up, not when he was clearly in desperate need of reassurance. He was also still rather tired, and a little sore in places where Kylo's
sharp teeth and nails had broken his skin. Pulling his sleeping lover close again, kissing his hair and breathing in the scent of him, Braith waited. When Kylo woke up, they would need to talk, but until then he was not going anywhere.

~*~*~*~

Dawn greeted the Hux clan's camp to the sound of drums and rhythmic chanting from the tent belonging to the Crows. The clanspeople did not need to know the strange old Crow language to understand that what was happening inside was a most serious matter. The warchief had ordered them all to be kept busy with exercises and chores, to keep them busy and away from the Crows and their strange ritual. Normally, the midnight-clad would have conducted this ceremony somewhere away from the clan – a sacred grove, or deep in a cavern in the mountains perhaps, but here, the most privacy they could be given was for as many of the soldiers as possible to move to the other end of the camp. They would not be marching today, and it was clearly annoying the warcouncil, but master Kylo and his strange kin had left no room to object. This had to be done, and that was all there was to it. It did nothing to comfort the soldiers, though. Who knew what they were doing in that tent? What powers they were invoking, what magic they were wielding.

In the middle of the tent, now adorned all over with complex patterns of runes and symbols of protection, one of the Crow lay on his back on a bed of soft blankets and cushions. He was naked, sans for a loincloth, his scarred and emaciated body pale and fragile against the mass of bulky black robes surrounding him like the petals of some strange dark flower. His eyes were half-lidded, jaw slack with the effects of the different potions and strong drinks he had been given to lessen the impact of this ordeal on his mind. Three Crows sat around him, their hands on his body. One of them rested his head in their lap, holding his temples in a soft grip. The other two sat opposite each other by his shoulders, hands on his chest. They had their eyes closed in concentrations as they gently passed some of their own strength and life-force into his body.

Encircling them were the Knights of Ren, Maul, and a few of the clan Hux Crows – hands slightly raised, palms facing the prone figure on the floor. They were chanting as they gathered and focused their Force power, holding it tightly as it spiked and coiled, protesting the restraints. In the rows behind them, other Crows – the younger, healthy ones – with their hands on their shoulders to provide them with even more power, and behind them stood the older, experienced Crows – hands linked as they built a protective shield around those within the circle. Along the walls, finally, were the older hatchlings, and those Crows not strong enough to partake in the ritual itself. They led the chant and drums, keeping the rhythm without faltering, voices rising and lowering in strange, guttural harmonies to the steady beat of the drums. Three tall braziers, gave off a sharp-smelling smoke from the dried herbs and other things the Crows had placed there to help them induce the necessary trance-like state they would need for this to work.

Kylo sat straight, head high, his mind and heart clear and empty of distractions as he focused on the task at hand. These were his Crows now, his followers. He was the highest ranking Crow in the world, the greatest threat against Snoke's claims to power. The safety and well-being of every Crow in this tent was his responsibility. Any success would be thanks to all of them, but any failure was his burden to bear, and his alone. He must not hesitate or let himself be distracted, even for a moment. If he did not do everything at exactly the right point, he would risk them all. But he had done this several times before, and even though the stakes had never been this high, he did not allow himself to ponder it. Instead he focused on the ritual, on performing each part to perfection, knowing they all trusted him to lead them through it. Maul's presence was a soothing warmth to his left side, Aya's gentle Force presence a steady anchor to his right.

The Crow sitting by his new brother's head met his gaze, and gave the slightest nod. But they were ready, and they did not hesitate. As one, they plunged their minds into his, finding the open wound
still left by Snoke's repeated violation, and like hounds on a blood trail, they followed it into the web. The scream of pain their brother let out must have been heard for leagues, primal in its raw intensity – the pain howled out as if he would burst from it if it did not find a channel. But they could barely even hear it, only their bodies were present in the tent now; their minds travelling leagues with each breath, the pulse of life, all the tangled threads parting for the wave of them, until the inky black thread of Snoke's rotten mind was laid bare to them.

Worlds seemed to swirl by their minds' eyes as they shot towards it source with impossible speed, fragments of images, sounds, smells, barraged them. They pierced through the shield with unexpected force, Kylo only just managing to pull himself back into himself in time. They could not risk letting Snoke feel his presence, but they had needed his power to make it through. Instead Maul, Sílass, and Gaius' Force signatures came together as a shield and batteringram all at once – hiding all others behind them. Kylo was still connected to them, and could still see through their minds' eyes the images and impressions hitting them in the few moments they had before their breach was detected and retaliation came. The sheer force of it had the shielding Crows fall to their knees, blood running from their noses and ears from the strain, but the shield held. Once the Hux Crows and Knights had slammed back into themselves, they turned to aid their siblings, and the attack was over after a few more harrowing waves. Their strength near depleted, the Crows collapsed where they knelt, some of them losing consciousness, others unable to do anything but lie there, gulping for air or spitting blood.

Kylo held up a hand, and only then did the chanting and drumming stop. He managed to make his tired body kneel by his brother's head. The poor soul – Kylo did not know his name; Snoke had taken it, along with so much else during the time he had kept them enslaved by his will – lay deathly still, his eyes half-closed, blood trickling from his mouth. Only the faintest rise and fall of his chest indicated that there wa slife in his still. As gently as he could, Kylo gathered him in his arms, cradling him to his chest like a child and kissing his forehead in respect and reverence for his bravery and sacrifice. All eyes in the tent were on them.

"Did...it work...?" the voice was faint, even to his mind. He was dying, holding on with only the last inklings of his will.

Tears rose in Kylo's eyes, and he nodded.

“Yes,” he said aloud. “Thanks to you. We found him.”

"Thank... the Gods.”

“Thank you, my brother.” Kylo caressed his sunken face. “Without your sacrifice, we could never have done it.”

“I remember... I had a name...” A hand gripped weakly at Kylo's robes as he tried to use his last strength to sit up. Kylo carefully adjusted him, to ease his last breaths. “Ilean. I was Ilean. Of- of Avarié.”

His hand fell away from Kylo's robes, and he died.

Kylo looked at his followers, his family. They were all crying, huddling together, their pain tangible in the air around them. Placing a final kiss to Ilean's already cooling forehead, he whispered the sacred words, wishes of a swift journey and a better life in the other world, for the Goddess to hold him close. The tent was silent as he did so. The Crows bowed their heads, pulling their cowls up over their faces as they did so, hands clasped before them in respect.

“His name was Ilean,” Kylo said, once he trusted his voice to carry again. “He was lost to us, but
came home. He was our brother, and in his last moments, he was our saviour. We will honour his sacrifice. His death will not be in vain. Remember his name; from now on, you will dedicate first blood to him. To Ilean, the Crow from Avarie.”

“To Ilean!” the Crows replied. “May his memory live longer than us all!”

After that, they were silent.

~*~*~*~

It was early evening when Kylo staggered into the warcouncil’s tent, where Braith and his chieftains had just been debating whether or not they dared send anyone to check on the Crows. He was accompanied by Maul and Erris – the others were back in the tent, seeing to their siblings – and his face was as grim as it was ashen. Braith hurried over to help him sit down, while Phasma and Mitaka carefully did the same for his brothers; all three of them looked about ready to pass out.

“What happened?” Braith asked. “You were at it for hours! You've never been that long before. Did it work?”

“It worked,” Kylo confirmed, voice slurred from exhaustion. “We found him. But our brother, Ilean, died.”

“I'm so sorry, my love,” Braith said, sitting down next to him and pulling him close. “I'm so, so sorry.”

“He died a hero,” Erris said. “We will honour his sacrifice.”

“I'll prepare for his funeral immediately,” Mitaka promised. “We will show him the respect he's due, I promise.”

The Crows just nodded, obviously not ready to talk about it yet. Rurik scratched his chin as he looked them over.

“Where is he, then?” he asked.

“That's the problem,” Kylo sighed, running a hand across his face. “He's in the South.”

“Somewhere off the coast,” Maul elaborated, “either in the South of Akhar, or the north of Beryse. It was all very fragmented, I'm afraid. But we will be able to tell when we get there.”

“Well, then,” Rurik said, slapping Braith on the shoulder in triumph. “Good thing that's where we're headed! Plenty of time to make all sorts of plans for how to best kill the arsehole.”

The three Crows shared a look, and Braith instantly knew there would be bad news. “What is it you're not telling us?” he asked. “Are you not coming with us?”

They shook their heads. Kylo took his hand, held it tight as he rested their foreheads together.

“You knew this would probably happen at some point, love,” he reminded him. “We talked about it many times, even before we moved out.”

“Well, I had hoped you wouldn't have to,” Braith sighed.

“The army is simply moving too slow,” Erris said. “He knows we're onto him now, so we have to move as quickly as we can before he can find us and counter us. Right now, all he needs to do is
find your army and start killing people – he knows that'll keep us firmly in our place here. For everyone's safety – yours, most of all – we have to split up.”

“Gaius, Chava, Sílass, and Ávi will be staying here with you,” Kylo said. “As will all of the Hux Crows, and all our new siblings. That will keep you protected, and keep our enemies wary of attacking the army as you get closer to the borders. Chava and Gaius are the best healers you will ever meet, Ávi is – as you know – a skilled tactician, and Sílass is my second in command. She is more powerful than you've had a chance to see yet. We can't risk having her and me in the same place, and you need healers more than we do. Ávi requested to stay with you, as they have taken a vow never to return to the South. They have some very bad memories from there that would only be a distraction.”

“But that leaves only four of you!” Braith objected. “Four against how many?”

“I assure you, my friend,” Maul said, “that us four will be more than enough. Initially, we considered having only me and Kylo go, but we realized you would never allow it. Erris and Vilya have travelled more extensively in the Southern kingdoms than either me or Kylo, and unlike the two of us, they can blend in quite well in a crowd, even with their markings. They seemed the most logical choice.”

“When do you leave?” Braith's voice gave a clear hint that he would rather not have had to ask that question. “Please tell me you'll at least rest first?”

“We'll stay with you until we're clear of the mountain passes,” Erris confirmed. “So a few more days. Then we need to go. And for the safety of all of you, we won't be telling anyone which direction, or when we're leaving. In case one of Snoke's attack dogs get lucky and catch someone, we don't want them to have any information to give.”

“Eira will stay with you,” Kylo said to Braith. “She won't be happy about it, but she stands out too much – and I just can't risk her getting hurt. But she can help you, just keep talking to her. She can spot liars from a league off, and she's the one controlling the Flock in my absense. That's quite a formidable weapon to wield, if you ask me.”

“Very well,” Braith said, nodding to his chieftains. “Then we all know what needs to be done. We need to plan for any and every eventuality, and you all need to get better acquainted with the Crows. We need to make sure everyone knows that just because Kylo is leaving it doesn't mean for a moment that we're any weaker or less prepared for this. We're still going South to claim the head of that power-crazed cow they call a Queen, and we are not stopping until she's dead at my feet for her crimes against my Crow.”

“And the more land we steal in the process, the better, right?” Rurik grinned.

“Precisely.” He stood up, pulling Kylo with him. “What are you waiting for? Start planning. I will join you once I've ensured that my Crow doesn't fall asleep someplace inappropriate.”

Ignoring Kylo's half-hearted protests that he was perfectly capable of putting himself to bed, Braith made sure he was securely tucked in before returning to his council. They only had a few days left together, and the Gods only knew how long they would be apart this time. His army was marching to war, his Crow about to head deep into enemy territory to fight a battle for stakes their ordinary human minds could not even begin to fathom – he could not even count on them both to survive. He knew better. The memory of his second wife, the mother of his children, and her death in the blood and chaos of the battlefield was increasingly present in his thoughts. While he had not loved her like he loved Kylo, she had still been a close childhood friend – she had risked her life to bear his children – and despite her tremendous skill with the sword, she had died right in front of him.
There had been nothing he could do to prevent it, to save her. A hero's death, they called it, when someone died like that. Braith knew how little it mattered what words you put to it; the Goddess took who she wanted, when she wanted – and the pain was not less excruciating when someone died with a sword in their hand, in childbirth, or by illness. If he lost Kylo again, he would not survive it. If he died, what would it do to Kylo?

They had these last few days together, and he was going to savour them. He had to. The future came with many things, but none of them was hope.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that only took forever! It's been a few exhausting months since last update - involving, amongst other things, some serious tech issues that proved unexpectedly difficult to solve. But here it is, the penultimate chapter of aSoC. Only one more to go, and then there will be no more of this story coming to Ao3. If you like to keep yourself updated on the story and what happens after the end of next chapter - because, believe me, there is a whole lot of story left to tell! - you can come poke me on Twitter (MxCabal), or Instagram (artbyartofmischief), and I'll provide you with all links and info you need to stay updated with the story as it progresses :)

So, Phasma's having a little mini-me, huh? Her timing is shit, but if anyone can pull that one off, it's definitely her! Pretty sure Mitaka melted into a puddle of happy when she told him! He deserves all the good things, the sweet little man, and I think he's gonna be such a good dad to their little one, and an even better supportive partner to his Phas.

And the found Snoke! Finally! The fucker's slimier than a bunch of eels in a keg of lube, but they finally got him! That, I can tell you, was the easy part. They still need to, you know, get there. And kill him.

Also, no Han or Rey in this chapter because, well, there just wasn't space for that in my planning - but you'll get a peek at where they're at, and what they're doing before the end of next chapter, I promise :)

So, since you're here, please take a moment to let me know what you think. Every single comment you lovelies leave makes me so damn happy, and I love hearing all the things you notice, or think of, or just need to yell at me a bit for as you read. ^^

Until next time, lovelies!
...And the World Holds Her Breath.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings for this chapter are: descriptions of violence, descriptions of illness.

Please make sure to read the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“All I'm saying – with all due respect, of course – is that I think Her Majesty would have found a way to break the city free from these uncultured swine and their attempted siege by now,” Themos, the duke of Vivalles – and Luke's new-found personal object of disgust – drawled. The duke was leisurely reclining in his comfortable chair, goblet in hand, and had for the last quarter hour made it abundantly clear what he thought of Luke, the situation, the Royal Council, the siege, and – especially – Luke's ability to rule.

“Thank you for your insight,” Luke gritted out between clenched teeth. “I'm certain it was most enlightening to everyone here. My sister, as you might have noticed, is not here, and thus she is not able to help us handle this situation. So therefore, your Grace, you will simply have to make do with me.” He took a small sip of his tea, a small reprieve, but all he could allow himself at the moment. “So, perhaps, instead of wishing for my sister's miraculous rescue of this city, you could do your duty to her and her country by actually offering something useful to the table?”

A month ago, he would never have thought himself capable of being so brusque with the council members – but with every new dawn the situation worsened, and his grip on the throne became more slippery. You did not need to be strong in the Force to read the minds of the Royal Council; they were all picturing themselves with a crown on their head and the keys to the kingdom firmly in hand. Órban had made sure to rid Luke of any illusions that his usual gentle demeanour and fear of conflict would help him stay in power. The count of Avaríe had proven himself perhaps the best ally Luke could ever have, but the inner circle of the Royal Council had twenty five members – meaning that Luke and Órban still had to fight twenty-three egos, drunk on the thought of more power.

D'Qar had been cut off from the rest of the world for ten days and nights now. The citizens had been allowed back into their homes once it had become clear that the Northerners were in no hurry to break down the walls. The food and water was still under strict rationing – Luke believed it was better to take such measures early and have everyone used to it before it became critical – and he had forced the city's Doves out among the laypeople to keep watch on their health and well-being. The citizens had been grateful for the presence of the clergy, but Luke's intentions were not quite as religious as he made apparent. The fewer of them he had running loose in the palace, the lesser the influence on the councillors and other nobility who were stuck in there with him. The Doves, now also cut off from their Great Mother, who had gone to her winter retreat in the countryside a few weeks before the attack, were clearly no more resistant to the sweet lure of worldly power and luxury than anyone else, and it had become a serious problem. Out there in the city, they would have no time to plot some nefarious power-plays – they would be kept quite busy tending to the
many fears and tribulations of the people they had vowed to serve.

Luke hoped it would be a good reminder of what it actually meant to be a Dove.

In a moment of unusual spitefulness, he had made it clear to them all that if any epidemic – whether of physical illness or spiritual despair – were to strike the city, he would hold them personally responsible. The Doves kept records of the members serving in the city’s temple and chapels, and he would not hesitate to mark them all down for punishment if they strayed but a little from their path.

It had not made him any more popular with his supposed spiritual kin, but he had greater worries on his mind. As long as the people, the ordinary citizens of his home-town, were on his side, he could tolerate the sour faces of the clergy and nobility. Though, he knew how fickle the love of the people could be, and he could only pray that the situation was resolved – one way or another – before they too turned on him.

“You know, Themos,” Órban said, a grin that had Luke profoundly worried creeping up on his face. “You sure do have a lot to say about military strategy for a man whose father bribed the Grand Marshal to skip military duty. Your daughters haven’t done theirs either, have they?” Themos nearly choked on the wine he had been drinking, but his attempt at a retort was cut off. “No, the eldest suddenly had weak lungs, didn’t she? Might just be me, but she’s got one bloody powerful singing voice for someone whose lungs don’t function. And the little one... Oh, right. She joined the Doves, and then regretted it. Very conveniently timed to her being too old to go back in.” Órban’s smile turned downright devilish. “Funny, how that happens.”

“At least I didn’t cost Her Majesty, oh, how many sailors’ lives was it? Three hundred? Including your pregnant husband?” Themos looked almost triumphant at the way Órban’s jaw hardened. “If that doesn’t make you the living definition of incompetence, I don’t know what does. I wonder what he’d make of you now. How disgusted he would be by what you’ve become.”

“You know, Themos,” Órban said, “once I’ve gotten all of us through this stinking pile of pig-shite, I’m going to tear you limb from limb.”

“Threats now, count Órban? In front of a holy man?”

“The holy man can think what he wants,” Órban said. “But I took responsibility for my mistake, my rash decision, and I accepted the punishment I was due for it. I don’t care what stroppy, spoiled, useless bags of sewage like you think of me – but for the crime of daring to use my husband’s memory against me, I will kill you. That, your Grace, is not a threat. That is a fact.”

“Councillors, please,” Luke pleaded. “We have more pressing matters to attend to. Duke Vivalles, in this matter, count Avaríe is infinitely more knowledgeable than you – past matters will be left to the past. Órban, I will pretend I didn’t hear any of that, but please refrain from any more such... statements, yes?”

Órban nodded obediently, but did not take his eyes off Duke Vivalles. Luke sighed. This was going to be a long day.

~*~*~*~

“How is she?” Han asked the old Middle Lander woman, Óddna, as she came out of Rey’s room and closed the door gently behind her. “Can she travel?”

She gave him a steely look, and Han shrunk where he was anxiously perched on a large seat.
cushion, spinning a wooden tea mug around in his hands. Chewie, Finn, and Poe were resting in the quarters assigned to the husbands and non-child bearing sons of Óddna's house, but Han had been so worried for his daughter that the women had taken pity on him and allowed him to sit in the common area – a rare honour for a man visiting this part of the Middle Lands. A sudden snowstorm a few days earlier had seen them hopelessly lost and off course. It could have ended terribly if they had not been found by a group of hunters from Óddna's clan, who had been tracking deer to the South of their camp.

A staunchly matriarchal group of clans and tribes had ruled these parts for generations, and they had been informed that when not out hunting or tending to the livestock, men only moved about their own quarters and the common areas unless their wives and relatives allowed otherwise. But luckily for Han, Óddna – an elderly, but no less fearsome chieftain – had nothing good to say about Leia. At least not after finding out she had sent her daughter and heir home in the harsh winter despite how ill she was. A concerned father was infinitely better in her eyes than a cold-hearted mother. Still, Han was more terrified of her than he was willing to admit.

“Travel?” she scoffed. “She's coughing blood, you dumb oaf. What in the seven hells do you think?” Pouring herself some tea, she sat down on another seat cushion. Han was quiet. “You're lucky we found you, or you'd be without a child now.” She paused, then – seeming to take pity on him – she put a hand on his shoulder, giving it a little squeeze. “You men and your soft, dumb hearts. She needs rest and medicine for a while yet. But I will keep her here with me, and I will treat her like one of my own – seeing as she is herself the daughter of a ruler – and no harm will come to her while under our roof. But no, she will not be travelling for the foreseeable future. I will tell my husbands to keep you and your companions comfortable in their quarters. They are good men, good warriors – I'm sure they have plenty of stories to tell. I know they're looking forward to hear yours.”

“Thank you, lady Óddna,” Han said, sighing in relief. “I owe you more than I can ever repay. My daughter, she's... She's all I have.”

“I'm glad she has you.” Óddna sipped her tea. “A pity the Northerners are marching here – I know you must be on your way before they cross our borders – or I wouldn't have minded having you and that striking fellow you travel with to join my husbands. Let the young ones travel on and save the world or whatever they intend to do. But I guess that walking womb-rot that raised your girl would throw a fit if she came through here to find the two of you in my bed. If we weren't all so old, you'd give me beautiful children, I'm sure.”

“I- I'm honoured, lady Óddna. But, as you say, we must be on our way as soon as Rey is able to travel again. I fear for the future of her homeland if she isn't there to guide them.” Han could scarcely remember when last his cheeks had been this hot with embarrassment. Óddna was a beautiful woman, with lovely tan skin, and steely grey strands slowly taking over the compact blackness of her hair. Her eyes were dark, wise with age and experience, and she bore her years with more dignity than most could ever hope for. Had they both been younger, or his farewell to Leia further behind him, he would not have minded sharing her bed, but he was still far too raw and far too aching from both loss and the strain of the journey. It would give neither of them any pleasure. Still, it had been a strange, and strangely flattering, experience.

“She's a strong one, your girl. We will have her back on her feet, don't you doubt it. I've handled worse than this.” She stood up. “Now, you must go back to the men's quarters. I've got other matters to handle that are not for your eyes or ears. Don't worry, I will send for you if the girl's condition changes.”

Chewie was waiting for him when he arrived back at their assigned room. Óddna's younger sons had been more than happy to give up one of their rooms for the four strangers in exchange for the
promise of hearing stories from their travels. Finn and Poe were deeply asleep; they had been examined by one of the healers, and given potions to help their recovery – the side-effect of which had been an over-powering need for sleep. They had been lost in the land of dreams for almost a full day now.

“How’s she faring?” Chewie asked as Han sat down on his bed and began to remove his shoes. Sleep sounded like an excellent idea. “Will she recover?”

“Yeah,” Han nodded. “Lady Óddna seemed confident she’ll make a good recovery, but she needs rest.”

“So we're stuck here, then?”

“Yes. For a while, at least.”

“Oh well. Could have been worse, I suppose – but let's not get too comfortable. Things tend to go to pig-shit when we get comfortable.”

“I know.” Han gave a small smile. “She offered to let us stay here, become her husbands.”

“You told her no, I hope. I wouldn't mind the life here so much, but I'd be a bloody terrible husband. You know I hate not being able to move about. Be at sea.”

“I know. She understood why it wouldn't work for any of us. But by the gods, if I'd been a decade or so younger, I would probably have taken her up on it.”

“Would probably have been a better life for you if you had. But you're not a decade younger, and we've got half a continent to somehow cross. I can't believe we ended up going the wrong bloody way. Never in my life have I gotten lost in my own birth lands!”

“But good thing we did – it saved Rey's life.” Han reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. “I know you hate it, old friend, but this time it really was for the better. Now, how about we get some sleep. I dunno about you, but I'm exhausted.”

Chewie had never been one to pass up an opportunity to sleep, and now that he was satisfied that Rey was in safe hands, he did not need to be told twice. The beds were comfortable, the houses warm and homey, and the distant sounds of relaxed conversations and children playing in the snow outside created a safe, soothing atmosphere for their weary minds to find rest in. Before long, they were both lost to deep, blessedly dreamless sleep.

~*~*~*~

Lady Bríghid kicked the lifeless body of a Northern soldier off her blade, spinning around to parry another blow coming at her from the side – trying not to let herself stop and think too much about whether she could recognize any of their faces. When no response to her messages had come from clan Winter, or from their vassals, she had feared the worst. A fear that had shown itself as truth in the early morning hours the day before, when the alarms had sounded on the inland side of the city, signalling an on-coming attack. Her heart had sunk in her chest at the sight of the pale blue and white of clan Winter's snowflake crest, sloppily painted over with the black bird-on-crescent-moon of that old Raven bastard. Praying against hope that her brother had at least died with his honour intact, and not given in to fear or allowing himself to become a puppet to be used by the traitor Crow he had sworn his life to, Bríghid had rallied her troops and met her birth clan head on.

What remained of them, anyway.
They moved as though their minds were not their own, as if someone else was controlling the movement of their bodies. Every face she met expressed nothing but empty, maddened blood-lust – worlds apart from the proud, disciplined warriors she had grown up around. They seemed not to care about the injuries sustained to them; warriors pierced through by arrows kept on running as if they had not even felt the impact. Bríghid was no Crow, but even she could sense the wrongness in the air around them. Something foul clinging to them like a stench. She had yet to see even a glimpse of those who were undoubtedly behind this, but she knew her brother's Crow was wise enough to keep his ugly face hidden in the shadows for as long as he could. Bríghid had no intentions of letting him set one foot inside Whitehaven. All Crows were to be killed on sight, laws and traditions be damned. The warchief had given them the order, and she would not fail him – sooner would she burn Whitehaven along with its residents than allow Snoke and his vile henchfolk to use Braith's own people against him and his beloved Crow.

The battle was hard, and had gone on for far too many hours already. Clan Winter had always been sailors above all else, and this gave her warriors a much needed advantage. Had they been equals in skill, the added terror of the onslaught of what was more an army of berserks than trained warriors could very well have proven too much even for her followers – but now, every berserk falling to their swords kept them hoping for victory, kept them from giving into the fear she knew they felt. She felt it too, and wished she had Mai beside her, or Braith. But she was the chieftain here alone, and so she pressed on, hiding her terror behind a steely mask.

They would win. Any other outcome was out of the question. They would win. And then they would send the Southern ships to the bottom of the sea for the crime of daring to threaten her lands.

Whitehaven would not be defeated – not while she still drew breath.

~*~*~*~

Rey tossed in restless sleep, tangling herself in her soft sheets, sweating through both them and her clothes several times a day, despite the best efforts of her carers to keep her comfortable. She awoke only for short moments, just enough to be given water and medicine, but no more. Her greatest source of relief came in the shape of cool rags, and the soft hands of an old healer, whose touch sent the strangest tingling sensation through her ragged body but left her breathing deeper and freer, and took the pain in her muscles and joints away. Sometimes, in the distance, she thought she could hear her father's voice – loud and booming as ever, insistent and anxious – but it sounded strange, distorted, as if she was underwater. As if she was still there, under the waves that had nearly drowned her all those weeks before. She had the strangest dreams; voices, feelings, visions of places and faces – some familiar, but she had never known and could not place.

The regal figure of Lord Hux, in heavy armour, golden circlet round his fiery hair – more kingly than any man she had ever seen – face hard set and commanding, green eyes filled with steely resolve where he sat upon his Northern throne. Then his eyes caught fire and his mouth cracked open, revealing rows and rows of teeth in a bloody, saliva-drenched mouth that seemed to open forever. His shoulders twisting and contorting, until the body of something else, something so monstrous she had no words to describe it broke out of his skin to devour her whole.

The strange, white raven she had seen at Skye Castle, wings spread wide, a speck of pristine white in a writhing mass of black so deep it made tar resemble snow. Her red eyes wild and fierce, sharp talons extended as if ready to tear into something or someone. Ice and wind tore through the world with every beat of her wings, until everything was dead and frozen.

The faces of her birth family swam before her face, the healthy glow of them morphing into the sallow, gaunt masks of pain they had been as they died – her name falling from their rotting
mounds as some unholy chant, making her scream and cry in her sleep. Her birth-mother transformed into Leia, the sweet smile on her face and the welcoming arms she had loved so much became a dragon's razor-fanged mouth and scaly claws – crushing her to death under the weight of them.

Events from her past paraded through her mind, warping into the most bizarre scenes, often terrifying, always exhausting. Wild beasts, hellish fiends, the rotten corpses of those her mother had condemned chasing her through the never-ending corridors of the palace until she woke up screaming from the terror. There were so many things she did not know she even remembered now surfacing along with all her deepest buried fears and sorrows.

And then there was the face.

Older than her, but not old. Pale skin, a starry sky of freckles and moles – hints of strange tattoos showing under dark, luscious waves of hair – a gentle, sad smile pulling at a soft mouth. And the eyes... They were the strangest of all. Deep, rich golden green, like the eyes of a large cat, pupils narrow and elliptic, seeming to carry all the world's wisdom, all the world's secrets and pain in them. Those eyes seemed to see right through her, to burn away the dark visions from her soul and replace it with... Light.

Sunlight on white marble walls, the sound of sea birds soaring high in a summer sky, gentle spring winds and blossoming trees.

Such peace.

She had never known such peace, or such gentle, accepting love as she felt when this face appeared before her. It felt like being a little girl again, wrapped in her older brother's arms, being comforted after something had frightened her.

If only she knew who they were. This person felt so familiar, as if she had known them before. As if their face had been before her many times, as if their name should be at the tip of her tongue.

But her feverish mind and aching body left no room for any attempts to scour her memory for clues as to why they felt so close to her heart.

~*~*~*~

Queen Leia of House Organa paced irritatedly across the thick rugs on the floor of her private tent. All day, nothing but complaints from her subordinates. They whined about the cold, the food, the long march, the dark nights, the wild animals, the weather, and countless more petty and insignificant matters. Imbeciles, the lot of them! Had they no faith? Were their prayers nothing but lip service to the God who now led them toward greater glory than they had ever known? Glory far beyond what ignorant, lazy peasants like them deserved! How dare they doubt her! She was their queen – how many wars had she not won them? How many weak, foolish rulers had she not dethroned, how many servants to their God had she not converted and saved from their wretched mimicries of faith?

But now all they had for her were fears and complaints! The audacity!

For every mile she marched them, they felt to her less like her holy, shining army, and more like stupid, lazy children in dire need of a lesson in discipline and obedience. It was not their place to question her. They were not the ones chosen by the Ever Radiant God of Mornings; his most precious, beloved followers. She was! And she was going to show them. She was going to make sure that no one in history would ever forget her name or her deeds; Queen Leia, the Conqueror of
the North. The one to finally bring an end to the savagery of the Gods of the First Order, to bring the One True faith to their filthy, barbaric hearts. She would save them all, or they would die – her God had commanded it, and with him guiding her hand she would not fail.

He had told her as much. She had seen the future, the glory.

God would lead her to victory. He was all she needed. All she could ever need.

Sending her daughter and treacherous former lover South had been the right thing to do. Her mind was clearer now, she could hear Him so much better without them there to distract her. Rey would have to be dealt with upon her return, to make certain the girl understood her place, to put a swift end to any silly ideas about her future. Leia would find her a suitable spouse, make sure she got herself done with a bunch of children from which Leia could pick a new heir – one that would not betray her – and send her off somewhere where she would not be able to cause more problems. Han would know to stay away from D'Qar. He had always been smart enough to know when he was not welcome, which would save the trouble of having to put him on trial for treason and risk exposing the true blood of the boy she had sent to the scaffold all those years before. Han would keep her secret, or he would die – and he knew it. So many years together, sitting by her side during three days of her labour to birth his son – nearly losing her life in the process – and he threw it all away. For what? The memory of that useless brat? Friendship with that Northern demon who did God knows what in bed with a traitor and child murderer? She could hardly believe it, but then again, he had always been weak. Always a coward.

She did not need them.

The North would fall, and they would see what they had thrown away. They would all see.

She would make sure of it.

~*~*~*~

They had cleared the mountain passes the day before, and were now preparing for the difficult march through the Middle Lands. Braith had watched with growing sadness as Kylo and his siblings packed their few belongings together, having their weapons and armour tended to, and instructing their siblings on their responsibilities during their absence. Though they had deliberately kept the tone light and joking while around the war council, Braith knew that their mood was anything but that. There was a grim determination to the way the Crows carried themselves now, evident even in the faces of the young hatchlings. Where they usually did their chores accompanied by the cheerful banter and bouts of giggling that seemed universal among children of all social standings, they were now quiet, subdued, working as hard as their small bodies would let them – accepting the praise of their quartermasters and older siblings only with small nods and mumbled thanks. The older Crows had portioned themselves out among the troops, working on making themselves better acquainted with the soldiers and their officers, and in the evenings the war council's tent was more crowded than ever as they all packed in there to have their meals together. Only a year before, there would not have been a chieftain among them who would have dreamt of being in this close proximity to so many of the holy ones – much less conversing with them as if they were somehow all equally human, as if the Crows were not the Gods' own chosen children and thus far above such mundane things as filling up soup bowls for the chieftains and officers sitting by their table. It had never been done. Even with their own, bonded Crow most chieftains would never dream of asking such a thing.

But the world was no longer what it had been, and it was in these moments it became abundantly clear. The world was changing fast, the old ways that had always seemed set in stone were now crumbling as children's sand castles under the incoming tides.
They may not acknowledge it, but they all felt it.

Every night in bed, Braith had held Kylo as close as he could, making love to him with a trembling, desperate need to commit every last freckle and scar on his body to memory. Their kisses were salty with tears, but neither of them paid it any mind – they both needed these tears spilled, to empty their hearts and souls to each other so that they could put on a face of bravery and hope before the world. Whatever fears they carried, and they were many, would stay between them, in the warm dark – whispered in between declarations of love and faithfulness to each other, between trembling sighs and desperate kisses. They were both haunted still, by the memory of the last time they had been forced to separate – how fear and desperation had driven the consummation of their love that last night, and how right they had been to be afraid. Now, Kylo was headed across the continent, right through lands where people would not hesitate to bring harm to him, to face the creature who had already cost them both everything. Braith was so terrified he had to stop himself from throwing up when thinking too much about it, and with the way Kylo clung to him when they were alone, wrapping himself in Braith's embrace, breathing him in as if his very sanity depended on it, Braith knew Kylo's fear was even greater. After all, he knew Snoke better than Braith ever could. And it was more than just Snoke – the act of killing him, destroying him, was also the act of destroying the entire world the Crows knew. No mortal being, no matter how powerful, should ever have to bear that weight – it would crush even the strongest of minds, and it killed him to see how Kylo and master Maul pretended not to buckle under it.

He thanked the Gods for Maul. The old Crow's infinite wisdom and gentle nature was a blessing and a balm to them all in these fraught times, and the knowledge that he would be there with Kylo to the end was, at times, all that stood between Braith and a complete breakdown. There was so much at stake now. Whitehaven was under attack – his mother and children threatened – clan Winter was gone, and the Southern ships were already close enough to the coast to send landing crews any moment. Half the North was burning, thanks to Snoke's henchfolks; so many old friends and allies had been slain or simply joined forces with that vile creature. And the South was marching their way – intent on slaughtering them all, like so many times before. Braith Hux had the eyes of all the North on him, and he knew it. His reputation, and the reputation of his entire clan – for generations to come – depended on how he carried himself and his kinsfolk through this ordeal. Knowing that Kylo would at least have Maul with him on this journey – as well as Errís and Vilya, whom Braith had become fond of almost right from the start – helped him keep his focus and not give in to fear.

He was the son of Bríghid Winter, grandson of Sígr Hux, descendant of some of the greatest warchiefs the North had ever known. He would not fail them. He would not allow himself to be seen as weak or afraid. Before his days were counted, he would see to it that all the honour lost by his father's greed and arrogance was not only restored, but tenfolded. He would be the first King of the North, the one who united the clans and brought peace and prosperity, or he would die trying.

But first, he must survive being parted from his Kylo for a second time. They would leave tonight, and Braith watched the journey of the pale winter sun across the sky with increasing dread.

In the Crow tent, the last of the chanting faded out, and the drums stopped. In the middle of the tent, dressed only in their loincloths, Kylo, Maul, Errís and Vilya opened their eyes, and accepted a bundle of clothes each – moving carefully so as to not smudge the protective sigils and runes drawn upon their bodies to keep them safe and allow them to escape detection by hostile forces. To lay aside their midnight robes and cowls, which they had once sworn a sacred oath to die before
ever taking off, was a serious matter and the mood in the tent was solemn – sad, even. The midnight was so much more than simply garments; they were what set the Crows apart from the world. It was their armour, their robe of office, the mark of their chosen status in the eyes of the Gods. For Kylo Ren, Child of Death, and the highest ranking Crow remaining in the world, to remove his robes and replace them with the worn and ill-fitting clothes of a common mercenary was – no matter how temporary – to formally leave the remaining order without a leader. It was a loss that had always been treated the same as if the person had died – the ritual for disrobing was the same as the one for preparing a Crow for burial. They had been at it since early morning, and there had been many tears, words of goodbye, thanks given and love spoken.

Here they stood now, about to don the clothes of ordinary humans, and thus no longer counting among the Crows. The Crows pulled their cowls up, covering their faces with their hands as the four got dressed. They were of the world now, and once they had finished dressing, they would have to leave this tent and its inhabitants; it was no longer their space to occupy, and would not be until they had been formally re-initiated. How easy it had been, in the end, to become ordinary once more. And how soul-wrenching.

“May the Gods protect you, and may the roads aid your steps and ease your journey,” Sílass said, once they were finished. “And may your feet lead you safely home to happiness and belonging once your deed is done. You must now leave this tent, and not return until midnight sits around your shoulders and the Gods' blessings on your heart once more. Go, and may the God of journeys steer you gently through the coming days.”

Forcing himself to take the first steps towards the tent opening was one of the most difficult things Kylo could remember doing. His siblings' pain and grief was sharp in the air around them, and to turn his back on them, walk away instead of comforting them went against the very core of his being. Maul's hand landed on his shoulder, squeezing it gently in understanding, and then they were out – the tent flaps falling closed behind them with a finality that stung their hearts. They would not see their siblings again until they returned. The Crows had important work to do, raising wards and shields, muddling up the traces of Kylo, Maul, and the twins so that they would be protected for at least the first few leagues.

“I hadn't realized how uncomfortable regular armour is,” Vilya grumbled as she pulled on her chain-mail and the tunic underneath. “How is it that I'm wearing three layers underneath this, and still the rings pinch me in the tits?” Her complaint broke through the heavy feeling, release coming as they laughed despite themselves.

“If it's any comfort,” Errís offered, “it's doing the same to me, and I don't even have tits.” He grimaced. “Something is pulling on a hair, too. Good thing we have some time to adjust these before we head out, because this is ridiculous.”

“We'll see if Phasma can help you,” Kylo said, not looking too comfortable himself. “And first chance we get when we go south, we'll get these outfits traded for something less-ow. Less pinchy. How do Braith wear these things day in and day out?”

“Maybe that's why he's always so grouchy?” Errís offered. “I know I'd be. How're you faring, Maul?”

“I'm starting to suspect that one of you were given my chain-mail,” Maul said. “I feel like I'm wearing an especially heavy potato sack, and I know enough about armour to know that is not how it's supposed to be. Who was responsible for the outfits?”

“Aví.”
“Oh. That might explain it, then.”

“We’ve tried to teach them,” Kylo said as they entered the war council’s tent, “but you know how they are with things they find boring. It just won’t stick.”

“What won’t sti-whoa!” Rurik exclaimed, eyes wide and mouth agape as he too in the sight of the four travellers. “By the hells! Good thing I recognize yer voice, master Kylo, because I was just about to draw on you lot.”

“What’s going on he-!”

Braith entered the main area from his private quarters where he had been attempting to distract himself with paperwork. He stopped dead in his tracks and stared. Kylo may have been dressed for winter, and thus still mostly covered by thick clothes, but since he was wearing a regular knee-length jacket – like all adult Northern men and warriors – under heavy chain-mail, with his sleeves and trousers legs tightly wrapped, there was still a lot more of him visible than Braith was used to. Without the bulky robes, and the soft folds and wraps of the cowl, Kylo’s slender, well-muscled figure was now fully visible, and the warchief was altogether not entirely prepared for the effect. The worn clothing and much-repaired pieces of armour had been selected to make them appear to be a group of down-on-their-luck mercenaries – of which the continent was packed rather full, at least until someone’s army had lost enough soldiers for the rulers go in search of more battle-fodder – and Kylo’s long hair had now also been gathered into intricate plaits and braids, decorated here and there with beads from bone or wood. Together with his tattoos and the sword at his side, it gave him an untamed, brutish look that Braith already knew would haunt him every lonely night for the rest of the war. He looked every inch a warchief himself, ragged as he was styled; as if one of the ancient warchiefs from the songs had come back into flesh right there, in front of them. If there had been time, Braith would have taken great pleasure in peeling him out of just enough clothes to be able to have him on the nearest table – but time was the one thing they did not have. He would make it a point to fulfil that fantasy before Kylo was re-initiated, this he vowed to himself with fervour.

“Blasted hells!” he swore once he trusted his voice to speak again. “Warn a man, would you? By the Gods, you look-.... You look more chieftain than some of my chieftains!”

Maul, Errís and Vilya laughed, and Kylo blushed. He could feel exactly what Braith thought of his looks, and he found himself liking it.

“We will make time when I return,” he promised Braith through their bond

“Good.”

It was almost a growl, and it made Kylo’s knees feel weak. Aloud, he said “We will need some assistance with our armour. I’m afraid there has been a mix-up with the chain-mail. The rest is fine, but this mail does not fit us correctly, and we don’t know enough about it to sort it out on our own. Crows don’t wear chain-mail, as you know, so our knowledge is purely theoretical.”

"Of course,” Braith nodded. “What seems to be the problem?”

A brief explanation later, the four disrobed Crows found themselves expertly helped by half a dozen chieftains, Phasma, and two of the blacksmiths, while being educated on the practical aspects of armour-wearing during winter. Once they had been sorted out, and informed that the occasional pinching was simply something they had to get used to, they sat down to have their final
meal with the chieftains. It was, however, only Braith and the four who were aware of this, and the tone was kept light and warm. Errís especially, appreciated how much more room there was for food in his belly now that he did not have the broad leather belt like a vice around his midsection. Vilya was not as impressed; the leather belt had helped her back remain stable despite the weight of her chest, which was now held tightly in place by two layers of undergarments Phasma had shown her how to wear. While it certainly supported her breasts, it was still a new feeling, and not entirely comfortable for one who had never worn anything of the sort before in her life. She most definitely missed her belt. After dinner, Braith informed them he would like a word in private with the four, and they excused themselves to join him in his and Kylo's private quarters. He poured them some ale, waiting for them to take a sip before he spoke.

“I know you're about to leave,” he said. “You have that restless look on your faces, and there's nothing else keeping you, is there? No? You're all packed, the horses are ready, night has fallen. If it was me, I'd be itching to go, too.” He looked sternly at Maul and Kylo. “I'm guessing there's going to be another one of those strange sleeping spells – or whatever you call it – happening here at any moment. Am I right?”

“Yes,” Maul said. “I will put everyone to sleep, but only for as long as we need to get out of sight from the camp.”

“You will not put me to sleep. I forbid it.”

“Braith-”

“No, you listen to me, Kylo. Last time you had to leave like this, you made me sleep through it, and I would rather walk stark naked through the seven hells, than go through that again. This time, I will be awake to see you off, to say goodbye. I need it, love. For the sake of my sanity and my heart, I need to know we said goodbye, that I saw you off safely.”

Maul and Kylo exchanged a look, then Maul nodded.

“You will remain awake to see us off.” He looked at the twins. “Go fetch the horses. It's time.”

“You're doing it now?”

“Yes, Lord Hux. Everyone are distracted by other things – it's the ideal time. May I borrow your chair? I always found sitting down to be easier for doing this.”

“Of course!” Braith hurried to pull it out for him, and Maul sat down, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. Kylo came to stand next to them, taking Braith's hand. Braith pulled him close, kissing his forehead, caressing his cheek. In the chair, Maul began to sing softly. There was something strange about the song, something soothing, repetitive about the rise and falls of the melody. It was soon followed by a strange sensation in the air, reminiscent of the waves of hot air off of burning coal. Around them all the sounds of a busy army encampment went quiet, until only the sounds of the winter night, and of Errís and Vilya bringing the horses around remained. Maul stopped singing, and got to his feet.

“They will wake up very soon,” he said. “Come, we need to go now.”

“Take care of Eira,” Kylo said to Braith once they had secured their bags to the horses. The others had mounted up, and now waited a few steps away, to give Kylo and Braith some privacy for their farewell. “She's going to be very upset to find me gone. Not like last time, but still upset. She might be angry, so please talk to her as much as you can.”
“I know, love,” Braith assured him as he pulled him close. “I'll protect and care for her like I would for you. She's all of our little mother, and we're gonna make sure she won't get lonely.”

“Thank you.” Kylo cupped his face, bringing him in for a slow, deep kiss that left them both breathless as they parted. “You promise me not to do anything foolish now, do you hear me?” He fixed Braith's gaze with his own. “You promise me that you will keep yourself alive and in one piece until I come back. Don't you dare die. Don't you dare leave me alone.”

Braith gave a small smile, placing a chaste kiss on his lips.

“I promise. I'm going to bring you the head of that murderous cunt, and then – whether the gods approve or not – I'm going to bring you a crown, like you deserve. Like you have always deserved. And we're going to go back home, and grow old and wrinkly together.” He sighed. “Just- just promise me you'll come back to me, Kylo. Promise me I'll see you again – alive and safe. I-... That's all I will ask of you. Just come back to me.”

“I promise.” Kylo caressed his face one last time, gaze following the movements of his hands as if to commit it all to memory. “I'm going to kill him, and then I'm going to come home to you – and Crow or not, I am going to marry you. I don't care what I have to do to make it so, but I will have you for my husband, Braith Hux of the North.”

“A summer wedding,” Braith smiled, kissing him deeply as if to bind them both to the promise – an oath sealed by powers beyond gods or mortals. “And a crown of flowers for the son of Death. I will hold you to this, Kylo Ren of the Crows. You are mine and I am yours.”

“I love you.”

“And I love you.”

“Kill her slowly,” Kylo said as he moved to sit up in the saddle. Askr danced impatiently under him as he adjusted himself. “Make sure she suffers.”

“Until her last breath. I promise.”

Kylo nodded, and that was that. The moment had come, so clear it was almost tangible, they could both feel it. What needed to be said had been said, promises that had been a long time coming had finally been given, all oaths sworn. To everything there was a time, and the time for goodbye was now before them – a veil of distance between them, invisible, but profoundly present.

Braith watched as the man he loved more than anything in the world, the absolute centre of his world, bowed his head in silent farewell before urging his monster of a horse into motion. The four riders turned a corner around the cooking tent, and then they were gone. The sound of hooves against the padded snow died away as fast as the lingering warmth from Kylo's body next to him, and soon there was only silence, and the biting cold of the winter night. Braith remained where he stood until the cold became too much for him to bear. Around him, the encampment began to wake up from their induced sleep, the noise shattering the peaceful quiet, forcing him back to himself. He returned to his quarters to collect his maps of the Middle Lands.

From here-on out, things would become much harder. The Middle Landers were not friends of the North, nor of the South, and they were terrifying warriors in their own right. No invader had ever successfully held a conquered territory for longer than a few years. Without a doubt they knew he was coming, and he had to make certain that as much of his army as possible made it safely through the lands.
The time for grief and tears had come and gone. Now was the time for cunning. Now was the time for battle. Now was the time for death and glory.

For the Gods, for the North, for the future – and for his Kylo.

~*~*~*~

The End.

Chapter End Notes

...And here we are. The last installment of aSoC to ever come to Ao3. It's been a ride, hasn't it?
To everyone who has read and followed this story since its first stumbling, awkward steps back in 2016, thank you from the bottom of my heart. To those who made fanart, I've saved every piece I received in a special folder, and I look at them often. That someone would want to make fanart for my story boggles my mind, but I'm so, so grateful. Thank you.
Every comment, every kudos, every new hit on this fic has meant more to me than you'll ever know. Thank you all for coming on this adventure with me, and for staying with me through Life Happenings and writers blocks, and platform changes and whatnot. You're amazing, all of you.

But this, my dears, is not the end. Oh no. This is only the beginning - this story has so many more places to go and things to see yet. For those of you who would like to tag along when we continue this on other platforms and in other formats, I have made a Facebook group: "A Song of Crows Hangout", where you will find news and updates, and all the info you could possibly need about this story and its future. So please come and join me there!
For those of you who don't have Facebook, you can still find me on Twitter (@MxCabal), or Instagram (@artbyartofmischief). I post a lot about my writing process in both places, but especially Twitter. So come say hello if you're on there, and you'll make my whole day.

Have a great day, and thank you for reading.
Love,
Loke

End Notes

Braith means 'speckled/spotted' - his parents named him after his freckles. Hux is the name of the clan.

The birds are inspired by Norse mythology, specifically Hugin and Munin - Odin's two ravens who flew out into the world to observe and report back to him. The Crows use their birds in much the same way.
If you have any questions or thoughts about the fic, the AU, my headcanons, do feel free to poke me. I promise that I will try to answer them to the best of my ability. :) 

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!