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| Additional Tags: | Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Alternate Universe - Monster Hunters, Alternate Universe - Ghost Hunters, Paranormal Investigators, Road Trips, Tree Climbing, Physical Disability, Serious Injuries, Flashbacks, War, Hospitals, Hospital Sex, Oral Sex, Rough Oral Sex, Biting, Deepthraoting, Asphyxiation, only a little bit, Injury Recovery, Wheelchairs, Werewolves, Familiars, Bickering, Shapeshifting, Smoking, Swordfighting, Kylo is an idiot sandwich, Don't Try This At Home, Fauns & Satyrs, Public Nudity, Inappropriate Use of the Force, Modern AU but Kylo still has the force, Cryptozoology, Loch Ness Monster, Public Masturbation, Non-Linear Narrative, Past Rape/Non-con, Cadejo, muc-sheiliche, giant eel, Ghosts, Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism, Magical Tattoos, this story is exactly as weird as the tags make it sound, Comedy, Anal Sex, Anal Fingering, Condoms, Semi-Public Sex, Outdoor Sex, Accidental Voyeurism, briefly, 69 (Sex Position), implied only - Freeform, force lube grab, Misuse of the Force, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Dreams vs. Reality, Hallucinations, Burns, Haunting, Demonic Possession, Choking, Attempted Murder, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Violence, Magic, Witchcraft, Demons, Bakery, Explosions, Drama, POV Minor Character, Awkward Flirting, Minor Phasma/Rey, That's Not How The Force Works, Jedi Rey, Kylo Is A Bad Teacher, Caleb Temple/Boone McKenzie, Gail Emory/Lucas Buck |
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The Eldritch Effect

by GenerallyHuxurious (GallifreyanOmnishambles)

Summary
For the last three years Major Donal A. Hux, formerly of the British Army's Parachute Regiment, and Kylo Ren, estranged son of US Defence Secretary Leia Organa, have been tooing around North America investigating "weirdness"—and they're plenty weird themselves. Their latest tip off is leading them towards a haunting in rural Alabama. But first they need to make a stop in Trinity, South Carolina...

[NO PRIOR KNOWLEDGE OF AMERICAN GOTHIC IS NEEDED TO READ THIS FIC!]

Notes

[This was published before but due to a logic error in the main storyline it had to be retooled. Hopefully it's going to make sense now.]
Chapter 1

"It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no millionaire's son, no, no  
It ain't me, it ain't me, I ain't no fortunate one, no..."

Hux woke slowly to the sound of the radio and his companions enthusiastic singing. His neck ached,  
his aviator shades had dug a groove into his scalp, his mouth felt like a carpet, and the sun was  
streaming through the trees at a steep angle. Clearly this wasn't midday, the time he'd specifically  
asked Kylo to wake him and pull over for food. His stomach growled. Yes, he's definitely missed  
lunch. Once again Kylo bloody Ren had gotten distracted by the radio and kept right on driving  
whilst Hux slept with the air con pointing directly at his face. No wonder he felt like shit.

"Learn to fucking drive!!" Kylo was in form as always, leaning on the horn and waving a fist as he  
swerved. "It ain't me, it ain't..."

Grabbing the now flat and disgusting diet coke from his cupholder Hux did his best to pour it straight  
down his throat. He wanted the benefit of the hydration without having to suffer the taste.

Kylo glanced across at him and snorted, hands tapping out the beat on the steering wheel. The  
younger man's voice echoed slightly as he spoke directly into his mind.

*General Deepthroat demonstrates his skills once more.* Without pausing in his task Hux gave him the middle finger.

"Some folks inherit star spangled eyes  
Ooh, they send you down to war, Lord  
And when you ask 'em, "How much should we give?"  
Ooh, they only answer "More! More! More!"  
It ain't me..."

"Do you even hear yourself?" Hux asked, running the back of his wrist over his mouth. "You *are* a  
senator's son and you *are* a millionaire's son. Hell, you're even a military son."

"Yeah but I'm not like them, Hux," Kylo retorted, his expression sour. "I didn't give in to their  
parental expectations."

"Fuck you." Hux said in a singsong voice. It was an old, well worn, and utterly pointless argument  
that they'd repeated at least once a week for the last three years. He fished in the back seat for his  
huge leather satchel as the sat nav directed them to leave the interstate.

"You can do that later, General." Kylo said. "Unless you want to further demonstrate the skills you  
just used on that bottle?"

"Oh yes, that'd look lovely on my death certificate. Major Donal Hux, 34, casualty of an automotive  
collision. Cause of death- blunt force trauma from steering wheel exacerbated by choking on the  
penis of similarly deceased companion Ben 'Kylo Ren' Solo." Hux grumbled, turning fully in his seat  
as he struggled to catch hold of the bag's strap. "Yes I'm sure my stepmother would appreciate that.  
She still hasn't forgiven me for failing to end my military career on the high note of an heroic death,  
I'm sure dying with an eccentric ghost hunters cock in my mouth would finally give her the heart  
attack she so richly deserves."

"It's more likely that you think." Kylo said in a dramatic tone as the radio rambled through the local  
weather report.
"Ha!" Hux crowed, the bag finally captured and pulled onto his lap. Dragging his largest moleskine notebook from the bag he began flipping through it for his notes on the current area. "Pffft. As if. You're not that well endowed."

They'd only just left the interstate and already the road had become little more than two deserted lanes of winding woodland highway. Hux squinted at the approaching sign, sighed and dragged off his shades. It was far too dark under the trees to be wearing them now.

"Fulton County?!" He read, perplexed, "where the fuck is Fulton County? It's not on the map. Ren where the fuck are we?"

"I heard back from a friend of mine," Kylo said. "When you were asleep. She... Ah shit." He spat at the rear tires suddenly lost traction, spinning them across the thankfully empty highway and into a start of a gravel drive.

"What the fuck was that?" Hux peered out of the windows. "Did you hit something?"

"I dunno," Kylo moaned, pressing the heels of his hands against his eye sockets. "We passed the sign and... Fuck, I don't feel right. Dude, somethings not right."

This wasn't entirely unusual. Generally it happened on roads much more remote than these when the engine would fail and the car's internal clock would lose time. In those cases they usually drifted gently to a stop rather than slewing across both lanes. Just as Hux unfastened his seatbelt to lean towards his companion he heard the sound of another engine, two in fact, though one was more distant. On a hunch he refastened his belt, a decision he was glad of when the Crown Victoria with Sheriff decals slowed to a halt beside them.

"You boys ok?"

The man inside the car was older, probably the same age as Donal's father, but he'd aged in that way that turned some men into steel and teak, grey hair perfectly coiffed over ears a little too large for him. Idly a part of Hux' mind wondered if Ren would be that kind of silver fox, assuming they lived that long. However, it was mostly drowned out by the rest of his mind which was shrieking 'wrong' at the man's presence. He exuded power in much the same way as Kylo did, but with far less balance. There was rage and spite in that face, mixed with the kind of care an Emperor might have for beloved yet expendable citizens. Hux found that he liked him, though he'd certainly never be foolish enough to trust him.

"We're fine thank you... Officer..." He paused, unable to see any badge or insignia on the man's trench coat and button down shirt. The other engine sound was getting closer.

"Sheriff." He said with a half smile. "Sheriff Lucas Buck. With a B. That's quite an accent you got there, you boys from New Zealand?"

"No, Sir," Hux said, laying on the military precision, "I'm English. Major Donal Hux, with an H, formerly of the British Army, Paratrooper Regiment. My companion is Benjamin Organa Solo, from D.C."

The Sheriff eyed the scarred and tattooed form of Kylo Ren suspiciously, clearly unconvinced that the long haired youth could be related to Defence Secretary Organa and her notorious playboy husband. It didn't help that Kylo was still rubbing at his eyes in a slightly suspicious manner. Hux was preparing to talk his way out of whatever trouble the lawman intended to invent for them, when the approaching engine noise resolved itself into a Harley Davidson ridden by possibly the tallest woman Hux had ever seen.
Throwing up gravel against the black paintwork of Kylo's Plymouth Fury she swung to a halt between the two vehicles. The Sheriff looked displeased, like a schoolyard bully who'd just been spotted by the teacher.

"Evening Ms Emory."

"Good evening Lucas," the voice behind the helmet was much more refined than Hux had been expecting given her leather attire. "Are my friends causing you problems?"

"I just thought I'd offer them a helping hand," Buck said, gesturing toward the fresh skid marks on the asphalt. Hux knew instantly that the man meant he's caused the situation, rather than having any intention to remedy it. No wonder Kylo felt unwell. He would dearly like to cross reference his notes right about now, but that was never a good idea in front of a subject.

"They look fine to me, they didn't hit anything." The woman said, never actually turning her helmet away from the Sheriff.

"They staying long?" He asked with a raised eyebrow, clearly losing interest fast now there was a witness.

"We'll be in Alabama by Monday."

Kylo nodded vigorously at this whilst Hux tipped his head once in agreement.

"Good. See you around Ms Emory." He said. The car was peeling away into the gathering dusk before the sentence ended.

"What a prick." The woman muttered as she pulled off her helmet to reveal a pleasant face with ivory eyelashes and full lips, all framed by the loose strands of a blond mohawk. "Hello Kylo, gonna introduce me to your friend?"

"Hux, this is Captain Phasma, she served in... I dunno Iran or Afghanistan, wherever you were." Kylo waved a hand vaguely, the other still covering his eyes. "Phasma, this is General Deepthroat, he's the one with all the book learning."

"Iraq."


The laugh Phasma let out at the blank, seething look that settled on Hux' face was surprisingly lyrical and would have been pleasant if it hadn't been directed at him. "It's Major Donal Hux actually, not General. I'm not going to comment on the rest of it."

"I think you should take over driving until we come back over the county line, Major," Phasma said, looking in the direction the Crown Victoria had taken. "I should have warned Kylo, but it didn't occur to me that this place would affect him. Sorry. You can turn the sat nav off, it won't help you here anyway. Just follow me, ok?"

"Thank you, Captain," Hux nodded as he climbed out of the car and walked around to the drivers side, leaning heavily on the hood as his knees objected to the sudden movement after so long. It was always odd to him how easily he slipped back into the formality of military address, even after three years.

Kylo shifted over the passenger seat, shoving Hux' satchel and books out of the way of his excessively long legs, then leant his head against the door pillar. Hux watched him with concern for
a moment as the younger man closed his eyes tight. There was a tap at the window. Nodding to Phasma he started the engine.

"Carry on my wayward son!!"

"I swear to god Kylo, I'm gonna smash this fucking radio."

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The house was older than Hux had expected- some ostentatious wooden affair with a wrap around porch and a genuine swing. Kylo had claimed that, sprawled across it, all long limbs and arrogance, whilst Hux tried the relax in a wicker monstrosity that probably housed a million spiders. Phasma's brandy helped. Hux could never say no to free booze. It would be a problem if he ever took the time to acknowledge it. But he didn't, so it was added to the apparently endless list of things Kylo worried about but never addressed.

"So, what's in Alabama?" Phasma asked, throwing a stack of pizza boxes onto the table between them and hopping up onto the railing to eat her own slice.

"Some tiny nowhere town with a haunted cowshed." Kylo rumbled, taking a swig from his beer before rolling up two pizza slices and cramming them both into his mouth.

"How delightful, Ren. Lovely." Hux sneered. "And it's not just a 'haunted cowshed'. It's an 'animals turning up dead and mutilated' problem with maybe a side of 'strangers going missing' thrown in. It's all just a jumble of internet rumours. Could be a few things."

"This sounds more like a 'holy shit, leave it to the professionals' kinda problem." Phasma said with concern. "You know you're not actually FBI right? If people are going missing..."

"I don't know that anyone is. It's mostly just reddit chatter about abandoned cars, no signs of violence." Hux shrugged, fastidiously peeling the pepperoni from his slice. "Silverhill is a really small town, if there was a genuine issue then it would have been noticed by now. I don't think we'll be in any danger."

"... But just in case we thought we'd ask you to come with us since you're from that part of Alabama. A third set of eyes, some able-bodied muscle. We don't know anyone in the area so we figured a support crew might be a good idea." Kylo cut in. The break gave Hux the opportunity to eat his stack of pepperoni discs, ignoring Ren's exasperated eyeroll over his habits.

Phasma agreed to this line of reasoning with a shrug. She'd be getting paid, there didn't seem to be any real danger, and it would be an excuse to get out of Trinity for a while. What more could she ask for?

That settled the conversation turned to the reasons they'd each left their respective childhood homes, which for Donal and Phasma soon lead to them swapping literal war stories. It was an hour before they realised Kylo was asleep in the swing.

They managed to rouse him enough to stagger up to the room Phasma had set up for them. It was nice, if a little old fashioned, except for one feature.

"That's not a bed." Hux observed dryly. "That's a mattress on the floor."

"Kylo broke the bed frame last time he visited, so I took the liberty of removing it in advance this time."
"Whilst I see your reasoning," he replied, eying the impossibly massive torso of Kylo Ren as he shambled around the space, allegedly organising their bags but actually making a terrible mess. "These aren't my original knees. I can't sleep like that Phasma, I'm sorry."

Phasma looked stricken for a moment. "No, you shouldn't be the sorry one. I assumed, I apologise. You guys take my room tonight and I'll get Ren to help me move the bed frame back in the morning when he's more human."

"That might take a while."

"Fuck you, Hux."

"Please don't, not in my bed!"
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There was a crow on the window ledge, staring at him with its creepy little eyes. Hux had never liked Corvids- he knew far too much to trust something that smart and inhuman. He made a sign in the air with his right hand. Nothing happened. Beside him Kylo rolled onto his back and began to snore. It was a noise that, given the man's generous nasal attributes, could easily wake the dead and yet the bird didn't move. It just kept right on staring.

With a sigh Donal hauled himself out of Phasma's borrowed bed and crossed the room to slam the window shut. The crow blinked. Hux gave it the finger. The crow tipped its head.

Standing on the sidewalk below, Lucas Buck leaned back against the pole of the street lamp and closed his eyes as the crow's vision was obscured by angrily drawn floral curtains. There were other ways to find out about these outsiders. The Hot Topic reject was unreadable, barely even registering as a mind in Buck's mental landscape, but the redhead was an open book. Even if that book was written in fancier words than the Sheriff usually had to deal with since Matt Crower's suicide.

"Roll over you noisy bastard," Hux hissed as he settled back into the bed, shoving at Kylo's shoulder until he finally turned, snorting and grumbling. One massive hand caught Donal's own, pulling the smaller man firmly around his back like a blanket as he went. In the three years they'd been together Hux had never once admitted to preferring to be the big spoon. It was just a coincidence that he always fell asleep within a few breaths of settling into that position.

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This was what he lived for, what he'd dreamed about every night since he was five years old and Grandpa Sheev had let him watch A Bridge Too Far one rainy Bank Holiday weekend. Cold desert wind whistling past his ears, the dark blanket of the countryside rising up towards his feet, the distant lights of towns and villages... The flash of a SAM being launched from a hamlet that intelligence had sworn was unoccupied.

Time slowed. The roar of the rocket as it passed- far too close- rattled the Major's teeth in his skull. Above and behind him something detonated, raining burning shrapnel on the men it silhouetted, ruining the cover they'd hoped to gain with a nighttime drop.

More lights, smaller this time, appeared around the roof of one building, the zip of bullets cutting the air a moment later. Concerned for his men, Hux twisted in his harness, trying to see if any had been injured by the weapons fire. He didn't notice the first bullet tearing through his 'shute. Or the second. The third he only noticed when it compromised the structure enough for it to fail and begin to collapse.

Just as he reached for the cord to his reserve parachute, a second large light blossomed below. There was nothing he could do but instinctively turn his back when, seconds later, the SAM detonated far too close to him.

His legs were an indistinct white hot mass of pain.

The reserve wouldn't open.

His primary parachute would not detach, the lines tangled, the crumpled mass of fabric spinning him
dizzingly through the air.

The ground was approaching far too fast.

He wouldn't have enough stability to roll into the landing.

His legs took the majority of the impact and the pain took his consciousness.

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It was still dark. How long had he been laying there? There were distant sounds of gun fire, somewhere away to the East. Indistinct shouts in Arabic and English. A man was watching him, perched on a rock. The man was naked. And made of fire. Hux could hear helicopters to the South. He tried to sit up but agony crackled up his sides as he struggled to move his legs. He was glad it was dark enough not to be able to see what kind of mess he was in, though of course the burning man added a wavering glow to the desert around him. Hux stared at the stars for a long moment.

Wait.

What?

He turned his head to the side. Yep. That was a man. Made entirely of fire. Or maybe a fire in the shape of the man. With wings. He glanced down. Whoa. Definitely a man who should put some trousers on. Don't be ridiculous, his brain supplied in a faraway tone, they'd just catch light. Letting his eyes drift shut, Hux wondered if asbestos trousers would help.

_Back in the waking world_ Lucas frowned. _He was looking for memories, not bizarre homosexual fantasies about well endowed human torches. Angrily he shoved at the dream, trying to nudge it towards Truth. Nothing changed._

The man was speaking. It sounded like a wet log crackling and spitting on a bonfire but somehow Donal knew it was speech, even with his eyes closed.

Mussily he tried to recite the stock phrases he'd learned in case he met any friendly locals. There was no point offending the man by assuming he was a hostile, Hux was incapacitated, if this being meant him ill surely he would have already acted.

The creature just looked confused. Hux continued for a moment before he realised he was actually speaking Welsh. Head injury as well? He went back to staring at the stars.

A hand waved in front of his face, trailing sparks. What did it want, seeing that they couldn't communicate? Why didn't it just leave him there? The hand returned again, this time holding up three fingers. Donal raised an eyebrow.

"Ifrit don't grant wishes." He muttered, remembering an angry lecture he'd received in Afghanistan from a translator.

More gestures he couldn't follow, a frantic flapping of fiery wings, and another crackling monologue. There was a lot of pointing, mostly at the ground just to the other side of the Major's head, where the remains of his parachute lay crumpled and useless. Gritting his teeth against the movement Hux reached and swept it aside. There was a broken vase with a bloody boot imprint across a line of text he couldn't read. Ah. Shit. Had he freed the being from some kind of bondage, or had he inadvertently made a blood oath? Again.

He was too lightheaded to care very much. The pain in his legs was almost gone now, replaced by a
bone deep coldness. He should sleep. If he was asleep he wouldn't notice the cold or the way the stars whirled above him. Sleep sounded like a good idea.

The fingers were back, inches from his nose, demanding attention by searing his face through their sheer proximity.

"I don't want to die here," Hux slurred, eyes still fighting to close. One finger folded against the burning palm. "I don't want anyone else to get injured or die retrieving me." Another digit bent, one finger remained.

Hux thought for a moment, vision fading in waves. "Are any of my troops wounded?"

A shake of the head, a cloud of sparks.

"I... You keep it. Use it for yourself. What's the line from that Disney movie? 'Genie, I wish for your freedom!' Something like that."

A rock caught him the side of head, forcing him to look at the shattered vase. Oh yeah. Already free. Also, not a djinn. Hux was far too tired to navigate the waters of the supernatural right now, he just wanted to sleep forever.

Somehow the broken pieces of crockery spoke to him, though he didn't understand.

"I don't want to be broken any more," he whispered, knowing full well that he didn't just mean his injuries, but not able to articulate what he actually meant.

The sound of helicopters where growing closer. He let his eyes drift closed, giving into the pull of his exhaustion.

There were only snatches of memory after that- a tattered, jarring patchwork of sounds and pain. Running boots. The sway of a stretcher. Voices muttering prays and curses. Another explosion, cheers of relief when the vehicle somehow remained unscathed. A long gap, then his father's voice, his commanding officer's voice, the engines of a plane, the pinch of needles, nothing.

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Curling his lip, Lucas shoved again the redheads mind again, seeking to break the slow drift into REM sleep and maintain the dream. Hux rolled on to his back. Kylo followed, draping long limbs across the smaller man like some kind of codependent octopus. The dream continued. In the next room Phasma stirred, her own sleep disturbed.

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"The amount of pills I'm taking, counteracts the booze I'm drinking and this vanity I'm breaking, lets me live my life like this and well I find it hard to stay..."

Ah. So the ifrit had been a dream then, there had been no rescue, Hux had died in the desert, now he was in hell, and he had always suspected the choirs of the damned would sound exactly like Panic At The Chemical Fallout Boy...

He opened his eyes. Not hell. A hospital. A close second then. Not a military hospital though, or even an NHS one, judging by the expensive furnishings and excellent upkeep of the two person
He glanced down at himself, taking in the IV and the monitors, cables snaking everywhere. The sheets were held up off his legs by some kind of frame, he couldn't see the shape of them. His head swam with the familiar sick feeling of general anaesthetic. He couldn't really feel anything much right now, of any part of his body.

Sadly his ears still worked and the music had not stopped.

The other bed was occupied by... well... The least military man Hux had ever seen. He was huge, broad chested with unnecessary thick arms and a tapered waist. All of which was visible thanks to the man being shirtless, his hospital gown pooling at his waist. He was covered in tattoos, though Donal's eyes were still too tired to distinguish the designs. So far, not so different from the men Hux had shared barracks with for the last decade. But then there was the hair. They were in a hospital and yet the guy had still styled his hair into some ridiculous emo rats nest. With a side shave. He had stretches earlobes. And an eyebrow ring.

There was a pair of $300 headphones around his neck and yet he was still listening to his godawful music through the tinny speakers of his iPhone.

Sensing eyes on him the man turned to look at Hux. He was ethereal, bold features somehow balanced against a plush expressive mouth and shining eyes. There was a livid wound running from just above his left eyebrow all the way down to his right shoulder, bisecting a tattoo and coming close to one of the hazel eyes. The injury looked a few days old, beginning to heal around the stitches. Towards the shoulder there seemed to have been a more complex repair and some kind of drain poked out from under the layers of dressings.

"You're awake." The voice was surprisingly deep. Somehow despite the man's size Hux had expected something softer.

"Yes, well, I could hardly hope to be otherwise with that racket going on!" Hux tried to snap and failed, his words slurring together.

Abruptly the man laughed, wincing slightly at the pull of healing flesh. Despite the momentary flash of pain his face almost glowed with his amusement. The volume increased. Groaning Donal gave him the finger, dragging one of his pillows across his face to block the noise.

Christ what a prick, he thought, why did he have to be so bloody beautiful.

"Aww you think I'm a beautiful prick? Wait til you see my cock!" The man crowed, laughing again in a way that made Hux wonder how many painmeds he was taking.

Abruptly he slapped a hand over his mouth. He'd been thinking aloud. He'd actually, genuinely called the man a beautiful prick out loud. Quietly he prayed to God, Yog-Sothoth and the Goblin King to get him out of the situation.

The door opened and a nurse bustled in to administer another sedative dose. Under its influence Hux, eternally thankful to whichever power had helped him, drifted off.

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This time Lucas couldn't fight the pull of REM sleep and he'd learned next to nothing. He left the redhead's mind and turned towards his car. A window snapped open behind him. Glancing up he caught sight of Phasma's ghostly face watching him closely. There was rifle held casually in her hands.
He gave her a sarcastic wave and climbed in the Crown Victoria. A glance at the dashboard told him it was 2am. Idly he wondered if Selena would still be awake. Well she should would be. He drove away.

The crow launched itself at Phasma's open window. It took a well worn copy of Tipping The Velvet to the beak and dropped like a stone. A hardback edition of Sun Tzu followed soon after, landing amongst the well tended flowerbed with a wet crunch. Of course, when she retrieved the books a few minutes later there would be nothing there. Lucas was long gone into the night and his familiars would always follow after him.

Chapter End Notes

Please forgive Hux for his opinions of Kylo's musical tastes, the grumpy git has only just woken up and we all know he’s not right without a coffee or four.
"There's no kettle... Kylo, there's no sodding kettle!"

"So? Use the microwave!"

Voices echoed up from the kitchen in the antisocial tones of men who's sleep cycles had come unmoored from the standards of decent human beings. Phasma pulled a pillow over her head.

"The MICROWAVE? You disgusting pervert!"

It didn't help muffle the noise in the slightest. She added a second.

"I'll show you are a disgusting pervert..."

"What does that even mean... mmfphh!"

Nope. Not having Kylo Ren fucking someone in the kitchen again. It's nine in the morning. It's unsanitary. This was precisely why she hadn't invited him back in the last five years.

With an exaggerated groan of exertion Phasma rolled off the mattress. Unfortunately she'd forgotten it wasn't on the nice high bedframe and landed in an undignified heap, her nose pressed to floorboards. She lay there a moment, eyes screwed shut, regretting her life choices. From the kitchen the sound of tinkling piano music began to play.

"I love this song! Breakfast montage! Dance with me Hux!"

Well, that was probably better than finding them semi-naked on a counter top... Unless it was a euphemism. Her eyes snapped open. Nope. Not going to risk it. She scrabbled herself upright and trotted towards the stairs, adjusting her Hufflepuff Quidditch Team tank top as she went.

Ready 1-2-3

"You know I can't dance!"

"I know you CAN, you're just too scared... I'll do all the heavy lifting, it'll be fine!"

"What? No! Put me down!"

Phasma moved a little faster at that, just in case. The smell of cooking bacon and hash browns was slowly drifting through the house, that had to be a good sign.

Through the open double doors to the kitchen Phasma was relieved to see the two men actually dancing. Laughing quietly under his breath Ren span around the room, one hand pressed tight against Donal's back, the other caught in the redhead's white-knuckled grip. They were still in their sleepwear, Ren in nothing but Thai fisherman's trousers, Hux in tiny shorts and an ancient stretched out X-Files tee that must have once belonged to Ren, the neckline slipping to reveal one narrow, too thin shoulder. With a side step and a flourish Kylo dipped them low, pausing to press a kiss to the bridge of that freckled and imperious nose, before spinning them off again.
I'm a bad boy – I need to dance,
if you don't dance no romance
feel like dancing dance with me
first dance is always free.

Hux' face seemed to be at war with itself- fear, irritation, and fond amusement chased one another across his surprisingly mobile features. Although he'd seemed reasonably relaxed during the previous evening there had been a tension to his expression-lips and eyebrows rigidly controlled as if he feared giving too much away. Now, especially when Kylo dragged him closer to press kisses along his throat, all that evaporated, leaving him a very different looking man- joyful almost. The effect was only enhanced by the ginger scruff along his jawline.

The pair rounded the central island of the kitchen. They still hadn't noticed Phasma watching, her head tipped in confusion now that she could see their feet. Kylo span Hux out and away from him, causing the slim man to shriek slightly, not expecting the sudden loss of support. As he pulled him back Ren's elbow caught the stack of pizza boxes from the night before, scattering them towards the floor. The boxes stopped. So did the dancing.

"What the actual fuck?" Phasma breathed, too surprised to shout. She knew Kylo did wierd things, he was an exceedingly strange guy, but this, this was impossible.

Turning towards her with an embarrassed blush that somehow spread from his face all the way down to his scared knees, Hux bit his lip and stepped away from his partner to tend to the food. However, he didn't just step away. He also stepped down, a gesture that would have been missed by anyone not watching closely, or that hadn't already noticed the half inch gap between the soles of his feet and the floor. Staring at the hovering pizza boxes Phasma might have missed it herself if she weren't suddenly on high alert, slightly terrified by the odd goings on in her own home.

Crouching slightly Kylo slid a hand under the bottom most box, plucking the whole stack out of the air and walking quickly out onto the porch, towards the trash and away from any inconvenient questions.

The entire sequence couldn't have taken more than a second. A short enough span for the pair to plausibly deny everything Phasma had just seen as sleep-addled misperceptions. Well she wasn't going to stand for that, not in her own home. She stalked towards Hux, trying to ignore the food smell that was somehow so much more appetising that her own cooking, and opened her mouth to confront him.

One thin hand held up the spatula in a silencing gesture, whilst the other shook the pan, rearranging the sizzling contents.

"Yes, you saw what you saw. No, it's not normal. Yes, he can control it. Yes, it's instinctive too. No, I don't know what it is. No, he's never been tested. Why? Because the X Men aren't real and he doesn't want to spend the rest of his life in a shady testing facility somewhere in the Nevada desert. No, it doesn't hurt. Yes, it's kind of cute. No, it doesn't worry me. Did I miss anything?"

Phasma blinked. Clearly this was a sore point. She considered her own life since she moved to Trinity. With a shrug she turned away, opening a high cupboard and fishing out a brushed metal kettle, the fancy kind with the multiple temperature settings.

"Yeah you missed something." She said, stifling a contrived yawn. Why make someone more uncomfortable than they already were? "When's breakfast going to be done? I'm starving! Also, what kind of tea do you want?"
Hux grinned at her gratefully. She didn't bother to look around as Kylo slunk quietly back into the kitchen, climbing graceless onto one of the bar stools to poke at the controls for the coffee machine.

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Commissioned illustration by Sakurita94 on Tumblr

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[Three years previously, First Order Hospital for Specialist Surgery]

His legs were made entirely of fire. He could feel to the flames licking around the shattered bones and the pulp that had once been his muscles. It crackled and hissed and spat as it consumed the ruined mess the missile had left behind. He could smell his boots burning, his uniform burning, his
skin, his tendons, his bone marrow, charring and twisting under the onslaught of this otherworldly conflagration.

A handsome man leaned close, whispering words in his ear that he could not hope to understand. The language was the voice of the fire, all consuming. Everything it touched would be changed beyond recognition, stripped down to its innermost structure, then warped to his will. The man was naked, he wore a long leather coat, he was made of fire from his hovering feet to the tips of his wings, he was icy cold, his hands shone like the sun, his hands absorbed every photon of light, everywhere that he touched Donal burned and burned and burned.

There were claws around his throat.

There was a hand on his shoulder, shaking him awake.

"Dude! Hey, Mister! Come on, man, wake up!" The voice sounded familiar, deep, sleep-addled, and slow. "You're projecting, man, I've got enough of my own pain to deal with! Come on, dude, get it together!"

"It's Major, thankyouverymuch," Donal murmured between sleep and anaesthetic gummed lips.

"I don't care, just keep the noise down," the voice huffed in a teasing tone. The hand patted awkwardly at his shoulder, the released him. "Do you hear that?"

Opening his eyes Hux found himself staring at straggly black hair and the edge of a striking profile. His roommate was leaning over him but staring towards the door. Based on the low light levels in the room it must have been night still, or possibly early morning. A thin shaft of light came from the partially open door, cutting across the floor to highlight the man's eyes and the edge of his prominent nose. As Donal watched, the nervous tip of a pink tongue dragged across full lips. It was a very nice view. And temptingly close.

The light vanished for a moment, interrupted by something passing the door. There was a snuffling noise.

"Do you believe in werewolves?" The man asked quietly, slowly edging towards the door.

Ah. So this was one of those wake-up-from-a-dream-but-you're-still-dreaming dreams then? Fine.

"Yeah, of course."

"What? Really?" That made the figure pause at the end of the bed. "This is usually the point when people call me mad or try to leave."

Hux shrugged. "I met a woman once who'd lived as a pub cat for close to a decade. I don't believe in the lunar influence aspect, but I can't see any reason NOT to believe in lycanthropy."

"I like you." In the dim light teeth sparkled in a wide grin. "You're different. I'm Kylo by the way."

"Hux."

"Major Sux? Wow, shit name. I'm so sorry."

"You know what? I don't have to take this kind of abuse from my own subconscious, I don't care if it's wearing a gorgeous face, it isn't real. I'm going back to sleep, or rather, I'm going back to the previous layer of this dream. Sort out your own damn werewolf."
"Wait, what?"

Screwing his eyes shut Hux forced himself back towards sleep. He roused twice at the sound of scuffling and the heavy drag of furniture across floor tiles, but his brain was still full of opiates and he soon drifted off into unconsciousness.

He woke to brilliant sunshine, shouting, and the sight of the TV cabinet blocking the only door. So they'd put him in room with a crazy person. He glanced at the other side of the room. The huge man was asleep across the end of bed, long limbs trailing in every direction, blood seeping from under the bandages around his shoulder.

Yeah. Hux had no wish to wake him without an escape route. He'd have to sort out this mess himself. Sitting up he swung his legs out of bed and, resting against the mattress, he tottered three steps towards the door before he realised what he was doing.

He looked down at his legs. The legs he knew he'd lost somewhere over Iraq. They were whole, and definitely his- he recognised the pattern of freckles and the selkie bite scar on his foot from that seaside accident when he was seven. Two long livid lines ran down his lower thighs, over his knees and down towards his shins, staples holding the skin together. Finally the pain hit him and he folded up. Hux did his best to fall sideways to avoid further damage to his mysterious legs, crashing into the sleeping form of the man who called himself Kylo.

Kylo sat up with a snort. "... Dah fu...

From his awkward position on the floor Hux got a fine view of a leggings-wrapped arse and the chart hanging at the bottom of the bed. "Benjamin Organa-Solo". So not Kylo then. Had that been a dream? He shifted his head to stare at the TV cabinet. Probably not.

A shaggy head peered down at him from the end of the bed. The idiot had reopened his face as well as his shoulder, dried trails of blood showing how his head had been angled during the night.

"What are you doing on the floor?"

In the corridor the shouting had grown louder. Someone was banging on the door.

"Oh you know, I just fancied a change of scenery, it has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that you barricaded us in here like a lunatic from the the ABC Cafe!"

A pair of slightly sculpted eyebrows shot up. Blood started to seep from one of them. "You know Les Mis?"

"THAT WASN'T THE RELEVANT POINT IN THAT STATEMENT! MOVE THE BLOODY CABINET BEFORE SECURITY BREAKS DOWN THE DOOR!!"

"Wow, no need to get pissy!" The strange man said, clambering down from the bed, watching his step as he made his way over Hux. When his eyes passed over the other man's legs he turned pale. "Oh shit, dude, your knees! Oh fuck! I'm so, so sorry!!"

"Yes, fine, you're sorry. Just move that thing, and then help me up." Hux snapped as kylo shambled to the door, still trailing apologies. After a moment Donal remembered his manners. "Please."

"Yeah, yeah, sure of course."

The door opened and worried medical staff flooded the room. Two orderlies move Hux back to his bed in the end, Kylo too busy explaining about a man coming into their room the previous night to
help. Despite his height, and his massive shoulders, he somehow contrived to look small as he spoke, sheepishly running the fingers of his left hand through his hair. The right hung limp at his side. The doctor appeared unswayed and seemed to be checking the young man's medical chart.

In an uncharacteristic act of charity Hux sat up against the restraining hands of the orderlies and, in the voice he usually reserved for the parade ground, said, "he's telling the truth, someone did try to get in here. Several times. Not medical staff either."

"Major Hux, you should be resting!" The doctor admonished, dismissing his actual words with a wave of his hand.

"I have been given no information as to my current whereabouts. Or my medical status. The last thing I remember clearly is being shot at in an active war zone, and you think my response to your lax security should be to 'rest'?!" Hux threw all his father's authoritarian attitude into the speech, mimicking the Commandant's most disappointed tones. Beside the doctor Kylo shot him a relieved smile.

"But Major..."

"No. Don't you 'But Major' me!" Hux spat, exhausted and fighting down the pain in his legs. "Go and speak with your security team. And get someone in here to check that man's arm, before he loses the use of it!"

The next few hours were spent dealing with their own maladies. Whilst Kylo- as he repeatedly insisted on being called- received the attentions of an angry surgeon and two physiotherapists, Hux finally got the chance to speak to an MoD rep who explained exactly how he'd come to be in a private hospital on the wrong continent. Very little of the explanation made sense. They spoke about the mysterious local who'd sent up the distress flare at precisely the right moment; the injuries that had looked far worse on the ground than they did once he was evacuated; the chance escape of his troops from the trap that should have slaughtered them all; the unnamed friend of Donal's father who'd offered to cover the transfer to the First Order Hospital. Hux was never entirely clear on why he was chosen to receive the advanced implants, but he was grateful to the ifrit that he had legs at all. It had to have been that creature who had put him back together, however that might have worked. Again he hoped that the terms of their inadvertent deal were now satisfied. He really didn't need another blood oath.

Finally alone in his curtained off portion of the room Hux sighed and stared at the ceiling, idly flicking his fingertips along the edges of the physiotherapy guides he'd been given. The road to recovery would be a long one, but he wouldn't start walking down it until tomorrow. The other half of the room had been quiet for a while. He wondered if his roommate was even there.

"Hux?" A voice whispered as if Kylo had read his mind. "Are you there?"

"Yeah." The curtain separating their portions of the room pulls back. It was too far from the beds for either of them to reach, but it was a fancy private hospital, Hux reasoned, perhaps the mechanism was automatic.

"Thanks, for earlier," Kylo mumbled, "I've... umm... Had some mental health issues in the past. Even if I hadn't said what it was in the corridor, they still wouldn't have believed me if you hadn't spoken up."

Hux shrugged. Poor security was a genuine cause for concern. It would have needed addressing, though he really would have preferred a little less drama in the process.
"How are your legs?"

"Killing me." Hux finally turned his head to look at the occupant of the other bed. "And you? How's the arm?"

"They don't know if I'll get the full use back." He said in a small voice, left hand tracing over the fingers of right. "I start physiotherapy tomorrow. It's gonna hurt."

"Me too. We should be workout buddies." Hux suggested. The larger man snorted. "What?"

"Have you ever been in a gym in your life?"

"I'll have you know I've passed every physical test the Army has ever set for me," he said haughtily, "I just happen to be built for speed, not strength." He glanced down at his legs. "Well I was."

"You look like you could get blown away by a strong wind!"

"You're exceptionally rude, you know that right?"

Kylo shrugged his uninjured shoulder. "Though I guess with a name like Major Sux you're the one doing the blowing." He cackled at his own joke.

"Oh my sweet summer child you have no idea." Hux said with a smirk.

Kylo nearly gave himself whiplash as he turned with a mildly astonished look. "Wait, what?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all." Donal batted his innocent golden eyelashes. "Why don't you tell me all about your werewolf theory? Take my mind of my legs, hmm?"

Hux might have thought twice before making that request if he'd had any idea of Kylo's unparalleled skill for talking endlessly about his interests. But his deep, earnest voice had charmed him, and it gave him an excuse to stare at the still shirtless young man. He fell asleep around the fourth hour, somewhere in the middle of a monologue on secret government research trains.

That night he dreamt about nuzzling his face against warm, solid abdominal muscles whilst his hands massaged firm powerful thighs. He should have felt guilty for fantasising about a man he'd just met, but after the previous night he was just glad to be dreaming about a normal human being.

In the next bed Kylo Ren lay awake for hours, blushing furiously and trying to ignore his body's response to his roommate's unnecessarily loud mind. At least neither of them was worrying about their injuries any more.

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"But why can't we go to Alabama today?!" Kylo whined, kicking at the edge of the curb as he trailed Phasma and Hux through Trinity's old fashioned shopping district. People were staring at him with that particular brand of mistrust that Kylo's size, attitude, scars, and fashion sense always seemed to generate. A fearful, mocking condescension, as if they assumed that such a childish man wouldn't know how to use his overgrown muscles but they couldn't be absolutely sure.

The town felt old and slightly unreal- the sort of white picket fence fantasy that had never really existed outside of classic fiction. Hux did his best to keep pace with Phasma, feeling alien enough here that he was reassured by the sense of belonging she broadcast as she nodded to shopkeepers and pedestrians alike.
"I told you- my truck is in the shop."

"You can ride with us in the Fury!"

"Kylo, I'm taller than you and your car is filled with crap, I won't fit," Phasma said, waving to a dour middle aged woman outside a vintage newspaper office. "And even if I could, I've seen your driving. Not happening. Besides, Silverhill is tiny, we might need to sleep in the truck bed."

Behind her Kylo grumbled under his breath but didn't argue.

"You said you had some advanced photographic equipment we could use?" Hux said loudly, trying to defuse the tension and cover some of the rude words his partner was mumbling towards the pavement.

"Yeah, I lent the rig to Caleb, my... well it's complicated what we are... Anyway he's going meet us in that diner in an hour," she gestured towards a building that might have coming right out of Twin Peaks. "Meanwhile I'm going to get some things for my great-grandmother, she's from that area of Alabama and always happy to talk about the old days if you bribe her enough."

"Urgh, you brought us all the way into town for old lady shopping?!" Kylo groaned, sounding more like a melodramatic fifteen year old than a grown man nearly twice that age.

"There's a record store over there," Hux pointed out, "it looks like no ones touched it since the 1960s too."

Kylo was almost hit by a car as he practically ran across the street to investigate.

"Meet you at the diner in an hour then," Donal sighed to Phasma, trailing after his giant idiot.

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The diner didn't sell cherry pie. But the coffee was good and the waitress was polite, for all that she couldn't understand a word Hux said. Kylo ended up ordering for him, laughing the entire time and messing up his requests just to watch his face settle into that twisting sneering scowl he did so well. He did stop before Donal's eyes turned icy blue though. Some limits should not be pushed.

The headache from the day before was creeping back in at the edge of his senses. Orders placed and coffee in hand, Kylo turned towards the window, rubbing absently at his face.

The Sheriff's Crown Victoria was parked across the road, a boy of less than ten years eating a popsicle in the front passenger seat. He glared at Kylo, the family resemblance immediately clear.

Glancing around Ren spotted the Sheriff in a nearby store, chatting to the proprietor. He wondered if it was 'take your son to work' day or if the man had a habit of pulling his children out of school.

"Hello, Ms Emory."

If Kylo hadn't been looking at the Sheriff in that moment he'd have assumed he was standing by the table from the identical tone of voice. Turning his head he found a muscular young man of about Donal's age, wearing an ill fitting suit and a nervous expression.

"Hello, Caleb, would you care to join us?" Phasma said in even but uninviting tones.

"Oh no, thank you! Not... Not today, though I'd really appreciate if your accompany me to the office party next week." He stumbled over his words in his eagerness to get them out as quickly as possible.
"Caleb, we've been over this..."

"Please, Phasma, he's..." The man's mouth abruptly snapped shut and he held out the hessian shopping bag in his hands whilst suddenly staring at the floor. The three friends glanced towards the window. Sheriff Buck was leaning on the car roof, watching them. The boy was doing the same.

For a moment Kylo felt himself dragged twenty years into the past by the dead eyed stare of the child in the car. He'd seen that look in the mirror at much the same age, when his parents had bought their new mansion with the ancient summer house.

They'd insisted that Kylo host a slumber party in there while they hosted their own housewarming for all their political and business friends. Poe was the only one of the boys that attended that party who could still bear to speak to Kylo after what had happened there. He and Rey were the only ones who knew his family who ever spoke to him at all. Of course Rey had been nothing more than a hardly understood lump at the front of his aunt's dress when the incident happened. When he'd been handed his new cousin six months later Kylo had felt the connection between them and burned down the summer house the same night. That was the first time he got sent to anger management camp. It didn't work of course, he wasn't sorry, he was just protecting Rey from the horror he'd endured. The events that his parents had dismissed as childish imaginations. He'd never be free from the thing that had lurked in that building, but at least it would never touch her.

He wondered what the boy in the car had seen.

Beside him in the present Phasma agreed to go on a date with the loitering man. Surprised at the out of character behaviour of his lesbian friend Kylo looked up, accidentally looking Caleb in the eye.

His headache returned a thousand fold, driving through the centre of his skull like a hail of bullets. With a groan he slapped his hands over his face, bending double over the table. He could hear Hux speaking but couldn't understand. He had to get away.

With a slurred 'sorry', he turned and clambered over the back of the booth, practically running towards the restrooms.

"Look Caleb, I'll be out of town for a while but we can talk about this more when we get back, ok?" Phasma said carefully, watching the fleeing man's back with concern. Dejectedly her suitor wandered out the diner without another word.

Hux raised an eyebrow.

"You don't want to know." She sighed.

"Oh I think I do. That's not normal."

"Which part?"

"Oh Kylo's never normal," Hux said with a shrug, "I'm used to that. I mean the three generations of Creepy As Fuck out there."

"Two, the little kid is Caleb's brother."

"My point still stands Phasma, what the shit was that?"

Glancing around the diner she shook her head, fluffing her short blonde hair. "Not here. I'll explain later. Let's just eat and get home yeah?"
Hux nodded. "I'll retrieve our resident drama queen."

The restrooms were blessedly deserted, with just Kylo's scuffed and chain bedecked boots visible under the end stall door.

"You ok?" Donal asked, leaning back against the main door to maintain their privacy.

"The normal number of souls in a human body is one... Plus the occasional infant..."

"So?" He rolled his eyes. Kylo always had to be dramatic about this stuff, he could never said what he meant right away.

"That guy had two and two... two bits!" Kylo wailed, his voice half muffled as if he had his head in his hands. "And I don't think the partial souls were human and they certainly shouldn't be in the same vessel, but one of them tallied up with something in Phasma and it was like spiritual feedback; like the worst noise you can possibly imagine but reverberating through your very being."

"Kylo, calm down."

"No. Sharn't."

"Kylo, he's gone now."

"He's still out there somewhere."

"A lot of things are out there somewhere," Hux said, lightly banging his head back again the door in frustration. "You can't dwell on it, you'll go mad. I mean, every so often I remember that Bono exists but you just have to..."

Kylo snorted, "fuck you, Hux." He sounded calmer at least.

"We'll be gone in a day or two. And the sooner we eat, the sooner we can get back to the house. You were ok there, weren't you?"

"Yeah." Nothing happened. Hux ran his hands through his hair with an exaggerated sigh.

"Are you going to come out then?"

"... Can I have waffles?"

"I hate you so much, Kylo Ren."
Chapter 4

[June 26th 2013, First Order Hospital for Specialist Surgery]

Urgh. Scruff. The disapproving voices of a hundred superior officers echoed in Donal's ears as he scrubbed at his face. How long since the incident? Five days? And already well on his way to a full beard. He stared at his reflection with a critical eye. Despite the bruises and general tiredness it wasn't actually that bad. He looked older, and yet some how friendlier, the harsh lines of his habitually sour expression hidden behind warm red fuzz. That was a surprise. He hadn't tried to grow a beard since his university days, and that had been more hungover neglect rather than actual effort. Then he'd just looked foolish. Now. Well. It wasn't as if he even needed to shave. Regulations didn't apply to him anymore.

That was a depressing thought. His routine had always been important to him, would it help him feel grounded if he shaved anyway?

Hux leant heavily against the sink, trying to keep the weight off his knees, and glanced at his right hand. His fingers shook. Whether it was exhaustion, pain or emotion he didn't know. Better not to risk it. Let it grow.

A knock at the door made him jump, air hissing between his teeth as pain blossomed up his legs.

"You ok in there Major?" Kylo's deep voice rang out, worry creeping in at the edges.

The turn took infinite care, shifting his feet inch by inch, one hand gripping the sink until his knuckles paled whilst the other threw open the lock. Kylo was leaning against the door frame, the fingers of his left hand gently flexing the ones on the right, compulsively testing the nerve responses. At the sight of Hux trembling with effort to stay standing he tried to raise an eyebrow and failed, teeth bared briefly in pain.

"Dude," he drawled, eyes judgementally flickering over the shorts clad figure as Hux stumbled to the waiting wheelchair, "I know they said you should get back on your feet as soon as possible, but I think they meant for you to do that in the therapy sessions. Where people can help you if you fall over? Not alone in a tiny bathroom where you could be trapped for hours before someone finds you!"

"We've been here three days and you've spent a total of eight hours in front of that mirror." Hux said sourly, turning the wheelchair towards the door. "I doubt I'd have been waiting long. Besides, I needed a piss. It's not my fault they've mysteriously put me in a room with a narcissist and a non-accessible bog."

The door to their shared room ricocheted off the wall as he threw it open with unnecessary force and wheeled himself out into the corridor.

"Wow. Who crapped in your cereal this morning?" Kylo sounded just as irritated as he lopped along beside the chair, struggling to keep up with the redhead's pace. Despite his long legs he walked like he was at war with the floor, ever step more about force than distance.

"You've no place judging me for over doing things when you moved that damn cabinet against the door again last night. What the bloody hell are you playing at?"

"It came back. The werewolf."
Hux stopped abruptly, the handle on the back of his chair digging viciously into Kylo's hip as he crashed into him. "What?"

"Jesus, Hux, warn a guy."

"What do you mean it came back?"

"Someone tried the door again."

"And what did you see?"

"Something huge, tall and furry with clawed hands." Kylo said, vaguely gesturing with his left hand to indicate something close to seven feet tall.

With a muttered apology Hux dragged him forward by the waistband of his sweats and out of the path of a gaggle of running nurses. Glancing around at the other occupants of the corridor Donal lowered his voice, hoping his companion would do the same.

"Standing upright? Like a person?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Kylo, have you ever seen an actual werewolf?" Hux asked with a roll of his eyes. When the other man failed to answer beyond a slackjawed stare, the Major sighed and began rolling down the corridor again, though this time at a more sensible pace. "We'll talk about this later ok? Let's just get therapy over with. Then I'm going to visit the security office. Then we'll talk about this."

After a few yards he realised Kylo wasn't following him. He paused, peering back over his shoulder. "What?"

"Are saying you have seen a real life werewolf?!"

"I've seen things you people wouldn't believe..." He quoted with an irritated sigh.

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It was impossible to pinpoint precisely where it all started. Somethings had simply always been a part of his life.

"Imaginary friends" - that's what his mother had called them, in that worried but cheerful voice she'd always used when he said anything unusual. "Foolish daydreaming" had been his father's name for it. But grandpa Sheev? When Hux spoke to him about the crying girl in the attic, or the terrifying thing in the basement, or the creature that caused all the fatal accidents at the sharp corner by the village pub? Well he just laughed and winked. He always seemed to know more than he was ever willing to say.

The creature that really marked the turning point was the one Donal first encountered on Beltane, 1989, in an isolated part of the woodland on his grandfather's estate.

A fast flowing stream had its source in a deep gully that had been an open mine centuries earlier. Some former owner of the land had seen fit to build a folly around it, to capture the water in an artificial pool. But the sides of the basin had cracked decades earlier, and the columns fallen into moss covered ruin. He loved that place. The soft green light and the gentle bubbling of water. It was quiet and peaceful, not like home with all its whispers and screams that no one else could hear.
The stream was a lovely place. It had *not* needed the addition of pan flute music. Nothing in the universe needed the addition of pan flute music, certainly not from a shirtless man with alarmingly furry legs.

But of course the BBC had shown their adaptation of *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe* the previous Christmas, and that had featured a faun hadn't it? So this being, who sat and stared and never, ever approached him, must be just another "imaginary friend" like the others. He was no more real than Mr Tumnus and could be safely ignored. Just like all the others.

And so Hux had.

The creature was always there, but since he did no harm by simply existing in that space Donal saw no reason to try to get rid of him. Although his presence did make Hux increasingly uncomfortable as the boy aged- something about the faun seemed vaguely threatening and improper. But he couldn't put his finger on it and so he let it be.

Finally, at fourteen, Hux has attended a special class at school about sexual harassment and that one nagging detail clicked into place. Ten hours later he drove the faun out of its grove with what had been be, on reflection from half a lifetime away, a rather embarrassing cocktail of holy water, garlic and silver shavings.

Fauns are very beautiful. Fauns don't wear trousers. Fauns are very well endowed. Fauns really should wear trousers. Although this particular individual had made no moves on him whatsoever, the young Hux had been very certain that naked mythological creatures should not be loitering around teenage boys. So the creature had to go. Donal had been very proud of himself at the time.

If an older, wiser and legally adult Hux-one who'd by then travelled far and wide and engaged in sexual acts with more supernatural species than most people have ever heard of- returned to the grove to apologise a decade later, well who could blame him? After all the creature was very beautiful. And very well endowed.

"What do you mean 'it's not a werewolf'? I saw it, man! It was seven feet tall! It had claws! It tried to get in and eat us whilst we slept!! How is that not a werewolf?!!" Kylo asked as he paced in front of the hospital smoking a clove cigarette in the secretive fashion of someone who still expected to get caught by their mother. It was a warm, sunny day in June. Birds were singing, flowers were blooming, somewhere in the car park a radio was playing 'Scooby Snacks' at an antisocial volume, and a woman in pink scrubs had just walked face first into a lamppost thanks to staring distractedly at Kylo's sculpted torso.

In the shade of an awning Hux lounged in his wheelchair, legs stretched out in front of him, chin resting on one fist, determinedly not staring at the same spectacle as the man passed back and forth in front of him.

Though he'd never admit it, one reason Kylo refused to stand still - beyond the rising irritation and agitation that always came with inaction- was the unshakeable impression that, seated as he was, Hux should have been wearing a crown. It was unsettling. He hated visions like that, the feeling that universes were bleeding into one another, it gave him a headache.

"I've seen the video from the surveillance cameras," Hux explained casually, as if it was no feat of persuasion to get security to release that kind of information to a man wearing nothing but a hospital issued tank top and shorts. But an officious military tone could achieve wonders, when properly applied. "It was a seven foot biped, not a gigantic wolf or a dog standing on its hind legs. It moved
with a human gait. Even if dogs could stand like that for extended periods they can't walk like us, their skeletal structure is all wrong. It might have had clawed hands but they were hands, not paws. Therefore not a werewolf. I mean, there's no evidence that it changes form, there's a good chance it isn't a were-anything."

"Then how did it get into the hospital looking like that?" Kylo asked with a pointed finger, as if he'd found the flaw in Hux' argument.

He shrugged, leaning back in his chair and trying to pretend that he wasn't enjoying the scent of clove smoke and cologne that Kylo's gesture had sent his way. "Service tunnels? The sewage system? I dunno, there are lots of options."

"I don't really care what it is. I just want it to stay out of our room." Kylo said unconvincingly. "Come on then Major, use your military training, what do we do?"

"We could start by asking what it wants?"

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"So, that went well!" Kylo shouted as he ran half crouching down the dimly lit service tunnel under the hospital, pushing Hux ahead of him as the great shambling beast fought to fit through the narrow cable and pipe strewn space behind him.

"Shut up and hang a left!"

"I'm just saying, 'ask it what it wants' might be the best plan I've ever heard! It's up there with such greats as 'getting involved in a land war in Asia' and 'no Mr Bond I expect you to die'. It's genius..."

"The other bloody left! For fucks sake shut up and run!"

-----

They'd sat up that night, cutting back on pain meds and chugging coffees to stay as alert as possible. Hux took his black and strong, whilst Kylo favoured the ridiculous four thousand calorie cream-based concoctions from the kiosk in the lobby. He'd bought three. Donal was seriously concerned the man might spontaneously give himself a heart attack or go into hyperglycaemic shock if he drank all three. Instead he just became extremely annoying.

"Hey, Major Sux?"

"It's Hux."

"What's your first name?"

"Donal. Why?"

"Well," Kylo said matter of factly, flipping his long perfectly straightened fringe away from his face and positioning his right hand so he could count on his fingers, "we're sharing a room, you think I'm hot, we're planning on fighting a werewolf together, aaaand I'm probably going to fuck you soon, so it seemed like the sort of thing I should know. Nice to meet you Donald, I'm Kylo Ren."

He held his hand out a little awkwardly, the whole arm trembling at the effort whilst Hux just stared blankly at him, his face slowly turning beet red as his jaw hung open, working silently. Some vocal part of his brain was gleefully chanting he wants to fuck me whilst the part that had gotten him promoted to the position of youngest serving Major in British Army history was demanding to know
"who the fuck does he think he is. Finally, that one tiny sensible portion of his brain, the bit that had been dealing with non-Irish natives his entire life, took control and responded to the only dignified portion of Kylo's speech.

"It's Donal. Dough-null. Like Tonal but with a D."

"More on that later."

"You are unbelievable."

Kylo preened slightly, amused to have flustered the military man. Hux looked like he needed to smile more. Get the stick removed from his butt. Replace it with something more fun. "Well, you don't look like a Donal, Major Sux, so I'll just call you Hux."

"And yet you look *exactly* like a Kylo Ren." Hux said, a little nastily, offended at the idea of not looking like his own name. "Which I note isn't the name on your chart."

"Oh that's my mom's doing, they kept saying I'd embarrass the family name by being myself so I dropped it. Changed it legally. But I wasn't conscious when they brought me in, and Han is insisting on paying, so they won't change it."

"Han?" Hux asked, raising an eyebrow.

The answer was cut off by the sound of claws scrabbling at the door handle.

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They'd chased the giant dog faced thing, whatever it was, through the hospital and down into the basement- Hux forced to split off to take the elevator down whilst Kylo thundered after the thing like a man possessed. He moved differently in pursuit, the energising effect of the chase making him graceful where before he'd been almost shambling. Donal had to force his own mind into a battle mentality just to stop himself getting distracted.

They'd finally cornered it near the medical waste furnaces at half past five in the morning, only to realise that they were in a small enclosed space with an unknown creature and no conventional weapons. And no one knew where they were. Hux pressed on with the plan.

"What do you want? Why do you keep trying to get into our room at night?"

The sound that came out of the creature in response was something akin to a walrus in a garbage disposal. As they stared, at a loss as to how to proceed, one claw tipped arm whipped out towards Kylo, almost catching him in the face. They ran.

Although Hux had paid careful attention to their route through the tunnels it was difficult to navigate the way out whilst being pushed by someone who insisted on griping in his ear the whole time.

Passing down one of the better lit corridors he was horrified to see a door open and an elderly janitor peer out. Donal was struck by a sudden impression of being in a children's cartoon when the man, instead of ducking back to his room and closing the door, began to run after them. Now there was a screaming old man between them and the monster. Very not good.

Fumbling in his shorts Hux managed to free his phone. "Siri! What time is sunrise in Washington DC?"

"[Checking out the weather in Washington District of Columbia United States... Sunrise will be at 5:42"
today in Washington District of Columbia United States."

Twisting in his chair he tried to look around Kylo's bulk towards the man running breathlessly behind them. "What's the shortest route outside?" He shouted as Kylo pushed him back into the seat and a circuit box whizzed by right where his head had been.

"Two rights and a left, there's a fire door!" Came the wheezing response.

"Did you get that or do you need help with directions again?" Hux joking up at Kylo, too full of adrenaline to worry about the situation. He frowned as Kylo's face turned darker.

"Just, just point where you want me to go!"

The light of dawn was blinding as they burst through the double doors, Hux leaning forward in his chair to protect his knees. Kylo swung the chair to one side of the door out of the way. Turning he grabbed the janitor one handed and shoved him in the same direction.

As the beast swarmed out of the door and into the light kylo squared up and delivered a devastating left hook to where the thing's head should have been. He missed. Because a bearded middle aged man stood there instead, naked and blinking in the rays of the sun. Moving on instinct Kylo adjusted his aim and punched him in the face instead. The man dropped like a stone.

"What the fuck?" He muttered, poking at the body with a toe. Crouching down he pushed the man's long hair away from his face. "Uncle Chewie?"

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How exactly does one explain why you were being pushed through restricted areas of a hospital by a shirtless fellow patient while being pursued by a then naked, now unconscious, friend of that patient's family?

With confidence, dignity, a straight face, and more bullshit than an Australia cattle station.

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"Oh my god, oh my fucking GOD, I can't believe you did that!!" Kylo giggled as he slammed the door to their room shut behind them.

"I can't believe you tried to have a one armed fist fight with a giant monster!" Hux laughed, pulling himself out of the chair and tottering towards his bed. Kylo squeezed a undignified squeak out of him as he reached down and hauled him up against his chest, his left arm wrapped under Donal's backside. "Jayzus fuck, you're strong!!"

Kylo's eyes widened at the sudden burst of Irish accent. He grinned up at the man he was holding in the air. "That was amazing."

"It was stupid."

"It was wild!"

"Idiotic!"

"It was hot."

Donal's eyes darkened as he licked his lips. "So fucking hot."
Somehow the kiss took them both by surprise. Kylo gasped against Hux lips, his right arm carefully coming up to wrap around his back, not necessary for stability but suddenly needing to be as close to him as possible.

Hux in turn sank his fingers into the artfully messy hair, the pad of his right thumb brushing across the fuzz of Kylo's side shave. He was a man rarely given to frivolity, he should have found the hair style ridiculous, instead the contrasting textures drew him in. That's what this creature was- contrasting textures that should never have worked together- muscles and eyeliner, tattoos and scars, deep voice and an infectious grin, horrible taste in music and a mouth that would get him into trouble one day, and that face, those eyes, those lips. None of this should have appealed to Hux, who's taste in humans had always run towards the sort of tweed covered men that looked liked they graduated from Oxbridge and owned horses. But perhaps that was the point. He'd always had far more varied tastes when it came to the more mysterious creatures lurking in the dark and hidden corners of the human world, and Kylo was so much more than human.

Gently the edge of his bed nudged the back of his thighs. Kylo had carried them across the room so smoothly Hux hadn't priced the movement, he'd been too busy tracing the exact shape of his lips and recording the precise taste of his kisses.

"Mmmmmmm, ow," kylo rumbled deep in his throat, trying to break the kiss with an affectionate forehead nuzzle that turned into a gasp of pain as it disturbed the half healed wound across his face. Slowly his right hand drifted down to stroke the crease between Donal's thighs and buttocks. "God, Hux, I really want to fuck you right now, but I guess I can't."

"Humph," Hux muttered noncommittally as he raised an eyebrow and bent to kissing Kylo's neck, careful to keep his touches away from the livid line of healing flesh. "And you thought you were so clever calling me 'Major Sux'. Don't you know that the army is all about bringing out a soldiers skills and what's best in them?"

"And what's best in you?" Kylo asked with a laugh, happy to deliver the terrible set up line.

"Put me down on the bed and I'll show you."

Deliberately Kylo allowed Hux to slide down his front towards the floor, using his right arm and the proximity of the bed to ensure that he felt the full effect of his hardness against his hip and stomach as he descended. Donal tipped his head back with a sigh as the friction from Kylo's abs sent a quiet thrill through his own groin. The angle of his head meant he didn't see the mischievous smile as Kylo watched him. The contact broke when he suddenly found himself back in Kylo's arms, carried bridal style this time, for just a moment before he was dropped onto the bed.

Kylo flexed his right shoulder awkwardly as he watched Hux scrabble backwards, settling himself hurriedly against the pillows. When the redhead pointed at his leggings and trainers with a imperious "Off! Now!"something settled at the base of his spine at the command, radiating heat and tension through his limbs. He almost tripped in his rush to comply.

It was hard to resist the urge to pose as he stood naked beside the bed. He knew he was impressive, not just the muscles he'd worked so hard on, but the natural benefits of his size. Most of his lovers had been surprised to find he was more than proportional. Hux merely quirked a corner of his mouth and beckoned him closer.

One long slim hand ran along his flank, tracing one of the many lines of lyrics that curled across his skin. "You're beautiful, I need you to know that."

Kylo reached out his own hand and stroked along Hux' jawline, nails scratching back through the
red-gold stubble. "You're not bad yourself."

"Narcissist." Hux laughed, dragging him forward into another kiss. "Get up here, knees on either side of my chest."

Donal kept his hand on Kylo's hip, admiring the shift of his muscles as he clambered up to straddle him, fingertips flexing unconsciously against his skin, urging him closer. Once he'd settled over him, Hux ran his free hand down the length of Kylo's cock in one long slow movement, fingers dipped down to caress his balls and press against his perineum before his nails sank into one firm buttock.

Kylo caught at the top of the headboard as Hux dragged him forward onto his knees, tongue flicking out to follow the same path as his fingers. Glancing down he met Donal's gaze through his sparkling golden eyelashes, groaning at the sight and sensation of his cock dragging across one stubbled cheek. Abruptly Hux changed direction, his wide wet tongue tracing up towards the head of his cock. Sighing Kylo pressed his right hand against his mouth, fingers flexing in an effort to form a fist as Hux grinned up at him.

Keeping eye contact a moment longer Hux surged forward, taking in the whole of Kylo's length in one movement, his throat working around the head with shocking ease.

"Fucking Christ!" Kylo hissed. Beneath him he felt the bed shake as Donal laughed around his cock, the vibrations dragging another gasp from the larger man and driving him to thrust forward. It shouldn't be possible to grin with a mouth so full but Hux managed it, rolling his eyes back in his head in something like bliss as his hands urged Kylo to thrust deeper.

His tongue worked fitfully along the veins under Kylo's cock, his throat swallowing against the head as his face warmed to a sweet pink at the pressure. After a moment he drew back and put his tongue to work along the tip, lapping at the slit with relish. When Kylo dropped his hand from his mouth and ran it back through Donal's hair, he tipped his head into the touch, changing the angle and earning another sigh from the man above him.

He soon had Kylo panting as he settled into his own tried and true rhythm, alternating between minutes of slow detailed worship with his tongue and a deep drive into his throat that had him seeing stars. Which was an improvement on the tattoo closest to Hux face, which seemed to show a mountain troll and some kind of cartoon character standing back to back. As Kylo thrust, mewling each time he hit the back of his throat, Hux sincerely wished that whatever it was would stop jiggling and grinning at him with every flex of those massive hips.

"It's a Totoro from Studio Ghibli," Kylo gasped, tightening his fingers into Donal's hair.

Startled at the revelation that Kylo could actually read his mind Hux jolted, lightly closing his teeth around Kylo's cock. With a muffled roar Kylo dropped his other hand from the railing, dragging Hux' head hard against him as he came. Beneath him Hux arched and scrabbled against his hips, diligently swallowing everything he was given.

"Shit," Kylo gasped, forcing himself back and away from Donal, who dropped his head back into the pillows and laughed. "Fuck, Hux, are y..."

"You deserved that, you mind reading arsehole," he croaked, staring at the ceiling. Absently one hand detached from Kylo's shapely rear to rub at his own throat, the other chose to maintain its death grip on his hip.

"What? The blow job of a lifetime featuring biting at just the right moment to make me think I'm going to ascend to heaven?" Kylo said, shakily running his hands through his hair. "I don't know
man, be careful or I might just decide to accidentally violate your privacy more often if this is how you punish me."

"It's not an accident if you 'decide' to do it, Kylo. Which is it? Are you spying on me with your mind or just picking up random thoughts like a untuned radio? You let me think I'd propositioned you when I was out of my mind on opiates, that wasn't very nice."

"I'm not spying on you," Kylo said softly, "you're just very loud sometimes. I can listen to you when I want to, intentionally I mean, but I don't want to, Hux, your mind is your own."

With gentle fingers his left hand stroked along the bruising over his cheekbone, the damage from Iraq slowly starting to fade. Hux leaned into it, almost purring with contentment, a disappointed cry breaking free from his lips as the fingers were pulled away.

"You didn't get off," Kylo continued, leaning back to press against the front of Donal's shorts. "Here, let me help you."

"No. Don't." Hux said, his gravelly tone deliberately gentle, not annoyed but still insistent.

Kylo frowned, his expression hurt, flexing his fingertips against the obvious hardness under his hand. "It's only fair. I thought you..."

"Hey, shush," Donal said quickly, reaching down to catch Kylo's wrist with an awkward twist of his body. Once he's carefully pulled his hand free he brought it up to his mouth and placed a damp kiss against the massive palm. With a reassuring smile he continued a little breathlessly, "as much as I want to experience hands this impressive, and I really, really do, I'm full of morphine. It'd be an exercise in futility."

"Are you sure? Not to blow my own horn or anything- because clearly that should be your job from now on- but I'm pretty good at this." Kylo smirked, his right hand drifting behind him to ghost uncertainly over the hip beneath him.

"I've been on these meds before," Hux said, sitting up enough to reach around Kylo's back to grab the other hand. The change in position dragged a surprised sigh from the man above him as it trapped his still sensitive cock against Donal's chest. Smiling Hux pressed an apologetic kiss against his abs before he paused to nuzzle against the firm muscles and admire the beard burn he'd left across the top of Kylo's thighs. "It doesn't matter how good you are, you're just going to have to wait. Now, get off me."

To emphasis his point, and because he simply couldn't resist, he pulled Kylo forward by the hands and twisted around to sink his teeth playfully into one tattoo'd buttock.

"Okay! Okay!" Kylo gasped.

The laugh he gave as he freed his arms was surprisingly light for a man with such a deep voice. Careful to avoid jostling his knees, Kylo swung one leg over the Major's body and hopped off the bed. It was awkward for him to pull his leggings back on with one hand, but it did afford Donal a rather nice view of his arse and the half moon imprints his fingernails had left on it.

Dressed once more, Kylo stood hesitant in the space between their two beds, glancing surreptitiously back towards his own empty bed.

Hux considered a moment. It was ridiculous to have gotten attached to this strange man so quickly. Three days in a hospital room together, both seriously injured, lives turned upside down and their blood filled with a cocktail of drugs. They'd saved a man's life tonight, maybe two. He was so
beautiful. They'd moved together with such easy grace, despite their limitations. He felt so good.
They'd both made promises of the future without even a second thought- 'from now on', 'you'll have
to wait'.

Whatever his life was going to look like from now on the Army wasn't going to be an active part of
it, and what else did he have beyond that?

Why not this bizarre creature?

Decision made Hux shuffled a little stiffly to one side of the bed. The smile that twisted across Kylo's
face was almost shy, as if he hadn't just had his cock down the redhead's throat. Grabbing a pillow
from his bed Kylo clambered gingerly into the offered space. After a moment of fidgeting he
arranged his right arm across Donal's chest and shifted his legs well back. Blinking languidly they
stared in silence at one another, allowing postcoital drowsiness and one another's warmth to lull them
in sleep.

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"No, don't go into the summer house!"

The scream jerked Donal awake, his mind instantly on high alert as the mountain of a man beside
him sat bolt upright, shaking, one hand stretched out as if to halt someone who wasn't there.

"Hey," Hux said, the soft drag of fingertips across the Icelandic tattoo at the base of his spine meant
to remind Kylo that he was still there, either to reassure him after the nightmare or wake him from it.

With a deep shuddering breath Kylo turned to stare at him, eyes dark and unfocused.

"Kylo?"

He snapped out if it as abruptly as he'd woken, the haunted look melting away as he pushed back to
sit against the headboard.

"Talk with me," Kylo said, in a voice rough with sleep, his face turned towards the ceiling. "I don't care what about, just, keep me awake."

"Ok, I can do that." Settling into the pillows Hux reached up to run a fingertip along the bruises peaking from under Kylo's bandages. He searched for topics, mind blank as it always was when presented with such situations. Watching his finger trace across the marks of pain he found inspiration. "You know what happened to me, but how did you end up in here?"

A huge hand enveloped his own, carefully lifting it away from the tender skin. When he tilted his head back down Kylo had an odd look on his face, a bizarre combination of embarrassment and pride, like he'd done something impressively stupid. "Have you ever seen a movie and thought, wow, I wonder if that's actually possible?"

Ah. So he had done something impressively stupid then.

"Well, yesss," he said slowly, "that's the nature of special effects. But beyond doing things that I already KNEW were possible, like jumping out of a plane from a few thousand feet, which is usually safe," he laughed and vaguely gestured towards his legs, "I can't say I've ever felt compelled to try anything else. I suppose you did?"

Grin widening slowly Kylo nodded.

Hux sighed. "I know I'm going to regret asking, but which film?"

"Pirates of the Caribbean." Yes, that facial expression was just all pride now.

"Which one?"

Kylo frowned, suddenly offended, and hissed as it disturbed his facial wounds. "There's only one Pirates of the Caribbean movie. They never made any sequels."

"So what, you got on one of those tall ships and fell out of the rigging?" Hux asked, choosing to ignore the film snobbery for now. He'd quite liked the second movie- Tom Hollander in that uniform, very nice.

"Nope. You'll never guess."

Not much of a challenge- there only so many stupid things one person could possibly do. He tried to remember the plot of a film he hadn't seen in nearly a decade. Most of what he could recall about the first one involved Jack Davenport, and he hadn't really had any exciting stunts. Shifting slightly in the bed he peered up to study the other man more carefully. Most of his injuries were bandaged and hidden from view. No help there. Except the long linear scar cutting across his face, with its oddly cauterised edges...

"Oh no. You..." In the face of such reckless stupidity Donal found it hard to string together an adequate sentence to express his incredulity. "How would you... WHY WOULD..."

"My cousin Rey is studying for a Masters in Metallurgy." Kylo said, as if this explained everything.

"And that somehow led to you having a sword fight in a forge?!"

"Well, we've both taken martial arts since we're were toddlers, we know how to handle swords."
"Kylo, no offence, but the fact that you're sitting here, in hospital, recovering from major surgery, sort of suggests that at least one of you doesn't know how to handle a RED HOT SWORD. What the actual fuck?"

"It would have been fine if her damn rescue dog hadn't attacked me," came the huffed reply as Kylo folded his arms and stared resolutely away from Hux.

Donal smiled slightly since the man had made the gesture fluidly with both arms. Clearly his wounded shoulder felt freer since that morning's chase through the hospital, or perhaps the Major's own efforts.

"A dog did this?"

"Stupid orange and white fuzzball called Bee-Bee." Kylo said, gesturing with one hand to give the idea of a Pomeranian sized dog. "Turns out it was rehomed because the kids at its last home liked to play at laserswords and hit it a few times. So it saw us in the forge and snapped. Knocked me down onto my sword," he touched his left shoulder, fingers shaking at the memory "then Rey fell on me with hers. She's only 110lbs but it was a sharp sword and momentum did the rest. I thought I'd lost my eye before I passed out. All because of a damn dog. I guess it didn't mean it though."

Eyebrows raised in disbelief Hux stared open-mouthed at Kylo's bizarre assessment of the situation. "It's not as if it wasn't a stunt almost guaranteed to go wrong, I mean, why didn't you at least use iron bars rather than, you know, actual live swords?"

Finally looking down at him again Kylo wore an expression that strongly implied that the option had never occurred to him. Well, it's a good thing he's gorgeous, Hux thought, running one hand gently along the tattoo'd hip pressed against his side, cos he's dumb as a brick.

"Hey!!"

Oh yeah. The mind reading. Let me apologise. He thought as he adjusted the grip of his hand, urging Kylo closer.

"Again? Seriously?" Kylo smirked, eagerly straddling the redhead's chest. "I've know you three days, General Deepthroat, and you're already trying to kill me."

Glancing up at him from under his thick golden eyelashes Hux grinned as he eased Kylo's leggings down again. "Whatever happened to 'Major Sux'?"

"Oh, I figured you deserve a promotion."
Chapter 5

Phasma stared in confusion at the jumble of various sized notebooks, scraps of paper, pens, and unidentified technical equipment spread across the dining table. How did one satchel contain so much stuff?

"So, how does this work?" She asked, picking up a notebook at random and turning it over in her hands. They all had numbers on the covers- some handwritten, some embossed depending on the quality of the book itself rather than the value of the number.

The one she'd chosen was made of black leather with silver edging to the pages. It was significantly nicer than some of the others with torn or folded cardboard covers. The number on this cover was a large scrolling 69a. Opening it at random she found herself facing a colour photograph of Kylo Ren. It was a very good, high definition photograph taken in excellent lighting. Sadly he hadn't chosen to wear clothes for this particular picture. She snapped the book shut and blinked rapidly to try to clear the image from her mind.

Glancing up from organising the mess Donal suddenly noticed the particular volume in her hands and, flushing deep red, carefully tugged it from her fingers.

"Sorry, that one is ummm... private." He muttered, not meeting her eye as it was stuffed unceremoniously back into the bag.

"You have a notebook dedicated to your boyfriend? Or just to porn?" Her laugh was a little forced but he seemed to appreciate the attempt at levity to break up the embarrassment.

"I have ten actually, on Kylo I mean." Hux said with a shrug. "He's... lets say he's unique. I've got a system of twenty different classifications for note taking purposes and he doesn't really fit into any of them. He has powers that are neither magical nor spiritual, he's human but he can do things on instinct that would normally be beyond all but the most learned esoteric scholars- he's endlessly fascinating. Since I get to interact with him on a daily basis it seems like a waste not to try to understand him. Maybe one day I can help him feel more settled in his body. Maybe I can help him cure the elements that cause him distress. Or maybe we'll just publish the whole thing as a work of fiction and retire to a tropical island on the proceeds."

This time the laugh was genuine.

"He's my husband by the way, not my boyfriend."

He wriggled his left hand as he finally settled on a notebook and started hunting for pens.

Phasma squinted at his hand, confused. "Is that a plastic cereal box prize?"

Following her gaze Donal flexed his fingers, a little nonplussed. Admittedly it was made of slightly glittery rubber but it usually fooled people from that distance.

"It's a safety ring, for craftsmen and engineers and other people who don't want to find out what 'degloving' is the hard way." He paused, considering. "Don't... don't Google that by the way. We spend a lot of time climbing in and out of derelict buildings. It's practical. Kylo has a tattoo.... we have proper rings too, for special occasions," He added defensively, "like dealing with his mother."

"Hey, sorry, I didn't mean to offend, it just seemed odd. I am sorry I missed the wedding though, I can't actually imagine the Organa-Solos at the kind of wedding Kylo would have!"
Donal grinned at that, his face glowing with a slightly malicious light. "Oh they didn't come, it was just us and four other people in Vegas. We kept it small because we'd picked a date when we knew they'd be out of the country on official business. I didn't want them to show up and spoil it for him. Leia was livid."

Returning the smile Phasma offered him her fist. After an awkwardly long pause he bumped it.

"Anyway, back to your question- I'll ask you some questions about Trinity, you just tell me what you know, what you might suspect, any other weird goings on- anything that comes to mind really. For now I'll just write it down short hand, then I can expand on it and come back to it later."

Out of the remaining books on the table he tossed her a blue composition book that seemed to have been dropped in muddy water then dried out. The crinkled pages made a disconcerting noise as it flew through the air. Phasma caught it between finger and thumb.

"If it helps this has some really basic notes from last year if you want to get a vague idea of what I'm doing. It varies so much from situation to situation anyway."

She didn't particularly want to handle it but turned to the first page anyway.

**Temporary Notebook 22 : Scotland, June-July 2015**

Transcribe to- **Main Notes 12** - Mortals - Water-Based - Non-Sentient

**Main Notes 4c** - Hauntings - Religious

**Main Notes 69f** - Kylo Ren - Behaviour - Interaction With Other Species

**Loch Maree - 27 June 2015**

- British Isles in midst of heat wave. Local population in panic as usual. National shortage on air conditioning/fans. Our room in the Bed & Breakfast is like the fourth level of hell. Can barely sleep. Owner insisted only twin rooms available. Suspect homophobic prick [*NOTE: leave One Star TripAdvisor review*]. Damn near impossible to fit both of us in a single bed- Kylo solved this by having me sleep on his chest. Surprisingly comfortable. But very sweaty.
- Despite maintaining rigorous sunscreen routine, Kylo has managed to achieve a deep tan. Bastard. Certainly highlights his muscle definition. Sexy bastard. Did I mention smug. His many scars do not tan, making them more pronounced. Had expected negative reaction from locals. Instead subject has been accepted as an honorary Scot. Despite my own colouring I am treated with the suspicion due to an Englishman. This is not helped by Kylo revealing that I am in fact Irish to anyone who listens. I fear as an American he vastly overestimates the camaraderie between countries. Also I know nothing about football and do not wish to argue about Celtic vs Rangers.
- Journey to Loch Maree uneventful. Am still doing all the driving as Kylo seems incapable of remembering to drive on the correct side of the road. Suspect this is a ruse. Arrived at Loch and immediately eaten alive by midges. Kylo as usual
immune. Boat hire uneventful.

- Subject is insufferable [NOTE: contact divorce lawyer/psychiatrist]. Despite average water temp of 6c (42f) Kylo insisted on skinny dipping on the basis that "it is summer". Pointed out that summer in Scotland is not known for its nude bathing. Kylo insisted.

- Submersion in cold water has the same physiological affect on Kylo Ren's genitalia as 'normal' human beings. Unlike a normal person Kylo took it upon himself to try to 'beat' these effects by taking himself in hand. [NOTE: buy a new tape measure, the existing one has been irreparably sullied]. I have no idea if he was successful as I was too busy Googling local Indecent Exposure laws.

- Muc-sheilche is real and has made a friend in Kylo Ren! Eel-like creature. Single central eye with vertical rather than horizontal eyelids. Pale pink in colour [NOTE: check date range against White Wyrm myth] approx 12 metres (40 feet) in length. Cephalopod like suckers along both flanks [NOTE: measure sucker marks on Kylo's thighs for more accurate estimation of animal's size].

- Creature surfaced due to intense interest in Kylo's penis. Not clear whether it believed it was a potential mate or a juvenile in need of assistance. Held Kylo in the shallow portion of the Loch for nearly 45 minutes whilst it presented his anatomy with a selection of fish and water birds in various states of pre-consumption. Was ultimately disturbed by a passing speedboat before Kylo was freed long enough to return to our own boat. Creature then attempted to join us. Once we left the water it followed us along the bank for half a mile before the path moved far enough inland to lose sight of it.

- Investigation of haunted hermitage of Maol Rubha and adjacent wish/holy tree suspended until Kylo recovers from the affects of being held in 6c water for 45 minutes without adequate clothing, or in fact any clothing. Should feel no sympathy as subject brought this upon himself, but his skill at the 'puppy dog eyes' expression is almost supernatural. Have stocked up on hot chocolate and warm blankets. Subject insists on watching High School Musical marathon, for medicinal reasons. I fear my sanity might not survive.

"Well... That's certainly something." Phasma said. The notebook was thrown back to Donal with an discomforted twist of her lips. "Did that really happen? With the eel?"

"Yup. We never did manage to get to the island with the hermitage, that poor love-struck creature was too determined to grab Kylo so we had to give in. Anyway," he said, changing the subject with a smile. he leant forward, pen poised eagerly above a new, and thankfully clean, notebook. "Tell me about Trinity."

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It was about balance, or so her great-grandmother had said.

Not the balance between good and evil, those convenient titles that humans all too often applied when they wanted to absolve themselves of responsibility or more conveniently separate 'us' from 'them'. To say 'that man is just evil' was to wilfully ignore the social reasons for his actions and pretend that normal human beings could never do something so wrong as commit murder or take part in genocide.

Evil is nebulous, a snake in the garden, an outside influence that can be pointed to after the fact. It isn't a person, just like us, someone who sits down to dinner, raises their children, pays their taxes. It
isn't someone we know well, who we see every week- a neighbour, a pastor, a sheriff.

No this wasn't about good versus evil, this was the balance between something real and properly human tied up in the influence of the supernatural. Someone had made a deal with forces they couldn't understand, and they'd wrapped it up in fancy language over time but ultimately it came down to balance.

A balance between the caring and indifferent. The large scale and the small. Two families destined to represent the two sides of the scale - the Bucks, a solid linear line of single births, usually male and always representing a callous focus on the bigger picture; and Phasma's own massive sprawling family, lacking a unifying name thanks to the misfortune of usually being female, and always representing a concern for the downtrodden individual. Two families doomed to come together in every generation - at best through marriage, and at worst through forced breeding - to battle for control and influence over the town as a whole.

Her great-grandmother, Lillian Emory, had always known there was a chance that she'd be pulled into the supernatural dance that kept Trinity spinning along in its oddly prosperous condition.

Trinity had never been famous, or wealthy, not by any national measure. But by local standards it was unusually fortunate. It was less effected by national economics; far fewer of its citizens ever got called up in the draft; epidemic diseases just passed it by.

Born in 1917 she should have reached adulthood in a society struggling under the weight of the Great Depression, but Trinity sat relatively unaffected thanks to the otherworldly deals made with the spirits of the land centuries before when the settlement was first formalised. Deals she heard about in frightened furtive whispers as her own mother tried to prepare or protect her daughters. There was no telling which member of the family would be chosen to carry the curse in each generation and Lillian's sisters and cousins seemed resigned to their potential fates. The only Buck son at that time was training for the Ministry and most considered him a stern but respectable marriage prospect. Of course he could be cruel, but the family was wealthy and there would be no contest on the inheritance. What kind of woman wouldn't want to marry such a man in times of such widespread hardship?

Lillian was that kind of woman. She looked for an escape like a storybook hero looks for buried treasure. She found it in a smile and the scent of hair pomade.

When a charming Irish outsider passed through the town on his way to Georgia she fell into his bed without a second thought. Anything was better than a Buck, and Bryan did have the most perfect attributes. When he'd inevitably moved on she'd followed him, sneaking over the county line in the cover of darkness, determined to make a better life that the fate Trinity had to offer. He'd unexpectedly died soon after, before she could join him, and without ever knowing about the triplets she'd carried- but he'd freed her from Trinity's influence and that was enough.

She'd gone to New York and created a history for herself. A beloved husband, "Bryan Emory", tragically lost too young, too soon. Three children to be raised alone. Against the odds she'd prospered, the Irish community of that city closing into help one of its own. Or so they'd thought.

A decade later she'd married a returning war veteran and moved to Alabama, rejoicing that all her children and grandchild were male. She'd wept the day Phasma was born.

Of course once she was grown, Phasma had done her best to educate the older woman. She had countered her horror stories of the town that didn't even appear on maps with feminist theory, with logic, with refutations of the gender binary, with her own teenaged realisations about her sexuality.
Lillian had only shaken her head sadly and lit candles every day with prayers that her little Phae not be drawn to the town's influence.

At sixteen she'd been woken to the news that a cousin she'd never met - Gail Emory - had travelled from Charleston to Trinity. She was free from the curse. Another had been chosen. Irritated she'd rolled over and gone back to sleep.

From there Phasma had gotten on with her life without ever thinking of Trinity again. She went to college; joined the army; had a few secret affairs; broken hearts and had hers broken in return; received an honourable discharge and- after a few years of nomadic travelling where she'd first met Kylo Ren- she'd finally settled into a relatively normal civilian life as a personal trainer in Atlanta.

The dreams had started on Lammastide in 2013. Soon she was no longer sleeping because every time she closed her eyes the streets of an unfamiliar town were passing beneath her feet, crows' wings battered against her face and a voice murmured terrible things in her ear.

Two weeks after the first dream she woke to the ringtone of her phone, shrill over the roar of her pick-up's engine. She was already half way out of the state on the I20, barefoot and wearing only her pyjamas. It had been all she could do to keep the F-150 on the road in the shock of finding herself sleepdriving. The call had been from Lillian, the 97 year old shouting over the nursing home orderlies that she done her best to warn Phasma but now there was nothing she could do but try to take control of her own situation.

Trinity would lure her back in her sleep if she did not go there of her own accord. But she could at least go with her eyes wide open and her truck filled with ammo.

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"Wow." Hux breathed, staring at the pages in front of him as Phasma's story petered out. "That's a lot more complicated than our usual 'people say this house is haunted' or 'I saw a weird thing in the woods, maybe it was Bigfoot'.'

From the entrance hall the telephone rang, breaking the atmosphere.

"It gets worse." Phasma said as she stretched and strode out of the room to answer the call.

"Worse? There's more?!!"

"Hang on. Hello? Oh, hi T.J. What do you mean the trucks not going to be fixed until next week? It was nearly done when I called you this morning... The brake lines? The Sheriff told you to check them... uh-huh. Ok T.J. just fix it as fast as you can. Thanks."

The click of the receiver was unexpectedly loud in the silence of the house. A few seconds later there was a crash. Leaning sideways in his chair Donal could just see that Phasma had kicked over the entire console table. Biting his tongue he decided to say nothing. He saw enough of Kylo's frustrated outbursts to know he couldn't help.

Her face was as pale as her hair when she finally returned and leaned against the doorjamb.

"Major," she said with military precision, "you need to wake Kylo. I think the Fury might have been tampered with. I'm not sure we're going anywhere."
[June 27th 2013, First Order Hospital for Specialist Surgery]

"Please, don't tell your dad about this." The tall man said, more to his shoes than to Kylo.

They'd passed the whole thing off as an adverse reaction to allergy meds and a pack of stray dogs hiding in the basement. It was pure bullshit, anyone with an ounce of sense could have seen that, but as Hux had discovered at an early age - most human beings locked their common sense in a cupboard the instant they were faced with anything unusual.

Kylo rolled his eyes. "What do you think I'm gonna tell Han- 'Uncle Chewie is a werewolf?'"

"Therianthrope." Donal corrected absently as he took notes on the incongruous figure standing sheepishly between the hospital beds. It was a habit he'd developed as a child, a way to keep track of his endless parade of 'imaginary friends'. Now it was a compulsion, these things were real and someone should know the truth of them.

Just over seven feet, bearded, and balding, Peter 'Chewie' Chewbecca dressed like an accountant who wanted to be a lumberjack. He certainly didn't look like either the kind of guy who turned into a giant monster or the sort to be involved in Han Solo's less than legal business dealings back in the late seventies. Apparently they'd met in Laos, flying god-knew-what in and out of Hong Kong. Kylo hadn't known the details and Donal had learned enough from his grandfather not to pry into such things. Solo was respectable now, married to one of the most successful women in the country. A woman with organisations worse than the CIA at her fingertips if need be. He wouldn't ask and no one would feel the need to shoot him for doing so.

"Whatever," Kylo snapped, "If I told Han that he'd have me tested again, why would I risk it?"

"I didn't mean that," Chewie continued, "though I would appreciate the discretion. I mean- please don't tell your father you saw me. I'm supposed to be undercover, if your mom found out your dad was having me spy on you... I could lose my job, Ben, please."

"Kylo." Both younger men said together.

"Sorry, sorry Kylo I forgot. Please, don't tell anyone you saw me, please?"

"What I don't understand," Donal said, circling something in his notes, "is why you would take on a job at a time when you can't keep your form stable? Surely that's incredibly risky."

"I..." The man rubbed his head clearly uncomfortable. His feet started to shuffle him towards the door, apparently of their own volition. "I don't know why I change. It's not lunar or anything, it just happens. Look, I don't want to talk about this and the longer I stay in here the more likely I am to be seen. I'll not come back, I'll just make up reports for your dad okay Kylo? Don't do anything rash and no one needs to know, okay?"
Donal turned to Kylo and raised an eyebrow. Kylo shrugged his left shoulder. "Fine, sure, I won't mention this to Han."

Chewbacca was out the door before Kylo had even finished the sentence.

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Finn hated hospitals. Always had done, ever since he was small. But the back injury that ended his active military career and led him to an embassy-linked MoD job had solidified that hatred into a solid ball of distaste that rolled around his stomach as he approached the foyer of the First Order surgical hospital.

He didn't particularly want to go in. He'd much rather head back to work and do some mindnumbing overtime that walk into that antiseptic-smelling place. But Major Hux, who'd only been a Captain then, had visited him multiple times throughout his recovery. His own sense of personal honour told him to return the favour.

It was strange that Hux had ended up in D.C. at all, rather than going to a European hospital. The email he'd received from their mutual friend Thanisson had said it was his father's doing. It had taken some political wrangling for the wealthy Commandant to get his son the best possible care, which was admirable, but it also meant Donal had no local visitors or support network. If the injury was as severe as Thanisson had suggested then Finn knew he'd need help coping with what would probably be the end of his career. Finn had been there himself, it was a hard road.

Joining the short line at the information desk Finn's train of thought was derailed by the charming man talking to one of the receptionists in front of him. He looked vaguely familiar and Finn wondered if he'd worked with one of the man's relatives. He certainly hadn't worked with him- he'd have remembered the very nice backside just visible beneath the expensive brown leather jacket.

"Nooo... We don't have a Kai-low Ren regist... Oh wait, I have a Ben Organa-Solo with a secondary name listed as Kilo Ren, is that him?"

Finn winced with the stranger at the mangling of the name. He dealt with that enough himself to be vaguely offended on the patient's behalf.

Organa-Solo though? Would that be the Defence Secretary's often gossiped about but rarely seen son? Obviously Finn didn't have the rank to attend many of the social events she frequented but he'd heard enough talk from the embassy staff to know that Ben was something of a legendary black sleep in the old political family circles.

"Room 713a. Take that elevator there to the seventh floor, turn right, then second left, then right again. It's at the end of the corridor."

"Thank you very much, ma'am!" The stranger said with a bright smile that made Finn's heart do strange things in his chest. A second later the man bestowed the same smile on him as he passed and Finn almost forgot to take his place at the desk.

"Hello, I'm here to visit Major Donal Hux," Finn said with a smile, continuing quickly when the woman frowned at either the name or the London accent. He was glad he was still in uniform, Americans always seemed to be more polite when he wore it. "That's D-O-N-A-L H-U-X."

"Yes, Sir. Room 713a. Take that eleva..."

"That's okay, I heard the directions, thank you!!" He said, already turning to hurry after the other man. Fortune was smiling on him and he'd be damned if he turned aside. "Hold the elevator!!"
There was that smile again followed by a full body once over that had Finn blushing as he hurried across the tiles. The elevator felt surprisingly small as the doors shut on the two of them, the enclosed space seeming to highlight the smooth cologne and warmth radiating from the stranger's body.

"Which floor?"

Finn blinked, realising he was staring open mouthed.

"Seven, please, we're uh going to the same room actually."

"Really?! Wow, you don't look like one of Kylo's usual friends..." The stranger paused, eyes wide as if realising he'd said something inappropriate. "I mean with the uniform. He's not that fond of the military, handsome guys are totally his usual... I am going to stop now and start over. Hi, I'm Poe Dameron, nice to meet you."

"Hello, Poe, good to meet you." Finn said, recognising the surname from various contacts at the Department of Defence. "I'm Sergeant Finn Adegboyega. I'm afraid I don't know anyone Kylo though- I'm actually here to visit my former commanding officer. I guess they must be sharing a room."

"Huh, it was supposed to be a private room."

The ding of the elevator reaching their floor interrupted Poe's train of thought.

"Maybe the receptionist got the room number wrong," Finn said with a grin, waving the other man to go ahead of him, "let's go on an adventure to find out."

Finn was finding it incredibly easy to settle into a friendly banter with his new acquaintance. He still didn't know a lot of people here so he was glad of the chance to make a new friend and, if the heated looks were anything to go by, this was the kind of new friend that might become a boyfriend quite quickly. He crossed his fingers in his pocket.

Poe snorted.

"If this place is as badly signposted as most hospitals it'll either be an adventure or a trial... Oh never mind, here we are!"

"Shockingly easy!" Finn said dramatically as the other man presented the room number with a flourish.

Without knocking, Poe opened the door and stopped mid-movement in shock. Finn had to step to one side to see around his frame and into the room. He soon regretted it, though it took him a moment to decipher the tangle of limbs on the bed in front of them.

Eyes wide, he placed a hand gently over Poe's on the door handle and gently eased it shut.

"I uh..." He said quietly, blinking hard to clear the after images, "I guess that was Kylo with the uh..."

"Tattoos... Yeah, they're pretty distinctive..." Poe replied, in a similarly horrified tone. "I haven't seen them from that angle before... kinda... upside down like that... Was your guy here for knee surgery?"

"Oh yeah, that was Donal alright. He's ginger."

"Yeaaaah I noticed." Poe sighed. "Well I suppose I don't need to worry about Kylo being lonely.
"And here I was thinking that not knowing anyone would hold him back..."

They shared a solemn look for a long moment then collapsed giggling onto each other's shoulder, hands pressed against their own mouths to stifle the noise.

"I can't believe we just saw them... Just... Right there in a fucking hospital bed, next to an unlocked door... Just... For f*cks sake..."

"Well," Poe said wiping his eyes, "it probably wasn't a 'f*cking hospital bed' before, but it is now..."

The giggling resumed.

At the end of the corridor a nurse paused to give them a glare and tutted disapprovingly as she walked away. A little sheepish, the pair straightened their clothes and endeavoured to look serious. If Poe took an extra minute to make sure the shoulders of Finn's uniform were smooth, the soldier made no objection.

"Look I could use a drink right about now," Poe said, taking his elbow to lead him away, "how about you and me grab a coffee and let's uh, give those two an hour to finish up. Then we can try again? And hopefully not get another eyeful..."

"Sure," Finn smiled, "I'd like that."

Five hours later, when the hospital's coffee shop closed for the night, Poe and Finn realised they never had gotten to see their respective patients. But they'd still be in the hospital tomorrow, so maybe right now Poe should take Finn out to dinner. And then maybe Finn should take Poe home.

In a room on the seventh floor two exhausted but blissfully sated men shared a narrow hospital bed and slept on unaware that they'd inadvertently started someone else's romance.

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"So... You're being discharged tomorrow?" Kylo asked. He was oddly subdued and quiet. It was midday but his hair was still a tangled, flattened mess of bedhead for the first time since they'd met a month earlier.

"Yeah. You are too, aren't you?" Donal said, one eye watching him with concern whilst the other scrolled through the messages on his phone. It had been a surprise, he'd expected at least a week to prepare. The situation wasn't looking good. "Where will you be staying? With a friend or..."

They didn't really talk about their families but, considering what he knew of Kylo's history, there probably wasn't much hope of him just moving back home to be cared for whilst he completed his physical therapy. Donal himself didn't know where he was supposed to go. He had to stay in the area for months of further treatment but his MoD contact hadn't been able to find him anywhere to stay. He wasn't supposed to be alone, so a hotel wasn't practical but the only other person he knew was Finn and he only had an attic studio with far too many narrow stairs to reach it.

"I'm going back to my apartment."

"On your own?"

"I... I can manage." Kylo muttered defiantly. "What about you?"
"I don't have anywhere. I've just been hoping something would come up at the last minute close enough to wherever you're going but so far there's nothing at all... I don't suppose your apartment has two bedrooms..."

He paused, hopeful. From his seat on the opposite bed he saw Kylo's eyes light up.

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"You didn't mention stairs." Hux said the next day, his tone distinctly unimpressed.

"It's not far," Kylo murmured, pressing his face against Donal's cheek and running his left hand down his ass. "We can do it! See?!"

Hux shrieked as Kylo hoisted him bodily up against his hip and practically ran up the five flights of stairs.

"What the fuck, Kylo?!" He gasped when he was finally deposited on the fifth floor landing, Kylo resting his face against his neck and panting heavily between giggles. That should not have been possible, it was some kind of Worlds Strongest Man Contest level of endurance. Of course Donal was thin, most would say too thin, but he was over six feet tall and probably still weighed more than 160lbs. Running up five flights of stairs carrying that much in one hand. Not normal. Impressive though.

"Don't say you're not impressed," Kylo said against his neck, warm tongue slipping out to trace one of the stress-taut tendons. "This is usually the point when people cling to me and swoon while their underwear sprouts wings and flies away."

Donal narrowed his eyes. Less impressive if he used it on other conquests.

"You left the suitcases downstairs." He said, pushing him back with his fingertips against temptingly firm pecs. "They've probably been stolen by now."

Smirking Kylo sketched a bow. "Stay there, I shall return momentarily."

As he watched the huge man parkour his way back down the stairs Donal wondered why he could never seem to meet normal people. After two minutes, when the sound of footsteps failed to return to the stairwell, he began to worry that the bags really had been stolen.

Behind him a door clicked open.

"This way," Kylo beckoned, an elevator door sliding closed in the corridor behind him.

Why did he always end up with guys with a penchant for the dramatic?

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"So, when I asked you if it was a two bedroom apartment you didn't feel it necessary to point out that the second bedroom didn't actually contain a bed?" Hux asked, staring around mildly perturbed by the sheer volume of junk in the room in front of him. It looked like a musical instrument store had crash landed into the sort of secret society meeting hall that HP Lovecraft might have written about if he'd ever taken hallucinogenics. There were actual collections of paper scraps stuck to the walls and linked with coloured string. Hux had never seen the like of it outside a Hollywood movie.

"Well, I have a king-size and we've been sharing a single person hospital bed for weeks now." Kylo said, picking sadly at the doorframe. "It didn't occur to me that you'd want to go back to sleeping on
"I don't want to do that, Hux..." Kylo continued in a small voice.

"Oh Jesus, Kylo no," he said, catching the the bigger man's face between his hands and turning him to look him in the eye. The scar had healed now, still red and shiny but no longer at risk of reopening. Donal ran a thumb across it soothingly as he continued. "I just wanted somewhere to put my stuff, a space for myself. Even when I was expecting to have to live elsewhere I was still going to try to find a way to spend my nights with you. I swear."

Kylo smiled, a little shakily.

"Besides," he said with a coy smile, "you really should at least buy me dinner before you try to get me into your bed. I'm not that easy you know!"

"Sure thing, General," Kylo said with a mock salute.

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"Thank you, Mr Ren," the delivery boy said handing over the bag of food and accepting a roll of bills that he didn't bother to check. "Ma was getting worried about you, it's good to see you home again. You'll have to come into the restaurant though, tell her what happened to your face."

Donal frowned as Kylo carried their dinner towards the dining table. "You're not buying drugs are you?"

"Why?" Kylo asked without looking at him. "Would that be a problem?"

"Yes, yes it would. Mostly for you since that guy had a fox's tail. You could be getting anything if you're buying from a trickst..."

"Then it's a good thing I'm just paying for a months worth of meals in advance then isn't it?" Kylo said, finally meeting Hux' eye with a look of disappointment. "Drunk me tends to be unable to find his wallet. Ma took pity on me. So now I pay a set amount and she doesn't bother running a tab. John's a good kid, he's doing his best with what nature gave him. Don't judge him just because he's a Kitsune."

Nodding slightly Donal had the decency to look contrite. "Sorry. Force of habit. How do you know about that but you've never seen a werewolf?"

"Does central D.C. look like prime wildlife habitat?"

"Good point. We should travel a bit. When we don't have appointments I mean. To aid our recovery. See what else is hiding out there."

Kylo looked thoughtful as he finished unpacking the food and lead them out onto the balcony.

The views across the city were stunning, far better than Hux had been expecting. Their hospital window had shown them only the courtyard and other windows, and all Kylo's smoke breaks had been at ground level. He'd almost forgotten where they were until now.

Leaning comfortably against the chest high railings and each other's shoulders they ate at a leisurely pace, Kylo pausing now and then to point out the various sights and historical buildings, the tourist
traps and the best bars. Every location had a story. Usually wildly exaggerated and utterly hilarious, each tale was accompanied by dramatic hand gestures that morphed into gentle touches.

It felt a little like Kylo was trying to convince himself that Hux was really there. Subtly Hux moved closer to reassure him. The weather was warm, a muggy August evening, but Kylo was warmer and somehow so welcome where his heat radiated through the cotton of Donal's shirt.

He felt content, relaxed in a way that hadn't been possible during active service. It was the sort of feeling he got just after he stepped out of a plane, the total freedom of the void, nothing but the wind rushing through his hair and the anticipation of finally pulling the cord. He never took risks with his parachute, he wasn't inclined to see how low he could get before he deployed it but the temptation was always there. Somehow being with Ren felt like being permanently in freefall, thrilling but oddly comforting since the ground never seemed to get any closer. Donal was beginning to think that perhaps he'd never really been in love before and this was what everyone else felt like. He was wasn't sure if he should be concerned.

When the sun dipped low enough to paint the sky in orange, gold, pink and purple Donal looked up to find Kylo staring at him with a soft smile.

"I knew you'd look amazing out here at sunset; this light is perfect for your hair." He said fondly, bringing a blush to Hux' cheeks. "Much better than the fluorescent lights in the hospital. It made you look too stern and barely half alive. Now you look like the God of Wildfires, glowing like that, gold dusting your cheek bones every time you blink."

As he spoke he slipped an arm around Donal's back, his massive hand dwarfing the curve of his shoulder joint for a moment before his fingers drifted downward. Hux shivered slightly as gentle fingertips traced the curve of his spine to rest against the line of his belt.

"Ummm thanks," Donal replied, unaccustomed to receiving poetic compliments on his appearance and not entirely sure how to respond. Glancing down at his hands he noticed the banner tied to the outside of the balcony rails and decided to change the subject. "If you like the sunsets here why have you got this up? It must block a lot of the light into the living room?"

It was a wide banner that obscured almost all the railing in front of them. Blood red with a hexagon and circle design Hux had never seen before, it reminded him of the sort of flag some tinpot dictator might have in an eighties spy film. Perhaps Ren imagined himself as a Bond villain.

Ren glanced back into the living room for a moment, his thumb rubbing idly back and forth along the waistband of of Donal's jeans. "This time of year the sun reflects off the tiles during the day and makes it harder to train. Besides," he continued with an impish grin, "it lets me do this without anyone noticing."

"Do wh..." Hux began before he cut himself off with a gasp. Kylo had plunged his entire hand into his underwear, the blunt thickness of his middle finger already stroking insistently along the crevice of his backside.

"Jayzus fuck, Kylo!" He groaned.

"I've been wanting to do this since that first time," Kylo murmured, pressing close to Donal's side, his lips against his ear as his other hand fiddled uncertainly with the buckle of Hux' belt. "Can I? Please?"

"What? Fuck me?"
"Mhmm."

"Right here?" Hux sighed, his head tipping to rest against Kylo's forehead.

"Yeah, right here with the sun on your face, lighting up your hair like its witchfire." Kylo said, his voice still low and so thick with want that Donal thought he might agree to anything if he asked. "You look so beautiful with my cock down your throat, but now I want to hear you. I want to see what you look like when I take you apart."

Hux whined in his throat, fingers of one hand holding the balcony in a white-knuckled grip whilst the other scrabbled to help Kylo open his belt. Awkwardly Kylo pushed his jeans and boxers down to Donal's toes, trailing his fingertips along pale freckled thighs finally free from bruises. His hand felt impossibly hot as he pressed it flat against the golden treasure trail decorating the slight curve of his belly.

The studs of his belts were cold as Kylo pressed close against Donal's back, pushing his questing hand more firmly against his ass. His middle fingertip drew slow firm circles around the pucker of muscle while his other fingers eased his cheeks apart.

"Lube!" Hux hissed, both hands back on the railing, frowning slightly at the dry touch against such a sensitive area.

He felt Kylo grin against his hair as the hand on his stomach raised, palm-up towards his chest. Just when he began to wonder if Kylo expected him to spit into his palm a breeze passed his ear. Kylo snatched two objects out of the air, opening his fingers to display the bottle of lube and foil wrapped condom.

Sighing through gritted teeth Hux tipped his eyes upward in exasperation. "Telekinesis? You have telekinesis and you're using it summon lubricant?!"

"Oh I can do other things with it," kylo said with a laugh, stepping back slightly pour a trickle of cool liquid along the crack of Donal's ass, his fingers eagerly working it around his hole.

Behind him Hux could hear the slight clink and rustle of belt buckles and jean buttons opening but Kylo didn't expand on his statement. He knew he'd regret asking but the curiosity was maddening and the slow slide of the first finger breaching him felt too good. He needed a distraction if he was going to last and getting Kylo to talk about himself seemed like a good option.

"Like wh..." He began, again cutting himself off with another gasp. Kylo's warm flesh and blood hand had returned to its position against his stomach. He could feel the heat of the well lubed fingers working into him and the latex covered glans resting delicately against the small of his back. So what exactly was caressing his rapidly swelling cock with long, slow, torturously firm strokes?

Kylo was pressed against his back now, chest solid against his shoulder blades as Donal tipped his head back exposing his throat to soft trailing kisses. The hand behind him shifted and somehow a third thick finger entered him. He hadn't even noticed the second, everything felt too good. Scissoring wider the fingers twisted, brushing his prostate and he almost shouted, biting his lips hard to keep from coming from this alone.

"Kylo, please, hurry up and fuck me, I can't last like this, please, it's been too long."

The grip on his cock slipped down to tighten at the base of his shaft, helping to hold him back as Kylo eased his fingers free and nudged the head of his cock against Donal's twitching hole. Hux' eyes widened apprehensively. He'd had that cock down his throat more times than he could counts...
but his gag reflex was something he worked on regularly. Whereas it had been an almost embarrassingly long time since he'd last bottomed for anyone, let alone anyone with Kylo's length and girth.

Both of Kylo's hands were on his stomach now, running continuous soothing lines down his front as he slowly pressed forward. As the head of kylo's cock breached the ring of muscles Hux dropped his hands from the rail to twine their fingers together. He was panting at the burn of the intrusion and the soft gasps ruffling his hair under Kylo's mouth, is head tipped back and eyelids fluttering.

"Fuck, you look so goddamn beautiful," Kylo groaned, pushing up onto his toes to drive himself inward with aching slowness.

By the time he was only half way seated Hux was trembling in his arms. Carefully Kylo untangled their left fingers, manoeuvring their hands so Donal's palm was pressed hard against his own stomach.

"Ready?" He asked. His weight shifted slightly as he twisted to better see Hux' face.

Donal groaned, teeth bared as he breathed deeply, easing back a little further onto Kylo's cock.

"Yeah."

"Sure?"

"Fuck me properly or I swear I'm going to kill you."

Chuckling softly Kylo surged forward, sinking balls deep in on last thrust, not so hard that it hurt but enough to drag a litany of swear words from Donal's lips.

Holding himself fully seated Kylo pressed down on Donal's hand, running it in tight circles. Hux' eyes flew open as he realised he could feel the head of Kylo's cock inside him.

He knew he was thin and Kylo was pretty well endowed but... Suspicious, he turned his head to look Kylo in the eye. After a second or two Kylo sniggered and the sensation vanished.

"Telekinesis again?"

"Yeah."

"You basically have a superpower and you're using it for sex tricks?"

"Yeah." Kylo said with a smug grin, drawing slowly out and thrusting back in as the gentle caresses along his cock began again. "You're gonna last longer now though, right?"

"I fucking doubt it." Hux gasped.

The pace Kylo was setting was languorous and gentle, his movements so subtle that anyone seeing them from the road below would just see two boyfriends swaying as they cuddled, pausing occasionally to kiss while they watched the sky slowly turn purple and indigo.

Every thrust dragged lazily over Donal's prostate making his toes curl. The phantom hand on his cock was keeping a rhythm just off enough to hold his orgasm at bay.

It was torture.

It was brilliant.
The sun had disappeared below the horizon and the stars were fighting to shine through the light pollution of the city when Kylo finally began to quicken his thrusts, bringing the rhythm of his hips into time with the stimulation across Donal's cock. They were both soaked in sweat, fingers ghosting across slick hips and thighs, pulling one another closer with every gasping movement.

Kylo's hair was slicked to his face as he kissed along Hux' throat and up to his ear. One of the huge hands on the redheads stomach unexpectedly shifted, sliding down his treasure trail to grip his cock backhanded, his thumb massaging along the vein underneath, brushing balls that tightened instantly at the contact.

"Fuck, I love you." Donal sighed unable to resist any longer, dropping his own hand down to cover Kylo's and catch the come that pulsed into his palm.

Behind him Kylo tensed, pressing in deep as his cock jerked and spasmed, a whispered litany of "Hux, Hux, Hux" against Donal's throat as he reached his own climax.

They stayed like that for a minute or two, Hux fighting to stay upright, Kylo's persistent erection twitching inside him as his own cock slowly softened in Kylo's gentle grip.

Hux considered licking away the cold sticky mess in his hand rather than going to wash up, just to prolong the contact further but without the sun the temperature was falling. He shivered, leaning back against the sweat-cooled mass of Kylo's chest. Inside him he felt Kylo's cock jump at the movement, inexplicably filling out rather than softening. His own cock gave a tired twitch in response.

Kylo laughed quietly, squeezing his fist for a moment before easing back to let his cock slip free.

Suddenly unsteady on his feet, Donal turned to lean his back against the railing. He watched open mouthed as Kylo carefully slid the condom free of his still very much erect cock. Watching the hands tying off the latex sheath he could see that he'd definitely come, so how was he still so hard?

Noticing his focus Kylo blushed and looked away, clearly embarrassed. "Sorry, this happens sometimes..."

"Can you still.. go again?" Donal asked, licking his lips as he stared, fascinated. Unconsciously he began to stroke his come smeared fingers over his own cock. "Right away I mean? It doesn't hurt does it?"

Kylo looked up, his eyes halting at Hux' hand before it finally travelled up to meet his eye. He held his gaze as he moved closer.

"No," Kylo said. His approach was almost predatory, his hands matching Donal's pace along his own cock. "It doesn't hurt. Most people are too sensitive to want it again so soon."

"I'm not most people."

"No."

"Well, you brought me dinner so maybe now you should take me to bed?"

Three steps closed the gap and suddenly Kylo's fingers were in his hair, dragging him into a desperate kiss. By the time he pulled back again they were both struggling to breathe.

"You know, I think I love you too, Hux."
On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair
Warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air
Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering light
My head grew heavy and my sight grew dim
I had to stop for the night

Hux sang to himself as he staggered to the coffeemaker, desperate to get some caffeine in his system before he began the day. Well, the afternoon. He'd had an amazing evening, and the first really excellent night's sleep since he'd woken up in the hospital but now he needed coffee, and food, and to go shopping so he had more than one change of clothes. His father had shipped him more but the courier service had lost it. So here he was in a pair of Kylo's shorts with the waist band knotted to keep them on his skinny hips. Dignified.

There was a cough behind him.

He surprised himself with how calmly he turned. If anyone had done this to him at the barracks, or in the first few weeks of hospital stay he'd probably have attacked. He hated people sneaking up on him and it wasn't Kylo because he'd have seen him leaving the bedroom.

A tiny older woman stood in the centre of the living room, dressed in an expensive Dior suit and flanked by two men whose entire appearance screamed 'government security agents'. They had guns under their jackets. Hux placed his hands wide on the counter behind him.

"Who are you?" The woman asked. She had a smoke roughened voice and an air of authority, cold but not outright hostile. Not yet.

"You're in my flat," Hux said with a half repressed sneer, "so I could ask the same, but I can guess. You're Leia Organa. My name is Major Donal Hux, British Army Parachute Regiment. Your contacts at the Ministry of Defence or the British Embassy can confirm my identity."

"And why are you here?"

Donal narrowed his eyes. Because I'm fucking your son. He thought. Because I'm pretty sure I'm in love with him. Because I was in the bed next to him for a month and he's was going to be left alone without support. As you'd know if you'd visited him even once during his recovery. He was never at his best before his coffee and he resented being ambushed in his own home in someone else's pants. He couldn't be trusted with this.

"Kylo!" He called over his shoulder, "you have some visitors! At least two of them are armed so don't take your time!"

"Ben?!" The woman yelled in the same direction.

That set Hux' teeth on edge.

"Kylo, now please." He added, stressing the name before he turned back to her. "I was his roommate at First Order and now I'm living here so we can support one another's recovery. I will be paying rent if that's your concern."

"My concern is a stranger giving my son access to prescription medications."

"Prescri..." Hux saw red. Other than the brief moment of suspicion the day before, he'd never seen or heard any serious indication that Kylo abused any narcotics. He rarely even took his pain
medication. "Any drugs in this flat are medications either he or I need, because they were prescribed by the highly qualified surgeons at First Order. Madame, I have served in Her Majesty's Armed Forces for over a decade, my father is Commandant at Sandhurst and my grandfather served alongside Winston Churchill himself. I would never do anything to bring dishonour to the country I serve or to my family name and I will ask you never to make that kind of baseless accusation again."

A massive hand gripped his shoulder gently, grounding him before he went any further.

Glancing to the side he sighed with relief that the other man had managed to find some loose trousers. He'd left him sleeping and 'borrowed' his underwear, he'd been mildly worried that a sleep addled Kylo would wandered out naked. Hux needn't have worried- Kylo looked wide awake and absolutely livid.

"Why are you in here?" He demanded of his mother, casually handing Hux his jeans. There was no dignified way for him to put them on though so he let them hang at his side whilst he watched the unfolding train wreck.

"I wanted to see how you were, Ben! Can't a mother do that? And I pay the rent for this place, I don't see why I can't..."

"You heard Donal- he's paying rent now and since you only pay some of it, unasked, you can stop now, and you can leave."

"Ben!"

"No, mommy. We agreed you wouldn't come here without an invitation and I wouldn't show up at the house unannounced. Neutral ground, you agreed." He voice cracked then, and Hux edged closer. "I was in the hospital for a month, mommy, you could have visited any time you wanted."

"Ben, I was busy! I was out of the c..."

"I watch the news, mommy, I saw your press conferences. The hospital is twenty minutes from the Wh..."

"Ben, affairs of sta..."

"Secretary Organa," Hux said calmly, stepping in front of the huge man who was now trembling bodily. "Please. Leave. I'll arrange for some time this week for you to reconnect with your son somewhere neutral, once he's actually settled. He's been through a traumatic time and showing up here with armed men is not helping. Please. Leave. Now."

Hux didn't bother to watch Leia exit trailed by her guards. He had Kylo's sobbing form bundled against his shoulder before the door even closed.

And to think his morning had been going so well.
Chapter 7

I've been writing some short stories for the month long Huxloween challenge. Many of them are set in this verse and you can find on my AO3 profile under the "Huxurious Halloween" series. However this new chapter is to fulfil the 'Day 9: Haunted House' prompt. Please read the tag if you have any triggers.

Hux was having a good morning.

He wouldn’t have expected to given the events of the day before. After Leia had left Kylo had cried for nearly three hours, unwilling to talk about the issue, just sitting on the couch with tears silently running down his face. Donal hadn’t pushed it. He had a world of family issues all his own, and the heat of the moment wasn’t necessarily the best time to start unpacking Kylo’s history.

He knew the basics of course - only child of a politician and a scoundrel made “good”, for a given value of good. The internet had all kinds of dark hints about Han Solo and his operations over the years, but it was hard to tell what was rumour or conspiracy and what was fact. Nephew of a genius pilot, cousin of an academic prodigy, grandchild of a war hero and yet more politicians. Although Leia’s father had been one of the most famous Generals in American history both of his children had been raised by other families. Wikipedia hadn’t been clear on the details of why but Leia had ended up with a family on a par with the Kennedys, while Luke was raised on a farm in Ohio and cut his teeth flying crop dusting planes at age ten.

All that success. So much pressure. And Hux certainly knew what that felt like. So he’d sat and waited, handing Kylo periodic cups of horribly sweet tea like a proper Brit in a crisis.

Eventually Kylo had pulled Hux down into his lap, crying against his ear for a while before he’d asked to take him to bed. On the face of it that had looked like a bad idea, but for Kylo, who exercised three hours every day, it seemed to be precisely what he needed. Long, achingly slow repetitive motions had quieted his mind as if he were meditating and it had very nearly driven Hux insane. They’d slept for a while, limbs entangled until Kylo had woken him for another round. And then another.

The day had passed in a blur until Hux finally looked at his phone and realised it was midnight. They’d been in bed for fourteen hours. They’d hadn’t eaten at all that day.

Over a hastily ordered pair of pizzas- consumed in bed because Hux had doubted he’d be able to walk any time soon- Kylo had slowly opened up about his inability to refuse his mother anything. His unending, soul stunting fear of disappointing her again. His seemingly contradictory need to do impulsive things that made her angry. The fluctuating desire to get as far away from his family as possible and the wish that he could ever live up to their reputation.

A lot of things had gone unsaid. Hux could feel them in the holes they left in the narrative. Kylo would skirt around moments- mentioning stays in various behavioural camps, military school, boarding school, even a stint spent overseas- but he’d never explain the reasons. Occasionally a word would slip out, framing some specific incident in a way that increased Donal’s worry without adding any particular context. The Fire. The Fight. The Collapse. The Temple.
Not for the first time Hux wondered exactly what he'd gotten into and how best to make it work.

Between the two of them they’d worked out some strategies that might help.

A locksmith would be attending later that afternoon to change the security arrangements on the apartment. Not just a new set of keys and locks but a digital viewer they could check on their phones before answering the door. No one would be coming in unless they were invited or they both agreed the person should have a key.

Since Leia was based in D.C. they would pursue the idea of travelling and head out on the road as much as they could, even if it was just day trips for now.

They'd arrange regular windows where Kylo could try to meet with his family members in a neutral location, if he felt like it. None of this arriving unannounced or setting up specific appointments like Kylo was some kind of chore to be completed. Hux didn't have a normal family life but he had a pretty good idea of what a healthy one should look like.

Yes, they had a serviceable plan, Hux had had a wonderful night, and now he was having a good morning. Life was good.

Any sensible observer might have thought that Hux would have learned his lesson from the previous day. For example- that he might perhaps avoid cooking breakfast in the nude, at least until after the locks had been changed. But no. He was in a good mood, singing along to Metallica on the radio. He wanted to surprise his boyfriend with bacon sandwiches, scrambled eggs and hash browns in bed. And for obvious reasons his backside was rather tender, so he'd rather not put on underwear unless he absolutely had to.

Which was why his first meeting with Rey Skywalker began with her opening the apartment door, screaming “oh my god a naked ginger” and then slamming the door again.

Ten minutes later, when Hux was dressed and Kylo had retrieved his giggling cousin from the lobby, she still shook his hand with the statement, “nice penis, Donal, my cousin’s a very lucky guy.” It rather set the tone for the rest of their relationship.

Since breakfast was inevitably ruined in the drama of her arrival, Rey had dragged the pair of yawning, grumpy men to her favourite BBQ place for huge plates of meat and the strongest coffee they could brew.

She had the cheerful demeanor that only an 18 year old could achieve at 11am on a Sunday. It didn't sit well. Donal wanted to hate her, mostly on principle as yet another member of Kylo’s family that had succeeded in seeing more of him than he'd ever intended and as one who hadn't bothered to visit the injured man in the hospital. But she'd addressed his concerns head on as they walked to the restaurant by apologising for not having met him before due to her own hospital stay.

Apparently she knew all about him thanks to the slightly frightening number of picture messages Kylo sent her over the previous five weeks. The first message had the more than slightly creepy caption “OMG look @ this cutie” under a photograph of Hux immediately post surgery with a mass of tubes still down his throat. Which must have been taken two days prior to their first meeting, what with Hux being unconscious for most of that time.

Kylo had merely shrugged at the side eye Donal gave him, as if taking photos of your sleeping roommate without their knowledge was somehow a normal thing. Hux had spent to rest of the journey to the restaurant reading through the rest of the texts Kylo had sent about him while the man
himself guided him along the busy sidewalks.

If anyone thought it strange that the huge scarred and tattoo'd man had his arm linked with a respectable looking, if limping, ginger they all had the good sense to keep quiet about it. As did the hostess who led them to their table, though she chose to seat them close to the open kitchen.

It was a hipsterish sort of establishment. Every item on the menu included either the word “organic”, “sustainable” or “farm-to-table” and at least one ingredient Hux didn't recognise. Kylo and Rey were in their element. Hux just thought it was a bit pretentious. Especially the huge metal dish suspended from the ceiling over open flames to cook the meat, which was mysteriously being treated as a huge selling point rather than a standard method he'd seen at German and Eastern European markets for decades. Still the others seemed impressed by it so he kept his mouth shut.

Hux couldn't work out whether the place was popular with students or just the wealthy elite but between them Rey and Kylo seemed to know at least half the patrons, if not more.

One pair in particular caught Donal’s suspicious eye- a short haired dignified woman in white who might have been a tired thirty or a fresh faced fifty and her male companion whom his grandfather would have uncharitably described as having ‘the Innsmouth look’- that chinless, slack jawed face and unblinking eyes that had characterised the hybrid inhabitants of HP Lovecraft’s ‘fictional’ town. Sheev had- despite having a well known hatred of foreigners himself- once gotten drunk and described Lovecraft as a ‘horrible little racist’. He'd then gone on to tell young Donal a tale of U-Boat sinking sea monsters that had rather disinclined the young man to take anything he read as purely fictional. Whatever the ugly man’s origins, he and his friend had eyed Donal’s exposed parachute regiment tattoo and inclined their heads to him as well as his companions. Something about their bearing made him salute without a second thought.

“I had uh… kinda had an ulterior motive for visiting,” Rey said quietly once they'd all been served and were working on inhaling their coffees.

Kylo nodded as if this were totally expected while Hux tensed but said nothing. Clearly this was yet another family thing.

“I mean obviously I wanted to meet the famous Hux and see how you were doing after…” She made a gesture towards her face indicating his scar, “and I was already in town yesterday with the intention of coming over… But Leia said not to.”

The two men glanced at each other. That at least had been for the best.

“But she and dad both asked me to ask you to come to Han’s birthday at the house this weekend.” Rey said more to the table cloth than to either of them. “It's his seventieth…”

“No. It isn't.” Kylo said flatly. “He doesn't have a birth certificate. No one knows when he was born.”

“It's as close as they could est…”

“I don't want to.”

“Please Kylo, I know you and your father don't get along but…”

“Han is an asshole. You're not old enough to remember…”

“I remember more than you think!” Rey snapped, half rising from her chair before she remembered where they were. “I do. I wasn't old enough to do anything but I swear to you, I do remember. And I
know they both try to smooth things over and pretend everything was all lovey-dovey all the time but I know it wasn't like that. I'm not asking for Han, I'm asking for me.”

“That makes no sense.”

Hux managed to resist the urge to bang his head on the table but still gave in to the temptation to put his hands over his face. “Kylo, just… Listen a minute. Rey, why do you want Kylo to go?”

She smiled gratefully at him. “I wanted you both to come because ‘the cute guy Kylo managed to pick up in a hospital while covered in bandages’ would make a much more interesting and distracting guest than ‘the hot girl pilot Rey picked up when she was supposed to be detailing her dad’s jet’…”

If there was more to this story Hux didn’t get to hear it.

There was a crash from the kitchen as one of the chefs slipped and fell, arms first, onto suspended the cooking surface and from there into the BBQ pit itself. The man's colleagues moved quickly to haul him out of the flames and under a nearby tap. He probably wasn't badly injured. But the screaming, the crackling of fat hitting the fire and the smell of the various food that fell into pit flicked switches that Hux hasn't even realised he had.

He was outside and sitting on the curb with his head between his knees before he’d even realised he was moving.

Rey stared open mouthed at the space that had contained Hux until a few moments ago. The chaos in the kitchen was already well under control but Hux had run like he was under attack.

“Ben? What the fu…”

Kylo silenced her with a wave of his fingers as a white clad figure passed him, one warm hand pressing lightly on his left shoulder in the process. He had only intended to signal that Rey should be quiet but the gesture ended up closing her jaw as well. He shrugged apologetically.

A waitress was already hurrying over to them, probably suspecting a dine-and-dash in the making with the loss of the one respectable looking customer. When she reached the table Kylo spotted a “support our troops” badge amongst the flare she wore on her lapel and he nearly sighed in relief.

“Excuse me, Miss?” He said with the bashful smile that had certainly worked well before his injuries and seemed to be doing the trick even now when her face softened. “I do hope that gentleman will be ok! Unfortunately my friend is a veteran and he was very badly burned in action just over a month ago. I don’t think he'll be able to come back in. Would you mind boxing these for us, please?” He gestured toward the plates and then held out his hand. “And would you please give this to your cook there, towards any medical bills he might have?”

The waitress gazed incredulously at the hundred dollar bill Kylo had placed in her hand, her train thought of still navigating towards a scolding with no idea of how to change direction.

Kylo placed the cost of their meal, plus her tip, onto the table. “I'm going to go outside and see how my friend is doing, could you give the boxed food to my friend here please? Thank you.” He nodded to Rey and walked away from the table, smiling slightly to himself as other patrons started handing more cash to the waitress for the injured chef.

He was never sure in situations like this whether it was just human nature or if his own intense focus on doing good was influenced their behaviour. Kylo didn't do things like this often, usually if he were confronted in public he'd get overwhelmed and turn either angry or embarrassed. Hostility did
always seem to spill over, with even sweet tempered people reflecting his frustration back at him. Somehow since he's found Hux he didn't feel his brain turning that way nearly as often. It was disorientating at times, but he hoped it would last.

He could just see the top of Hux’ head where he was sitting on the curb outside. Kylo hoped the concrete wasn't hurting his knees.

He should have expected it, his inner monologue tried to tell him over the screaming of his brain, how many soldiers had he helped through trauma just like this?

Hux didn't really register the admonishment. He was too focused on trying to separate reality, memory, and fictional construct, and the fact that he knew two conflicting simultaneous realities was not helping.

He knew- deep in his bones and at the very core of his being- that he had lost his legs in Iraq. He tried not to think about it too much and most days he was successful. He walked through his days on feet that he knew he shouldn't have, commanding muscles that had been reduced to torn ribbons with nerves he'd felt burn away. He knew the smell of his own burning flesh, his own bones as they charred. He had known it as he'd laid there negotiating for his life with a being that shouldn't exist and he knew it now as the odour of the restaurant accident clung to the back of his throat.

His senses were conspiring with buried shards of his brain to tell him that he was laid on his back bleeding to death in a cold desert wasteland. Everything that had happened since- the hospital; the werewolf; the operations; the beautiful wonderful lunatic- took on the consistency of mist and seemed to blow away from him, curling tendrils of thought that evaporated the harder he tried to grab for them.

He could feel the ground under him. He could. The pavement was sun-hot under his backside. He wasn't wearing his full combat gear, he was wearing a T-shirt that pulled tight across his back and jeans that cut in around his thighs and his knees. He could feel the sun on his exposed arms and on the crown of his head. He wasn't cold. He wasn't. Hux shifted, wrapping his arms around his legs and pressing his face against his knees. His knees that absolutely were there; his knees that ached where the deep scars were still healing around the replacement ceramic structures; his knees and lower legs that could sense the touch of his fingers and the warmth of his breath through his trousers; that were not on fire or blown to shreds; that were real; that were his, his, his…

A cool hand settled at the base of his spine. It was a gentle, tentative touch from a hand much smaller than the one he'd been expecting.

“Can you hear me?”

Hux tipped his head, keeping his cheek pressed against his knee. It was the woman in white, from the restaurant. Even up close he still couldn't estimate her age. She had soft eyes in a face that seemed not so much stern but determined, and rigid upright posture that flicked all the switches in his brain that a lifetime of military exposure had labelled as “commanding officer in the room”. He tried to sit up straighter, his body automatically wanting to shift out of this informal slump, but her hand held him in place.

“I heard Ben telling your waitress that you were an injured vet, though I could tell you'd served just by looking at you. You're very young, so I guess it happened recently?”

Hux blinked slowly at her. His father had trained him in the proper way to address an officer since he was first able to speak but all those conditioned reflexes were slipping through his mental fingers,
leaving him with one solid marble of knowledge.

“His name is Kylo, ma’am.”

The woman smiled slightly. “I've known him since before he was born…”

“Forgive me ma’am but I've known my father since he was just a Captain but I’d never dream of addressing the Commandant as anything other than his title or his rank as Major General. Just because you knew Kylo before he changed his name…”

The woman laughed, a low melodious sound that seemed rusty with lack of use but beautiful nonetheless. “Good point young man. Good point. I apologise. And what rank should I address you with?”

“Major Donal Hux, British Paratroop Regiment… formerly.” He added, the recollection of his medical retirement hitting him like a punch in the gut.

“Hello, General Mothma.”

Kylo’s deep rumble was like the promise of a thunderstorm to the parched and drought ridden expanse of Donal’s soul, and he nearly wept with the absurdity of it all. How the hell had he fallen so hard so fast?

Part him instinctively panicked at having been insubordinate towards a General- even though she was clearly a member of another country’s armed forces and he was no longer a serving officer- but it was a small quiet voice that was easily ignored once he'd shifted his gaze enough to look directly at Kylo.

“Hello, Kylo dear,” General Mothma said, her smile growing when Kylo’s face showed clear confusion at the use of his legal name, “your friend here was just reminding me that it's polite to use people's proper form of address.”

“In that case it would be more correct to call him my boy friend,” Kylo said with a smile, “are you ok Donal? Rey’s getting the food, we can go home and eat there if you like?”

Hux nodded.

“We’re going home now General,” Kylo continued, “but I suppose we'll see you at Han’s birthday party?”

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Kylo kept his arm clamped around Donal’s waist for the entire walk back to the apartment. Hux wasn't sure if it was just the solidity of his hold or some manifestation of his telekinesis but he felt lighter and moved easier, so he offered no objection. Still there were some things they needed to discuss.

“We’re really going to go to this birthday party? After all the plans we made last night?” Hux tried to keep the judgement out of his voice but he really didn't think this was a good idea.

“Yeah, I owe Rey a lot,” Kylo said, shaking his head as Hux eyed the scar across his face meaningfully, “I mean it. She’s the only one in the family who’s ever treated me as if I were normal, not scary or embarrassing or crazy, just me. And I know how coming out can be, especially since she was always ‘the good one’, and if I can make it easier, then I probably should.”

“She can hear you, you know,” Rey sang out from a few paces behind them.
“Private conversation here.” Kylo snapped.

“In the middle of the street!”

“Shush. Adults are talking!”

“I might be 18 but I'm the one with the degree, you're the one with the undecided haircut and clothes that don't fit right!”

Hux shook his head despairingly but left them to bicker. He hadn't had cousins, he had no idea how these things worked. Nor had he ever really come out. His father had caught him reading a book on Alexander the Great when he was twelve and swapped it for a far more accurate one from the locked section of Sheev’s library, with no more explanation than that “the description of his relationship with Hephaestion is more accurate”. That had certainly been an education. Sheev himself had been far less subtle when he’d sent Hux off to university with a thumbs up and a gift box containing extra strong condoms and specialist lubricant. Sometimes Hux wondered how he'd managed to grow up to be as mentally well balanced as he had.

“Besides, I think I'll be able to cope with being in the grounds better if you're with me.”

Hux blinked, the rib creaking squeeze of Kylo’s arm breaking his reverie.

“What?” He had realised he was being addressed and hadn't really heard what Kylo had said.

“Kylo doesn't like being near the former site of the spooOoOOky summer house,” Rey said helpfully, “I say former because he burnt it down like a totally psycho when I was six months old and got sent to anger management camp.”

Rey laughed, not paying attention as Kylo stared stony faced at the ground.

Oh shit, Donal’s mind intoned helpfully. This was a really bad idea.

Oh shit indeed.

Google had not been helpful on this one, not that he'd really expected it to be. There were some search terms the engines logic function hadn't really been calibrated for.

Still, the good old method of late night phone calls to the kind of dusty bookshops that always seemed to have closed down for good several decades earlier had been much more helpful.

Hux only had contacts in Europe and midnight in D.C. was practically bedtime for the not-quite-human people he tapped for favours. But they knew him of old, and they trusted him to always do the least harm, so they gave him what answers they could. Mostly more telephone numbers, even a few rare email addresses and now, after two dozen phonecalls and the extraction of three vials of blood (and other more valuable fluids) Hux was slipping out onto the moonlit streets of the dozing city ready to complete his mission.

Kylo had slept through the entire thing, still exhausted from his emotional encounter with his mother, and Hux was extremely grateful for that. There were some aspects of his life he wasn't ready to share just yet.

They’d ended up piling Rey and her girlfriend, Jessika Pava, into the back of Kylo’s vintage Plymouth Fury for the five hour drive up to the Hamptons.
Hux had worried about the presence of two strangers making the journey tense and uncomfortable, but the two lively women were a blessed distraction for Kylo’s honestly terrifying road rage. It had surfaced more or less the instant they’d pulled out of their apartment block’s underground garage and peaked in New York in an incident that Hux had almost been certain was going to end with them all getting shot. Fortunately nothing had happened, but it was a welcome relief to be able to turn around and talk to someone with some kind of grip on their sanity.

Jessika had turned out to be a fellow Brit, a military child just like him whose mother had emigrated from Singapore before she was born. They’d talked about the various bases they’d lived on as children and compared Jessika’s choice to fly commercially with Hux’ decision to become a military parachutist rather than a civilian one. The conversation had drifted briefly to the joy and freedom of flight but Rey, apparently picking up on the darkening of Donal’s mood steered them away from that topic, segueing onto the topic of parents with strange jobs. Jessika, having both parents in the military couldn’t entirely sympathise but Kylo, with his unpredictable father, and Rey and Donal with their odd mothers had found lots to talk about.

It was strange how many things in common there were between Rey’s mother and the woman Hux always thought of as simply “Jade” since even ‘birth-mother’ seemed to hold a greater implication of closeness than the reality had ever contained. They were both flighty, inconstant hippy types, prone to wandering off for years at a time.

They even shared the same name, though of course “Jade” wasn't Mara’s real name, just a nickname that Donal’s stepmother had insisted the family use to refer to her. Hux could understand that, since his stepmother’s name was Maratelle and Sheev had cruelly called his son-in-law’s new wife ‘Mara-Two’ for several years. It hadn't even been that Sheev felt any particular love for his wayward daughter- he clearly valued Hux as his grandson far more than he'd ever valued Mara as his daughter- but the old man was an arsehole who liked to needle Brendol with the power he held over the family group.

Hux hadn't seen his mother in the last two decades, and hadn't seen all that much more of her in the years before that. The occasional christmas visit where she’d tried to pretend that abandoning her three month old son was an entirely reasonable thing for a mother to do; sporadic letters talking more about her adventures than asking about her child; rare gifts that usually consisted of books that were always appropriate for an age that Donal hadn't been- either far too young or far too old- or, on one memorable and mentally scarring occasion, aimed at sex other than Donal’s own. Rey had howled with laughter as Hux describe unwrapping a book about menstruation at age nine and countered with the weird gifts she’d received but always found a way to make use of.

She’d received “The Daring Boys Guide To Danger” one Christmas and had completed all the tasks in it within a month, including building a tree house without parental supervision. The sections on swordplay and metalwork had inspired her academic career and scared the shit out of her father.

Although she still saw her mother at least once a year her parents had been estranged for at least a decade. It seemed to be the common opinion between all three of the passengers who knew Luke Skywalker that the man was actually engaged in a secret relationship with a senior military pilot and friend of Leia, but the old Don’t-Ask-Don’t-Tell laws had kept everyone from talking about it for so long that it seemed awkward to ask them about it now. Apparently the man had the unlikely name of ‘Wedge’ Antilles but no one seemed to know whether that was his actual name or a call sign.

The conversation had drifted to weird family names and the journey had passed in pleasant laughter that mostly covered Kylo’s sweary outbursts. All in all it was a surprisingly enjoyable drive.
There were no other members of the Skywalker-Organà-Solo family at the house when they arrived, just a team of harassed staff running around trying to set up for the party to Leia’s exacting standards.

The event itself would be taking place the next day but Leia wanted the family to have brunch together in the morning as a more intimate celebration before the five hundred guests arrived for the evening party. As such Luke, Leia and Han would be arriving by nightfall, but until then the younger people would have free reign of the house.

Instructions had been left to put Kylo in his childhood room with Rey next door and their guests in another wing entirely.

Of course Hux and Jessika had moved into their respective partner’s room the instant Leia’s assistant went back down stairs.

Kylo’s room was… disturbing. It was white. Entirely. The walls, floors, furniture and soft furnishings were all stark, bright white. There were no other decorations.

Hux had tried to cover his discomfort at this by commenting how his own room at the Palpatine estate was probably still exactly how he'd left it—with his childhood spaceships hanging from the ceiling and his patchwork quilt on the bed—and how odd he'd find it to come home to find his space redecorated like this. His heart had frozen in his chest when Kylo had replied that the room was how he’d left it. Leia had apparently been convinced that her wayward son was overstimulated. She had tried to reduce the problem each time he’d been sent away from home until he’d been left with a wardrobe of unbranded clothes and this blank room. Suddenly his wild appearance made much more sense.

Eager for a distraction from this particular instalment in what seemed to be the 26 part epic ‘The Tragic Life of Kylo Ren’, Hux suggested a tour of the property.

It was exactly what he’d expected from a lifetime of American movies - big, bright and wholesome. Kylo stood out like a Xenomorph at a children’s daycare centre. The sooner they could get back to their own home, the better.

They abandoned the tour of the house after the seventh time one of them walked into a low hanging light fitting. Kylo’s mother was barely over five feet tall and had apparently decorated the property to suit herself rather than the taller male members of the family. Hux insisted they go outside before someone lost an eye.

The woodland at the fringes of the property was dense but not deep, extending only thirty or forty feet to the perimeter fence in most places. The deepest part was also the newest, the group of trees having been extended with a new plantation of trees that seemed to be less than twenty years old. Hux had reluctantly learned some land management skills on his grandfather’s estate and he recognised artificial planting patterns when he saw them.

The explanation for this was a small square patch of ruined earth just behind the new trees. It was fire-blackened and utterly dead, which was mysterious given the density and age of the trees around it.

Kylo wouldn't go near it. Hux, once he was a pace or two away, agreed that that was a very wise decision.

He kept his hand clamped over the objects in his pocket all the way back to the house.
Dinner was a stilted, awkward affair. Han and Luke, with Wedge in tow, had arrived just before
nightfall but Leia was needed at the White House and couldn't get away. Kylo had barely spoken to
anyone while Jessika seemed to have frightened herself into silence in the presence of her boss who
was father of her girlfriend. Hux tried to engage the pilots in conversation but it was an uphill
struggle that even Rey’s perpetual good cheer couldn't alleviate. It had been a relief to retire for the
night.

“What’s that?” Kylo muttered as Hux emptied his pockets onto the nightstand. Keys, phone, spare
pain meds, sugar packets that had take three hours to track down, and The Object. “Looks like that
keychain thing the bad guy in The Mummy had.”

“What? Imhotep?” Hux deflected, knowing full well what Kylo meant since the first one he'd ever
made had actually been modelled on the one from the movie.

“Noooo, the thief, the one who works for the mummy. You know, he had a collection of religious
symbols on his belt and that's how the mummy realised he could communicate with him?”

“Oh yeah, that.” Hux said with feigned disinterest. “This is just a good luck charm my grandfather
gave me.”

It was a lie and he was sure Kylo would have picked up on it if Hux hadn't chosen that precise
moment to push his trousers towards the floor. Hux was too worried, and honestly too disturbed by
the blankness of the bedroom, for sex but languid mutual handjobs turned out to be enough to lull
them both to sleep after the long journey...

He didn't like sleepovers. He didn't want to have a stupid sleepover with all these stupid people in the
first place. They weren't his friends anyway, they were just the children of his mom’s friends. He
couldn't even remember all their names and now he had to lay on the hard wooden floor of this
stupid, drafty, spider infested summer house and listen to them snoring while he didn't get any sleep
at all.

Kill them, then.

What? Where had that thought come from? It had seemed so… Calm, so… Reasonable, so…
Caring. (What? No! Where the hell was he? Why would he think that was reasonable?!) They don't like you any more than you like them, boy. They're all scared of you. They've heard
about your special little talents. They all think you're a witch. My mother paid their parents to
bring them here, no, no they're here because mommy is an important lady and their parents have to
meet with her, no that's just a lie your mother told you so you'd stay out here.

He nodded, it all seemed so… True, so… Right.

You hate them and they hate you. They've probably been plotting against you, boy, they probably
made a plan before they even came here. They know what you are, boy, they know what you can
do and they won't allow it.

He looked round the room at the sleeping boys, his eye skipping over the bigger form of Poe, five
years his senior and so, so beautiful with his big dark eyes and warm skin that looked so different
from his own mole-spattered limbs. (What? He didn't have moles, he had freckles. And he'd only just
met Poe, he hadn't known him as a child.) He stared at the others, the strangers. Should he, could he
kill them? Why? Why did he want to do that?!
Don't you want someone to love you? Cold breath ghosted across his ears, as if two people were leaning against his shoulders. Don't you want someone who can understand you? Icy hands with the texture of twigs were touching him. Touching his hair, touching his face, his chest, his back, pressing into his mouth, pulling at his clothes, touching places no one was ever ever supposed to touch… kill them and I can be real, boy, I can love you properly and teach you everything you could ever want to know about your power, he wanted to scream but there was a weight crushing his chest, iron bands closing around his throat, so hot they burned, come on, boy, kill them, kill him, make me real, set me free…

...there was paper on his tongue...

...there were skeletal hands creeping down his thighs...

...there were great monstrous flesh-and-blood hands crushing his windpipe...

...there were thin desperate hands prising at his teeth…

... the paper dissolved, spilling salt and silver across his tongue, it burned and burned and burned... He opened his mouth to spit and a ball of jagged metal was forced passed his teeth...

He tried to scream but the mass sliced into his flesh and burned like a magnesium fire and it was too much take wedged as it was inside his very body...

Kylo collapsed, limp and unconscious across Hux’ struggling form. It took all his strength but he managed to shove the huge man up and off him with one great heave of his trembling, oxygen starved arms.

He landed on the rug, and Hux thanked whatever God had been watching for that one small mercy.

Hux could see himself in the mirror of the motel room bathroom from where he sat on the edge of the bed. He looked like shit. How he'd managed to convince the front desk clerk to rent him a room in this state he might never know.

The fact that he'd also successfully hauled Kylo from the back of the Fury into the room without arousing suspicious was probably proof of the existence of some kind of God.

If he looked like shit then Kylo looked no better. There was dried blood all over his face and chest where it had drooled out of his mouth from the cuts Donal’s protective spell had left behind.

Hux had broken or chipped at least four of Kylo’s teeth getting the damn thing in there, and he'd been badly bitten in the process. If he hadn't managed to toss the sugar-paper parcel of holy-water-salt, white oak, clove, garlic and silver in there first he'd probably have lost a finger. The old tricks really were the best.

Absently he stroked Kylo’s hair where the man slept fitfully behind him, his other hand coming up to rest against his own throat. The deep red marks from Kylo’s fingers were starting to darken to purple now and Hux wasn't sure how he was going to hide them from the others at the party tomorrow. They'd have to go back to the house early, before anyone came to their room to wake them and found an empty bed with blood and semen stained sheets. That would be a disaster, even worse than Kylo showing up with a ruined mouth and a battered boyfriend. He hadn't woken yet and Hux still needed to assess the extent of his injuries. Hell, he still needed to get the spell back out of his mouth.

Whatever had possessed him hadn't followed them beyond the bounds of the property. Hux had felt
it leave when he'd made off with his half naked boyfriend in the back of an unfamiliar car in a
country he'd never driven in before. Perhaps the thing had just not wanted to risk his driving, but
Rey’s tales of Kylo’s improved behaviour away from home as a child seemed to prove that the thing
was limited to one location.

Hux would have to keep a careful eye on Kylo the entire time they were on the property and there
was no way in hell Hux would ever let them sleep there again. Even after he arranged for someone
more experienced to exorcise the damn place. Again his mind went back to Kylo’s wounds. He
needed to see which had burnt the most so he could work out who to actually contact to remove the
spirit/demon/monster/arsehole-who'd-possessed-his-boyfriend.

He'd spent his whole life dealing with things from any number of realms and dimensions with
opinions on humanity ranging from fond curiosity to burning hatred. He had absolutely no sympathy
for a thing that would possess and molest a child and try to compel him to murder other children,
then torment the kid for decades before possessing him again and trying to have him murder his
boyfriend. Hux was going to remove this thing with extreme prejudice so they could live their life
together in peace.

Not once- not when he came out of Kylo’s dream-memory to find his boyfriend's hands around his
throat; or when he'd cleaned the bite wounds on his own hands with iodine; or when Kylo finally
woke, broken and remorseful and barely able to speak; or even when Leia muttered something
disgusting about BDSM practices under her breath at the party- not once, not even for a second, did
Hux consider ending his relationship with Kylo Ren.

Someone needed to be on Kylo’s side in this world and despite the bruises that lingered for weeks,
Hux still couldn't imagine anywhere else he'd rather be.
This chapter was originally a prompt fill for day 27 of Huxloween, but it ended up sitting better in the main fic. Sorry it isn’t as long as the last update

Every book he’d ever read had described blood as tasting like copper, but Kylo had always thought it tasted like fear.

The smell and the sight of it had never bothered him. He’d always been comfortable butchering meat or dealing with wounds, even when he was a small child. But the taste…

He knew why of course. That one horrible night twenty years ago.

Yes, he knew exactly why the taste of blood terrified him, and that’s why he didn’t move when he woke up in a strange bed with his mouth filled with the taste of liquid dread.

What had he done this time?

It had been so long since this had last happened. Eight damn years in fact.

He stared at the inside of his eyelids and tried to remember while every fibre of being told him to leave it buried.

What had been the last time - the fight with Uncle Lando at his own eighteen birthday party when he’d woken up with imprint of the man’s teeth cut into his knuckles or when he’d pushed Wedge Antilles down the stairs? Or had that been the same night?

Why did that matter when he was trying to remember what he’d done this time?

His mind circled back around. Had he been fighting with Rey?

His shoulder and part of his face felt wrong. Somehow he associated that with Rey. Was that it?

No.

His brain presented him with that incident in technicolour detail- they’d both been foolish, yes, dueling with red hot swords was possibly the stupidest thing a grown man could do, but he’d definitely been aware of what he was doing.

The hospital. The man in the other bed. Hux?

The addling smog of unconsciousness melted away to be met with blind panic. The last thing he remembered was falling asleep in his old bed in his old room with Hux tucked against his chest. And now he was somewhere strange with a mouthful of blood. Where was Hux?

He tried to sit up with a shout that his mouth mangled into a wordless noise of pain. The room was dark except for a pool of bright light from a doorway that rendered the figure by the bed as an angular silhouette.
A hand pressed against his chest, pushing him back towards the mattress. It felt too thin, too sharp and skeletal. Kylo caught it in his fist, pushing back when the delicate bones of the wrist ground together and its owner hissed in pain.

What?

The hand relaxed, deliberately falling limp despite his assault. It didn’t fight back. A second hand didn’t catch in his hair or close on his throat. A boney knee didn’t press down on his chest.

It was warm.

“Kylo? Could you let me go, please?” Hux said in a voice that grated and rattled like a rusted gate.

He tried to ask what was wrong with his voice but his tongue felt too thick to obey his commands and he managed little more than “Huth? Wah…” before the pain hit him.

Why did he feel like he’d been chewing broken glass?

“Now please, Kylo, while I can still feel my fingers.”

He let go.

The figure by the bed sat carefully on the edge of the mattress and reached out toward his face. Kylo shrank back. The hand stopped.

“I need to look at your mouth, Kylo, please.”

Stop using my name like that, he thought as loudly as he could, like you’re trying to calm a wounded animal.

“Aren’t I?”

Why do you sound like that? I can’t see you! How do I know it’s you?!

“Can’t you… I don’t know, doesn’t the inside of my head feel different?”

I guess.

Kylo reached up and gently felt along the outstretched hand to a slim rounded shoulder, warm through a thin t-shirt and from there to a stubble-coated cheek. The man sat patiently as he mapped the contours of sharp cheekbones and a rounded jawline. He could feel the laughter lines around Hux’ mouth, though the plush cupid’s bow was turned down now and felt heavy with sadness.

Hux twitched his lips, pressing a kiss to Kylo’s thumb. “Better?”

“Mm hmm.”

“Okay, you need to let me look at your mouth now.” Hux said, leaning forward to grip Kylo’s jaw.

He opened his mouth, blinking hard as the torch of Hux’ phone shone in his eyes for a moment before it was redirected to it proper target.

Hux made a few thoughtful noises, turning Kylo’s head this way and that as he angled the light. “Well, there's a lot of cuts and you've five chipped teeth, but I don't think anything needs stitches and the teeth can wait a day or two.” He pressed two cups into Kylo's hands, one warm and full, the other empty. “Here, swill this around your mouth then spit it out into the other cup. It might take you
a few rounds to get through the whole cup. Then I'll check again but I think you'll be fine.”

What is this? Kylo asked silently as he took a sip, then half choked at the taste. This is salt! Urgh this amount of salt cannot be a healthy!

“That why I said swill with it!” Hux exclaimed, his voice cracking horribly on the aspirated consonant. He paused to cough before continuing more carefully. “Salt water is the best way to clean mouth wounds but you're not supposed to drink it.”

Hux’ hand fitfully rubbed over Kylo’s knee while he swished the warm liquid around his mouth, flinching at the sting but doing his best to coat every surface. It wasn’t just his tongue that ached- his gums, his palette, his cheeks and even part of his throat seemed to be injured.

“How do you feel?” Hux asked after a minute or two. The back of one hand pressed briefly against Kylo’s forehead in a gesture that felt oddly tender.

Like I ate broken glass. Hux, what did I do?

“It’s ok Kylo, no one was hurt,” he said slowly. It sounded like he was trying to forced cheer but his distorted voice spoiled the effect. “Thankfully no one saw me dragging you out on a rug in just your underpants. I just have to hope that no one checks your room before we get back because there’s quite a lot of blood on those sheets.”

BLOOD?! HUX, WHAT DID I DO?

“Nothing, you didn’t do anything, but when it became clear that the thing in your body wasn’t you I had to get rid of it.” There was a rustle from the bedside table followed by a metallic jingling. “Do you remember asking about my keychain?”

Kylo nodded. “Yeath.”

“It’s exactly what it looks like,” Hux said, turning the mass of jagged metal in his hands. “I had no idea what that thing was, so I just got as many blessed and sanctified symbols together as I could.”

And you put it in my mouth?

“Maximum possible surface area in contact with as many symbols as possible. I mean, ideally you’d hold it in your hand but… your hands were busy so that was the best available option. It looks like a few of the symbols burned as well as cut you, I’ll take some photos when it’s light enough and that might give us a clue what it is.”

He’s called Snoke.

“Snoke? You’ve spoken to it? Can you tell me what happened? Originally, I mean?”

I… Hux… can you… can you come and sit up here, so I can hold you, I… I don’t like…

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want…” Hux began as he carefully switched positions to sit against the headboard.

Kylo shifted to rest his head on one thin thigh and wrapped his arms around Hux’ waist. He still couldn’t see Hux’ face but his hands were stroking his biceps.

It’s okay, I just… I didn’t exactly talk to him, he talked at me for years. Leia called him an imaginary friend and she told me off at first for crying because of course, you control the figments of your own
imagination, don’t you? So why did he make me cry? And besides wasn’t I too old for that? Then I burned down the summer house to try to get rid of him and the ‘imaginary friend’ was reclassified as ‘auditory hallucination’. Either way I wasn’t allowed to talk about him at home because it was ‘distressing’. But he only ever contacted me at home so… That was the hardest part- I was mostly okay when I was away from the house, except I was a scrawny kid locked up with a bunch of other unstable kids and I started learning behaviours from them...

“This doesn’t sound like the beginning of the story Kylo, what happened in the summer house?” Hux asked gently.

Han and Leia were hosting this huge house party. A whole weekend thing with golf and going out on yachts and fireworks. It was supposed to be half housewarming and half political rally. Leia’s career was really taking off and she wanted to connect with the new neighbourhood. As if she didn’t already know everyone around here anyway. I hated it. I’d liked The Vineyard, I didn’t want to move. Then she decided that since a lot of her friends also had kids we should all have a sleepover in the ‘quaint little summer house’. She framed it as a way to make new friends but we all knew it was to keep us away from the main house. I don’t remember what happened. I remember his voice. I remember it was convincing. I remember his hands and his breath and… I don’t know... I think he tried to do things that I didn’t understand at the time. I know that Poe had to knock me out with a chair. I know the other kids complained of horrible nightmares and ran out screaming. I don’t know what I did. Poe was older, he just kept saying “it’s gonna be okay buddy” in that way he does, but he’s always refused to say what happened. But once Snoke got in he just wouldn’t leave. I lost whole weeks of time during school vacation but no one would ever tell me what I did.

Hux was still stroking his arms. His fingers tightened comfortingly when Kylo shook with frustration. Kylo glanced down at the contact and frowned.

What happened to your hands? Kylo asked, the panic he’d felt earlier beginning to rise again.

There were bite marks and open wounds all over both Hux’ hands and the skin was stained yellow with antiseptic.

“Nothing.”

Why won’t you let me look at your face? Kylo asked again, wriggling out of Hux’ grip to turn in the bed. It was too dark to see clearly. Hux tried to catch his hand but he was quicker in reaching the bedside lamp. He instantly regretted it.

“You didn’t do this,” Hux said quietly, the grating of his voice somehow amplified by the bruises around his throat and the bright red of his eyes. After a second he turned his face away, his lashes lowered to cover the hemorrhaging. The glittering gold as he blinked made it look even worse.

Kylo whined deep his throat, backing away down the bed. You said my hands were ‘busy’ not that I was trying to kill you.

“You didn’t do this Kylo, this was Snoke.”

“Those are my handprints around your neck.” He said thickly. It hurt to talk but he just couldn’t stand to be inside the warm mental softness that Hux was projecting right now. Kylo had hurt him, he should hate him. This veneer of niceness just wasn’t fair. “My teeth marks on your hands. I hurt you. It looks like I tried to kill you, why aren’t you screaming at me?”

“Do I sound like I could scream at you, even if I wanted to?” Hux said irritably, standing with a groan when Kylo moved to put the bed between them. “You didn’t do this.”
“Stop saying that!”

“**You didn’t.** Jayzus fuck Kylo do you **REALLY** think you’re the first person to try to kill me? Bearing in mind the fact that we fucking met in the hospital just after I’d had my legs blown off in a fucking warzone?!’’ Hux spat, following Kylo around the bed. “You were not in control of your body. Blaming you for this would be like blaming you for hitting me during a epileptic fit.”

“I tried to chok…”

“**You didn’t try any bloody thing at all!** You were possessed! For fuck’s sake Kylo, if anyone is to blame it’s your fucking parents for keeping you there all that time. Snoke was using you.”

“You barely even know me!” Kylo shouted. Behind the bed, the wall shook as someone in the next room thumped on it.

“You’re right,” Hux hissed, limping away and then turning back like he couldn’t work out what to do with himself. “But I’ll tell you something I **do** fucking know Kylo, six weeks ago I was dying in the middle of some fucking desert talking to an ifrit about how to stay alive. I fucking lost both legs at mid-thigh in the middle of fucking nowhere. I should be dead. I’m only here because of luck and sihir. Do you really think I’m going to walk away from a love like this over a petty fucking possession Kylo? Considering you’re already bloody psychic and telekinetic and you’ll probably turn out to a shapeshifter or have fucking wings or something.”

“What?” Kylo had lost the thread some time ago. What the fuck was he talking about?

“Yes, I’m smaller than you- by two inches and probably a hundred pounds- but that doesn’t make me helpless. I was a goddamn Major, for fuck’s sake. I got that thing out of you and I got you out of there, six weeks off a double fucking knee replacement, and you are not a light man.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh as if you don’t work for it!”

“No. I mean it.” Kylo said quietly sitting back down on the edge of bed. “I do, thank you.”

Hux huffed and sat down next to him. Slowly Kylo lower his head onto his shoulder, being careful not to press against his neck.

“Did you really lose your legs?”

“Yeah, but I wished them back I think.”

“It didn’t work properly, then.” Kylo said. He gently traced the path of one scar from the hem of Hux’ boxers down over his knee.

“It was a strange wish. I think it worked the way it was meant to.”

“What did you wish?”

Hux laced their fingers together. “Not to be broken any more.”

They sat in silence until the beep of a phone alarm drew Hux back to his feet. “We need to get back.”

“Ok.” Kylo said, looking around the room only for his jeans and a shirt to hit him in the face.
“Thanks. Hux, speaking of broken, what happened to the coffee machine?”

There was a sad little pile of broken plastic on the chest of drawers. Hux shrugged.

“I needed boiled water for your mouth.” He said, like that explained everything. “Which reminds me, put these in your pockets, I want you eat one every hour while we’re at your parent’s house. Don’t worry, we won’t stay the night again.”

Kylo looked at the pile of small white objects in his palm. “Sugar packets? You want me to eat sugar and paper?”

“It’s exorcised salt and edible tapioca paper made with holy water.”

“Why is this a thing you have?”

Pausing in the process of pulling on his jeans Hux waved an injured hand. “It stopped my fingers getting bitten off so it’s worth having. Eating those should keep that thing out of your head, and if not I still have this.” The collection of holy symbols rattled before being stuffed in his pocket.

“So either I get to enjoy twelve hours of Han’s company or I get more of my teeth smashed. What a choice!”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine!”

It was not fine. But only in a horrible parents kind of way, which probably still counted as a win, given the alternative.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay in updating the main story. However, there's now twenty side stories to go with this fic if you haven't seen the rest of the series yet.

This chapter includes some dark details from the plot of American Gothic including mentions of rape and murder. They aren't graphic but please take care if you have triggers.

[Trinity, South Carolina, present]

The noise that came from Phasma’s driveway was disturbingly primal. More akin to a wounded animal than a human.

Kylo had run down stairs wearing what appeared to be just Donal’s boxer shorts and lept out of the house in his bare feet when he’d heard that there might be damage to his precious car. It was one of the few things he’d ever managed to buy entire with his own earnings. A rust bucket when he first found it, Kylo had spent nearly a year during his travels working for a mechanic so he could restore it in the evenings. Apparently Kylo had wanted to recreate the circumstances of the book as much as possible, which was frankly rather unsettling given that the book in question was Stephen King’s Christine. It must have been only a strange twist of his bizarre luck that had stopped him somehow finding an genuinely haunted Plymouth Fury.

Of course, if the car had been like the one in the book it wouldn’t now be sitting sad and useless on the driveway in a pool of a vital automotive fluids. It would already be out enacting the revenge that Kylo was muttering about as he stalked around Phasma’s garden, punching various shrubs.

“That car is basically his best friend.” Hux told Phasma in a whisper. They were watching from the porch, both aware that there was no benefit in approaching him when he was so upset.

“It can be repaired.”

“Yes, just like his face and my knees- imperfectly, with time and a lot of money. Classic car parts don’t just grow on trees, Captain.”

Phasma gave him a look that suggested that while she wasn’t an idiot she was also smart enough not to argue when everyone was already upset.

Somewhere in the darkness overhead a crow chattered.

“Kylo, come inside.” She shouted. Below her the huge man turned. The movement released various twigs and leaves that Hux hadn’t noticed were beginning to hover around him. That wasn’t a good sign for his mental state. And it certainly wasn’t something he should be allowing to happen in public right now. “I know you’re angry, but if you come inside we can spar. Burn some of that emotion off so we can think clearly.”

Kylo stared at her for a moment before turning to look sadly at his car, like he was unwilling to leave
it alone and injured in the dark.

“Whatever happens we’ll fix it.” Hux said when Kylo failed to move.

Finally he nodded and headed back into the house, giving the Fury one last pat on the hood as he went.

Hux was doing his best not to look at the floor.

In his haste to get to his beloved car Kylo had cut up his feet on gravel and twigs. So now he was leaving thin smears of red on Phasma’s training mats as they fought from one side of the room to the other.

Phasma seemed to be ignoring the mess in favour of trying to land a blow on Kylo that didn’t catch either his face or his shoulder. Of course Kylo had realised this and was deliberately leading with both body parts while he proceeded to knock her flat every 90 seconds or so.

It should have been a fair fight since they were evenly matched in height and muscle, plus Phasma had proper training, but her unwillingness to risk incapacitating him was holding her back.

Kylo was burning off his energy but he wasn’t getting the benefit of losing the frustration and anger.

“Just punch him!”

“Oh, I love you too, Donal, you bastard!”

Phasma snorted, but finally swept Kylo’s legs out from under him by combining it with a jab to his right shoulder.

He shouted in either irritation or pain, but Hux saw a little of the tension bleed from his frame when he jumped back to his feet. Good.

“So you think the Sheriff did this then?” Hux asked, pulling out his notebook to review what they’d said before the phone call about Phasma’s car.

“I’ll fucking kill him.” Kylo muttered. He took a swing at Phasma then stumbled when she dodged.

“No, you won’t, you don’t have enough blank skin left for the prison tattoos.” Hux said. “Phasma, do you think tha…”

“Yes! Of course it was him.”

“Why though? Is he concerned that you’ll leave and not come back?” Hux said, waving his arm in irritation. “That doesn’t make sense. He managed to drag you here by making you drive in your sleep! Surely he could just do that again if you were away for too long?”

“What the fuck?”

“Kylo, shush, I’ll show you the notes later.”

“He didn’t bring me to Trinity,” Phasma cut in, “Trinity brought me to itself. Or the creepy ancient deal did. Lucas doesn’t have that kind of control outside of the town.”

She shrugged. “I think he’s feeling threatened by you. He doesn’t like outsiders, and I have to wonder if he’s thinking Kylo might be stronger than him.”
“I’m really not sure telepathy and some minor telekinesis can really compare to ancient blood curse with a large side of locational magic.” Hux said dismissively. Kylo made an offended noise that was ignored by everyone.

“True. But something’s wrong. Something’s been wrong since my cousin came here.”

“Wrong how?” Hux turned to a fresh page. The casual hovering of his pen was a strange contrast to the violence at the other end of the room.

“Caleb isn’t the way he’s supposed to be.”

“Well he’s a thirty something living under the direct control of the Creepiest Father Of The Year, so…” Kylo began but trailed off under a flurry of blows.

“No, I mean, he should be like Lucas. In some way or other.” Phasma said a little breathlessly. “He should be trying to take control of things. His grandfather with a religious leader, Lucas is in law enforcement, but Caleb is an architect. He designs low cost housing meant to survive hurricanes. He helped out on the rebuilding of the hospital after the last time it mysteriously burnt down. He’s weird, but people like him- not in a charmed-but-fearful way but more as if they feel sorry for him. Apparently he’s very much like his mother.”

“Your cousin?”

“Oh no, no, Judith died shortly after Caleb was born. Postpartum suicide they said. Possibly because her older daughter was traumatised by something earlier in the year and became unmanageable.”

The way Phasma said this- like she was reading a deliberate lie from a cue card- made Hux look up from his notes.

“So Lucas’ first wife killed herself?”

“Oh, she wasn’t his wife.” Phasma said flatly, finally knocking Kylo down for long enough to place one foot victoriously on his chest. “And you know when people kill themselves? By jumping from windows? Don’t they usually open them first?”

“Well, this is exactly what I wanted to see,” Hux said, his voice dripping with sarcasm while he dabbed at the sweat dripping from his chin. “A burnt out cabin. Because we have such a fantastic track record with those.”

Kylo wasn’t entirely certain why they’d decided to actively investigate the phenomenon of Lucas Buck and his weird ass family, rather than just getting the fuck out of Dodge, but here they were, in the woods, staring at the charred stone chimney stack that marked the former location of a house.

It wasn’t that Kylo wanted to abandon the Fury, or Phasma for that matter, regardless of the fact that she could clearly take care of herself. He just really, really didn’t want to be here any more. His head hurt. His nerves felt like a storm was coming and he was certain he was being watched. It was that night in Georgia all over again. Not that he’d ever told Hux about that. Somethings were too weird, even for them.


He licked his teeth. He couldn’t feel the crowns but he knew they were there. And he could see Hux had his hand around something large in his pocket. He hoped like hell they wouldn’t have to use that damned collection of talismans. This crappy little town probably didn’t even have a dentist.
More out of nervous habit than any expectation to see it had connected to a network, he glanced at his phone. Nearly midday. Why the fuck were they in the woods in the middle of the day? Then again, who’d want to be in them at night?

“I told you phones won’t work here.” Phasma said as she paced around the outline of the house. The trees had started to reclaim it but the ones inside the rooms seemed to sicken and die off once they reached two feet tall.

“Just because I can’t make calls on it doesn’t mean the camera has stopped working.”

“I didn’t haul all that specialist camera equipment up here so you could film shit on your iPhone.”

“Oh, he didn’t intend to take photos of anything but himself.” Hux snarked while Kylo gave him the finger. “It’s vitally important that he look as good as possible at all times, just in case this is the story that makes us famous.”

“Hey, we didn’t get to 50k followers on Instagram by me neglecting myself.”

Hux glared at him in disgust. “Did you seriously just say ‘fifty-kay’?”

“Can we get on with this?” Phasma shouted across the ruins.

“What is this exactly?”

“It’s Caleb’s childhood home.”

“Delightful.”

Kylo felt cold all of a sudden.

“He burned it down.”

“Lovely.”

Kylo looked around. The sun was filtering in through the trees but he could swear he heard rain.

“Hux?”

“After the man he thought was his father murdered his half-sister with a shovel.”

“Charm… What?!” Hux stared at her open mouthed. “That’s… What?!”

Why was it getting dark? “Hux?!”

A 1980’s Crown Victoria with Sheriff Department decals pulled onto the drive that had only been barely visible beneath the undergrowth a moment earlier.

“HUX?! There was no one with him now, and the house wasn’t a ruin any more.

The officer who climbed out of the car was familiar, though much, much younger than he’d been when he menaced them as soon as they crossed the county line. He cut a dashing figure in the pale brown uniform but there was an air of wrongness about him that kept Kylo rooted to the spot.

A little girl in white answered the door when he knocked. Buck spoke to a woman somewhere in the house as he moved inside.

Kylo only heard a word or two of the conversation but the screaming that followed made the
situation unmistakable. He wanted nothing more than to move forward and pull the girl back from
the doorway so she wouldn’t see, but this was just a memory of a horror so traumatic it had imprinted
into the landscape- there was nothing he could do to change it.

Things shifted around him. The house decayed rapidly, like some time lapse video showing
someone’s descent into depression.

A broken looking pregnant woman left. A distraught man returned with just a baby. He was soon
followed by a collection of mourners dressed in black with arms full of casserole dishes and the other
funeral trappings. They were the last real visitors to the house as years rushed by.

The baby boy grew. The girl too, though her mental growth seemed to stall at the moment of her
mother’s attack. Any knock at the door triggered an extreme panic reaction. Her brother cared for her
from a young age while their father sank into alcoholism and despair.

Kylo witnessed the return of the Sheriff when the father finally snapped after over a decade on the
edge and attacked his children. Unwilling to go inside he followed a balding Deputy around the
house and so he stood behind him at the window as Buck snapped the neck of the concussed and
barely verbal girl in white. She couldn’t have been much older than eighteen.

The Deputy said nothing.

The father was arrested and the boy was taken away.

The Sheriff gave a press conference right there on the steps as if he didn’t have blood on his hands.

There was another confrontation before Caleb burned the house down in an effort to escape the
Sheriff. The boy had talked to a figure made of light. Kylo was in the wrong place to see quite who it
was, but it seemed to be the sister.

Most of the ghosts Kylo had encountered were the standard ‘vaguely misty, not visible to everyone’
kind who might strengthen to ‘almost corporeal’ over time and interaction, but this ‘brilliant heavenly
glow’ business seemed a bit suspicious. Unusually showy, for a ghost.

“Kylo?! Kylo can you hear me?” There were hands on his face and a papery packet pressed against
his lips.

“I don’t need tha…” The salt packet was jammed into his mouth anyway.

“Awww come on!” He muttered in irritation as he chewed. “You put that metal crap in my mouth, I
swear by Charles Atlas I will… well I dunno what I’ll do, but you won’t like it.”

“That covers about 30% of your daily…”

“Fuck you.” Kylo said without any real heat to the words. He could see that Hux was upset. Thin
fingers were trailing delicately over his face and shoulders like they were looking for injuries but
scared of finding anything. The bitching was just a cover for the fear.

“You just started walking around without checking where you were going.” Phasma said. She was
standing next to Hux but looking at the path of broken down plants Kylo had left in his wake. “I
hope there wasn’t any poison ivy in there!”

Kylo glanced back sadly. “There usually is…”

“What did you see?” Hux said while they led him back towards the car. The redhead was making
unsubtle attempts to check his clothes and the exposed parts of his skin as they moved, but Kylo was too deep in his own head to notice any discomfort yet.

“You said Caleb’s sister was traumatised by something. I’m pretty sure it was Caleb’s conception.”

Phasma’s face twisted in distaste and anger.

“If Caleb has powers anything like mine then he knows how he came about. The trauma of the whole thing has leached into the soil here, probably when the sister died. I don’t think anything is going to be able to live around here for a very long time. It’ll probably end up on the lists of haunting sites eventually.”

“That’s disgusting.” Hux gave voice to what they were all thinking. Phasma had hinted at something of the sort but usually when Kylo or Donal encountered this kind of thing it was in the distant past. Twenty years or so wasn’t long enough.

“There’s something else…” Kylo began.

An unexpected noise interrupted him.

“Can… Can anyone else hear Madonna?” Phasma asked with a tilt of her head.

*Ray of Light* echoed off the trees around them when Kylo pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“How did you…”

The caller ID read ‘HeyHeyReyRey’ and there was her photo on the screen, so unless the local weirdness involved spoofing phone calls from far off relatives it was probably safe. By the way the others were reaching for him they didn’t seem to agree.

He answered the call anyway.

“Y’ello?”

“Kylo, oh thank god, I kept getting an out of range message but I just had to talk to you, oh god, Kylo I need to talk to you, where are, you’re not at your apartment…” Rey sounded terrified, her words tumbling one over the other like they all needed to get out at once.

“Hey, hey, Rey, slow down, what’s wrong?”

“You’re… You’re going to think I’m crazy but I know all the strange stuff that happens around you and I know you pretend that you don’t have, like, magic powers, but Kylo I need to see you because no one else in the *entire fucking world* is going to believe me, and fuck, I nearly ended up in jail, Kylo, if there hadn’t been a security camera *right there* I’d be in jail for attempted murder, Kylo you have to help…”

“REY!” It was a bellow rather than a shout. It probably fried the speaker on Rey’s phone slightly, but a mixture of fear for his cousin and shock at the words ‘attempted murder’ had short circuited the sensible parts of his brain. He had to get her to stop talking for a second before she hyperventilated and passed out.

Above them a murder of crows scattered out of the canopy in alarm.

“Breathe. Try to form actual sentences. What happened?”

At the other end of the line Rey sniffed hard and took a deep breath. When she started talking this
time fear had been replaced by anger. “I broke up with Jessika last month. It was amicable, we just didn’t want to drag on a long distance thing while she was working overseas. I’ve been busy with an internship since then so I thought I’d unwind at a friend’s party. I knew the hosts but not everyone there, and these three guys kept trying to give me drinks.”

Kylo growled. He’d been roofied once at a party, it wasn’t pleasant but that had just been an poorly thought out ‘joke’, and not what he suspected Rey was going to say next.

“Of course I said no, I’m not an idiot, but when I went to leave they followed me out of the apartment building. They wanted me to get in their car and they weren’t taking no for an answer.”

“So what did you do?”

“I intended to use all that martial arts training my dad made me do- hit them, get away, and call the police, but…” She paused with a sigh. “Kylo, do you remember the time, when we were little, playing at the airfield, and all that metal sheeting collapsed?”

“Yeah.” Kylo swallowed thickly at the memory.

She’d been three or four- absolutely tiny- and several tons of metal had fallen while he was on the other side of the yard. It should have crushed her and he was barely ten- he’d had so little control of his abilities at that age but he knew he had to do something and he knew he couldn’t possibly stop so much metal. So he’d moved her. He’d dragged her sideways and left her with road rash that had taken weeks to heal, but she’d lived. Leia hadn’t believed his explanation for her injuries and he’d been grounded for weeks, but Rey had never blamed him. She knew he’d saved her, even if she didn’t understand how.

“I was upset- about Jessika; about being harassed; about misogyny; and not even being able to see my friends in peace. I was so angry, Kylo, so I… I shoved them.”

He was nodding as she spoke even though she couldn’t see him. Kylo knew exactly what she meant. It had gotten him expelled from more than one educational facility.

“Not with my hands, I mean, I didn’t actually touch them, though I sort of moved my hands, but I was several feet away Kylo, you have to believe me, it’s on the video…”

“I believe you.”

“There was a road. Next to the building.” Rey continued solemnly. “Two of the guys got hit by a car. One of them nearly died.”

“Rey, they tried to do something horrible to you, you defended yourself. And like you said- there’s camera evidence.”

“But I still did it, Kylo. I still hurt those men.” She paused but when Kylo went to speak she said quietly, “Is this what you live with? All the time? The anger always under the surface ready to burst out and hurt people?”

Kylo bit his lip against the tears that threatened to well up. “Was I angry at the airfield?”

“No.”

“This is just something I have Rey. I can’t always control it. Yes, anger has its part to play, but please don’t think it only comes from negative thoughts.”
“Maybe not for you.” She snapped.

“Rey…”

“Look, where are you?! I need to see you and get this mess under control before I actually kill someone. I broke the fucking TV this morning because some asshole on the news pissed me off, I can’t…”

“Rey, listen to me, something bad happened to you…”

“Where the fuck are you!”

With his thumb over the mic Kylo turned to Hux. “We have a problem.”

“Sounds like it.” Hux said flatly, looking pointedly at the ruins beside them. “Is it worse than being trapped in a weird town by an evil rapist with a penchant for car destruction?”

Phasma just watched them both, her face blank.

“It turns out my powers aren’t all that unique,” he wriggled his fingers causing a spiral of leaves to float into the air for moment before letting them drop. “Rey nearly killed someone. She’s freaking the fuck out.”

That at least made Donal raise his eyebrows. “Rey? Your Rey? Why?”

“They tried to drug her at a party, then tried to force her into a car when she refused.”

“Ah, justified violence then.” Phasma said. “But we can’t exactly help her from here, except by email. How did she even manage to call you?”

“I think she willed it. I don’t think I could copy her, my head hurts too much to think half the time.”

“Kylo…” Hux began, holding out his hand. “Give me the phone, I can’t be sure until I’ve spoken to Rey, but I have an idea.”
Chapter 10

As security systems went this was certainly the strangest Rey had ever seen. Not the most paranoid though. That distinction definitely went to Uncle Lando and his converted water tower home. No, this was just… weird.

She stood in the corridor outside Kylo’s apartment, holding the magazines and her driver’s licence up to the peephole in the door. Apparently there was a camera in there and following this specific ritual would open the lock. Which made zero sense since Donal had already told her that they had very little internet access where they were so they couldn’t just open the door for her. The ID she could almost understand if the security system was designed with text recognition or something, but why would it respond to the latest issues of *Out* and *Architectural Record*?

It was probably a joke. Some misguided attempt to cheer her up, or maybe to baffle whoever was actually housesitting for them at the moment.

Rey had just started shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other when the lock clicked and the door swung open.

There was no one behind it.

The apartment hadn’t been empty for long enough to develop a musty smell yet but it did feel oddly cold, like a window had been left open somewhere. A metallic taste settled at the back of her throat. It reminded here of thunderstorms gathering on the horizon beyond her father’s airfield. She’d always liked this apartment when its occupants were home, but without them she found it wasn’t a place wanted to linger in.

Donal had told her to leave the magazines on the coffee table ‘on top of the stacks’. She had to assume that the scattered landslide of glossy paper strewn across the carpet had been the ‘stacks’ once. It was a well known family motto that where there was a B… Kylo there was a mess. Really she should have just left it, but years of living in cramped dorm rooms had given her a taste, if not for order, then at least for not leaving deathtraps lying around the place.

She scooped up the magazines, bills, fast food menus, and polaroid photographs and quickly arranged them into a haphazard pile. Her own acquisitions she positioned on top.

Someone in the next apartment- and it must have been someone in the next apartment because there was no one behind her- said ‘danke schön’ before another voice shushed them irritably. She half wondered if there were German Embassy staff living in the building.

Finding the books she’d been sent to collect was an easy if slightly unpleasant job. They were kept in locked boxes in a compartment under the bed. Unfortunately the spare keys were stored in a place that Hux had assumed only the most determined thief would look for them.

Rey was not an innocent soul, nor was she a stranger to the world of personal bedroom entertainment, but dildos based on a wide variety of supernatural beings was not a concept she’d ever needed to know about, rainbow coloured or not. Some of them glowed in the dark. Despite Donal’s assurance that they were kept scrupulously clean she really had no wish to put her hands in there.

She might never be able to look either of them in the eye again.

In the end she used a plastic hanger from one of their closets to poke around the slightly jiggling array of fanciful phalluses until the glitter of metal caught her eye. The first time it was a pair of
monogrammed handcuffs. The second was an object that looked like a keyring crossed with a hex-key- the purpose of which she thankfully wouldn’t realise for at least another year- but the third time was the lucky one and she finally had the little of ring of keys in her hands. They had a sheen of lubricant to them that she hoped never to think about again.

“I’m sorry, Major, I think my hearing temporarily went insane, you want me to what?”

Hux sat on the edge of the kitchen counter, his legs swinging stiffly as he watched Kylo flip pancakes. The huge man was concentrating so hard on his task that his tongue was poking out of the corner of his mouth. It was adorable, but more than a little distracting.

“Invite him over.” He said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “You turned him down with the excuse that you were going out of town, now that we aren’t going anywhere…”

“After everything Kylo saw at that house, you really think this is a good idea? To invite him into my home?”

“He can’t help how he was made.” Hux replied. “Besides you said that people like him here, he’s an okay guy?”

“Caleb Buck is a creepy fucker and I don’t like the precedent this would be setting. If I let him in here will give the rest of his family carte blanche to get in too?”

Shaking his head, Kylo carefully slid the last pancake onto the precarious stack with a flourish. “It’s probably safe to say that vampiric rules don’t work for them. I mean, the Sheriff would suck at law enforcement if he couldn’t enter private spaces without permission.”

“Hehehe… ‘Come out so we can arrest you!’”

“‘No, now go away or I shall taunt you a second time!’” Kylo said in a terrible French accent.

“That’s not helpful.” Phasma sighed.

“Monty Python is always helpful.”

“You mispronounced ‘never’.” She said, rolling her eyes. “Given that spending five minutes in Caleb’s presence sent Kylo here running for the latrines, don’t you think having him in close quarters for an hour might outright kill him? Or are you two going to fuck off and leave me to deal with him?”

“Oh no,” Hux reassured her around a mouthful of batter and syrup. “We’re going to prep things to make him easier to deal with.”

“Caleb, or Kylo?”

“Heeeeey!”

“Why not both?”

“Fuck you!”

Gardening was not one of Hux’ strong suits.

He’d grown up in a dilapidated mansion amongst acres of ‘garden’ but all the formal plantings had
run to ruin decades ago. In fact he’d only ventured into the walled kitchen garden once and nearly been snatched by something that looked like a sentient giant parsnip. Since then, other than cutting the extensive lawns for pocket money and avoiding the ha-ha fence, he hadn’t had all that much involvement with horticulture.

He was still the most qualified of the pair of them though- Kylo had once killed a plastic replica ficus plant. So here he was, trying to look he was engaged in legitimate shrubbery care while he surreptitiously spread the blessed stones along the boundaries of the property.

It was oddly reminiscent of *The Great Escape*, though he was at least distributing them by hand rather than dropping them out of the leg of his trousers.

Whether it would help or not was questionable. It was so often the case that things only worked against supernatural forces if those forces believed that they would. A makeshift crucifix might be a powerful object in a country with a Christian history, but there were plenty of cultures where a vampire would just be slightly confused by two perpendicular pieces of wood.

They didn’t really know all that much about Buck and his bizarre family. Phasma had told him what few rumours had been past down to her and Kylo had seen a snippet of Caleb’s history, but it was a mystery how the man had come to hold more than one soul in a single body. Even if they did find out there was no guarantee that the information would help them to leave, or help Phasma break whatever weird curse had brought her here in the first place.

Still, what options did they have beyond asking one of the key players? Break into the Buck house in the hope that there was a locked glass case full of books with titles like “Trinity- What The Fuck Is Going On” and “A Layman’s Guide To My Evil Plan”? No one in real life was ever that stupid.

Blood magic was always a good bet. Blood, salt, silver, fire, and sulphur.

The town, or whatever held the locational magic, believed Phasma was some kind of powerful force here. She might not be given total autonomy to leave, but she could resist and have that resistance respected. So they just had to help her resist louder.

She hadn’t been happy about the drawing of blood to anoint the stones, but she’d followed Donal’s lead and completed the rituals. Hopefully it would help.

“Kylo, what is that?” She could guess, but some morbid part of her wanted him to confirm it.

“...’s a magic potion…”

“Is it really?”

“Ye.”

“So it’s not a two gallon bottle of what smells like Long Island Iced Tea.”

“Noooooo…."

She sighed. Why had she assumed that the preparations to protect Kylo’s mind would involve something more professional than five kinds of hand liquor mixed in a bucket? “Just… just remember the local hospital doesn’t have a stomach pump, okay?”

Kylo just giggled. This was going to be a really long night.
He wasn’t drunk. Well, no, he was. He was very much on his way to being wasted. But he was still sober enough to know what he had seen. Mostly.

Caleb had pulled up and just sat in his car for five full minutes, staring at his hands, until a crow landed on the hood. That had gotten him moving.

Kylo had started to giggle at that; then he’d gotten worried about what Hux had told him about familiars; then he’d ended up giggling again at what Phasma had told him about shooting one in the face; before getting worried again because the damn thing had apparently vanished; and then finally he’d almost swallowed his own tongue when Caleb seemed to shatter as he stepped onto the front path.

The rollercoaster of reactions almost made him sick as it was- he really didn’t need to see a guy turn into a three dimensional optical illusion.

Warily he watched Caleb climb the steps to the porch and vanish from view before he turned his gaze back to the things left behind on the path. One might have been a woman in a long white dress seen through a gauzy filter. The next was a small point of muted light that hovered between the woman and what Kylo could only describe as a man shaped hole in reality. What the fuck?

Just looking at the three of them made his head hurt. He’d better tell Hux.

To say that Phasma was a bad cook would be unfair- she was just a very specific cook. What she specifically cooked was a post-gym food. Protein and vegetables and eggs.

Hux looked sadly at the flavour-free zone that was his plate and wondered if he could order take out without anyone noticing. He doubted he could manage it, not without the use of his phone anyway.

The thought was just a distraction tactic anyway.

He’d fucked up and he really didn’t know the extent to which he’d fucked up. It was an uncomfortable position to be in.

Caleb had turned out to be nice in a quiet, understated sort of way. He’d talked quite happily about his charitable work and, while he didn’t maintain a level of fitness equal to Kylo, he still knew enough to keep up a conversation with Phasma about her own job as a personal trainer. He didn’t try to flirt as far as Hux could tell. He rarely made eye contact even though he wasn’t showing any signs of fear. In fact Caleb was behaving just like this was a pleasant gathering of friends- he hadn’t mentioned any kind of formal date or objected to Kylo and Donal being at the table. None of the insistence Phasma had mentioned seeing in the past was visible here.

The only problem now was the question of how much of this was down to the terrible trio now lurking just between the edge of Phasma’s property and the sidewalk.

Hux really hadn’t expected that to happen. He knew why it had- when he’d been laying the stones he’d turned in a circle when he reached the gate to survey his work. Which had apparently created a pocket- or loop, or fuck knew what bullshit- that would let a man pass through while holding back the negative elements of his soul, or whatever the hell they were.

He hated the lack of proper terminology. He would have coped much better if he only knew what to call these things.

Then he might know whether the things would stay trapped. Whether Caleb was naturally a nice, boring guy or if this was just a distortion. If Caleb walked back out the way he came would they go
back into him and make him unpleasant again? Or was that just the Sheriff’s influence?

If the things stayed trapped would they be there forever? Would they jump into any other host that left the property? Were they running the risk of generating a demonic mail man?

Most importantly of all- was Phasma going to kill him over this?

“Hey, can I ask you guys a question?”

Hux looked up and realised their host had left the room. He eyed Kylo- he’d sobered up quite a lot since his fright at the window and seemed to be enjoying his meal of nothing but baked chicken breast- and shrugged.

“Are you, you know, together?” Caleb continued, fiddling with his fork as he spoke.

“What, like sane?” Kylo asked in confusion.

Hux very gently rested his head on the edge of his plate. “No, Kylo,” he said with a lot more patience than he actually felt, “that’s not what he means.”

“Then, wha… Oh.” Kylo sounded angry and Hux really didn’t have the strength to deal with this. “Yeah, we’re ‘together’, because we’re married. Do you have a problem with that?”

“No!” The answer was instantaneous, though the explanation took a few seconds to follow. “I was just wondering… how did you tell your parents?”

Suddenly the question of what was going wrong with the magic in Trinity seemed at least 40% less complicated than Hux had first thought.

Now he just needed to work out what to do about it.
“I was just wondering… how did you tell your parents?” Caleb looked sheepishly at his plate which at least meant he missed the look of surprised relief that the others shared across the table.

“Uh, well, I didn’t, I guess,” Hux said after a moment. “It was something my family always knew, like my hair colour.”

“Han caught me with my best friend, you know, like, in bed with him. Well we weren’t in a bed, we were…”

Hux cut off the explanation with a cough. “Yes, good, thank you for your contribution. Have you tried to talk to your family about it?”

“I talked to Gail once- Lucas’s wife- she just made a strange noise and said it probably didn’t matter in the long run.”

“Lucas is married?”

“Yeah, Gail’s my cousin, though we didn’t meet til I was eleven when my sister died. I guess that makes her boys more than my half-brothers but I don’t really know. I never was good at keeping things straight.” Caleb said with a snort. “I guess I know why now.”

Hux wished he had his notebook with him. This was all information he should be writing down. A shame it was rude to do that at the table.

“‘It doesn’t matter in the long run’ is a kind of weird thing to say though,” Hux pressed on, “most people are supportive or antagonistic, but that…”

“Gail is strange. We, we never really got along after my first brother died. She sort of folded in on herself. And marrying Lucas was really out of character. I suppose she’s happy in her own way, but we were never going to be the best of friends.”

In his pocket Donal’s phone vibrated. He did his best to pull it out without letting Caleb see, but the man was staring at his plate again anyway.

**Phasma:** He had a psychotic break & pushed her down stairs. She miscarried Lucas’ baby.

So Phasma had left the room but was still listening. That was handy.

“What happened?” Hux asked gently.

“I uh, did Phasma ever tell you about the time Lucas died?”
Kylo raised his eyebrows. “Died like- on the operating table, had to be defibrillated; or autopsy and eulogy?”

“Well, they explained it by saying a doctor drugged him and faked the autopsy but,” Caleb didn’t sound convinced, “he was shot in the head, and how long can someone survive in a buried coffin anyway?”

“Five and a half hours.” They answered together.

Caleb looked a bit nauseous.

“What?” Hux questioned innocently. “It’s not like we’ve tried it- it’s just the sort of thing you know when you’ve dealt with a lot of haunted graveyards.”

“Right…”

An uncomfortable silence started to develop but Kylo frightened it away with a staggering lack of tact.

“So it was the second kind then? He’s looking very well for a zombie.”

“He’s not…” Caleb shook his head. “Anyway, what I trying to say was that when Lucas was dead I kinda, well, went crazy for a while. I thought I was someone else. I thought I was him maybe, or something. The next version of him. He’d shown me all these books at his house, before he died, that were supposed to tell me ‘what I was’ and I guess the shock of him dying after everything that happened with my sister and the man who raised me… I went a little crazy. I hurt Gail and then Lucas came back from the dead and… I can’t tell you what happened then, but I felt better. I couldn’t talk to my sister any more but I didn’t feel like… I dunno…”

Hux sat there with his mouth open. There really were books of the ‘Evil Deeds And How To Plot Them’ variety in Lucas’ house. He’d actually found a comic book villain.

Lucas had seemed like a monologuer- Hux really shouldn’t have given him the benefit of the doubt in the first place.

“Holy shit.” Kylo muttered.

Oh yes, all the other stuff, Hux should definitely be surprised about all of that.

“I mean, none of it was real. All that old hoodoo magic Lucas tried to tell me about, that was just family myths. He made a lot of life choices based on it- but it’s all fantasy.”

“And you didn’t? Let it guide your life?”

Caleb’s face went oddly slack at that, almost like a robot that had missed a gap in its coding.

“No, no not really.” He asserted after a long pause. “I was never a bright kid but I’d fucked up so bad that I had to prove myself. I studied hard, got a scholarship, got my degree, and then, well… I looked around me and I knew I wanted to help people but America is a big place. This is my home. So I came back. But magic didn’t make me.”

The word ‘bullshit’ materialised in Donal’s brain without first referring to his ears. He gave Kylo a look but his husband ignored him.

“What about Phasma?”
“Oh, Lucas says the magic is really invested in Phasma. He thinks it brought her here for me. He wants me to marry her.” Caleb stared into the distance with a soft smile. “That’s why I want to tell him about Boone. Well, I should talk to Boone first, but that won’t be so scary once I’ve said my piece to Lucas.”

Hux wanted to ask why Caleb was telling them all this so easily when he’d seemed terrified of Lucas back in the diner. He’d opened his mouth to say just when Kylo pressed a bare foot against his ankle. It was damp with sweat.

Glancing across Hux realised just how bad Kylo looked. He wasn't just drunk bad. He was pale except for two bright spots high on his cheekbones. He looked like he’d just run a marathon.

Hux hadn’t even asked him to use his abilities but Kylo seemed to have realised that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. They’d have to confer later so Hux could work out exactly what was going on in Caleb’s mind.

“You said you couldn’t ‘talk to your sister any more’ after you got better, what did you mean?” He asked instead.

“It was grief induced psychosis I think, I… I couldn’t stop her being killed so I imagined I could still talk to her for months after she died. I thought she was an angel- glowing light, long white dress, the whole nine yards.”

“Yeah, angels don’t look like that,” Hux muttered while Kylo glanced nervously toward the window. “Most people who see angels just scream and cry a lot. They’re not a species that meshes well with human perception.”

“What?”

“Nevermind. So… Boone is it?”

Phasma returned then, holding a bowl of… Well… She described it as ‘banoffee chia dessert’ but Hux thought it looked uncomfortably like caviar in custard. It made him think of some of the mermaid mating rituals he’d heard about in far, far more detail than he’d ever wanted to experience.

“Boone?” She repeated as she took her seat. “The llama guy?”

There was a sudden coughing fit when Kylo projected an image of a llama-centaur into Donal’s head without warning.

“They’re alpacas mostly, but yes.”

“What about him?”

Caleb blushed and went back to staring at his hands.

“You do know I’m a lesbian right?” Phasma asked when it became clear that he wasn’t actually going to say anything. “That’s one of about ten reasons why I haven’t agreed to a date.”

“Oh thank god.”

She blinked. “Not the usual response but okay, cool.”

“I’m gay, or at least I think I’m gay, I never really had a chance to experiment in college like everyone else, but I’m pretty certain I’m in love with Boone and I know he has a kid but his divorce
is almost finalised and Madison is a great kid and I’d be happy to be a step-parent if I could be with him and I’m so relieved you’re a lesbian because I’m not attracted to you in the slightest, I mean you’re half a foot taller than me and I know for a fact you could bench press me but that’s not what I’m looking for in a partner.”

The speech poured out of Caleb in a rush with one single breath while the others stared with their mouths open.

“Wow.” Phasma said reaching for her beer. “Wow.”

“So,” Hux said behind his hand, “sister in a long white dress, brief possession by something like his father, and a pre-term brother.”

Caleb was walking down the same path he’d entered by. A crow was watching from a lamppost.

“Yup, yup, and yup.” Kylo said as the entities in question seemed to recombine with the man’s body. “That seems to be the jist of it.”

They waited at the window in tense silence while Caleb climbed into his car. What exactly they were waiting for Kylo couldn’t say. A sudden personality change perhaps? Or for Caleb to suddenly turn on them once the elements of his patchwork soul came together again?

None of that happened. Caleb just waved cheerfully and drove away.

It was probably going to help that Phasma had agreed to go on weekly dates with him, just for the show of the thing, until Caleb had sorted out his intentions with Boone.

Still, they spent the next hour improving the supernatural security on the house anyway.

A one time invitation could not become a free pass.

“You didn’t need to do that,” Hux murmured against Kylo’s skin once they were finally settled in bed for the night. He still felt clammy and cooler than he normally might, especially given the amount of alcohol he’d consumed. “You didn’t need to go into his mind like that.”

“Yeah, I did.” Kylo said, his voice a tired rumble. “We both want to get out of here. We both want Phasma to be safe. Fast accurate information seemed like the best choice.”

“But still…”

“I’ve been weirder places with more threatening things.” Kylo said. Hux shifted slightly as he shrugged. “And, you know, he wasn’t that bad on his own. I think… Have you seen They Live?”

“Have I seen John Carpenter’s seminal cult classic featuring Rowdy Robby Piper and the dumbest fight scene in the history of cinema?”

“It’s not dumb.”

“It lasts nearly six fucking minutes.”

“Fine, yes I’ve seen the damn movie. Why?”

Kylo patted him condescendingly on the head. “Well you know how he finds those sunglasses that reveal all the subliminal messages in the world? ‘Obey’, ‘Consume’, ‘This Is Your God’?”

In the dark Hux nodded.

“Being in his head is like that. When he was thinking about anything supernatural I could see the hidden messages but he couldn’t. He said he didn’t know what happened after Lucas came back from the dead, but I saw clear as day- too big an entity, too small a body. He got too powerful too quickly, and Lucas literally threw him off a staircase. His ‘sister’ saved him by being absorbed into him. But it didn’t bring balance because whatever those things are- they shouldn’t be in one body. It’s thrown everything out of whack.”

“Phasma said it was a generational magic, it keeps on summoning the right kinds of folks until something sticks.”

“But if Caleb is fucked up, shouldn’t the magic be looking for someone for… I dunno, that creepy little kid?”

“He didn’t look more than nine!”

The bed creaked when Kylo tried to sit up and peer down at Hux where he was resting on his chest. “So?”

“So?! You just said Caleb’s fucked up because he came into his inheritance too early. What good would a repeat do anyone?” Hux slapped Kylo’s chest for emphasis and pushed him back down onto the mattress. “A decade is a long time to gamble on the old avatar surviving before the new one can take over.”

“Maybe the magic thinks Phasma can fix things somehow?”

Silence settled over the room as sleep tugged at their limbs.

“Hux?”

“Mmm?”

“Do think Phasma could punch the…”

“Go the fuck to sleep.”

Phasma walked around the bike for the seventh time. She kept pausing to poke at this or that; checking wiring and connections; feeling around in wheel arches.

“If you’re not sure…” Hux said from the porch.

Short blonde hair flew around her eyes as she shook her head. “No, I’m… I came off once, just outside Samarra. Bad memories.”

He nodded. “I know those.”

“It’s fine.” She shrugged under her leathers. “Come on, Kylo.”
Kylo moved to amble down the steps, but Hux held him back with a surprisingly firm arm.

“Question- why is Kylo going with you?”

“Well if Rey reacts to Trinity the way I did then someone needs to drive her in…” Kylo began.

“Kylo, you haven’t crossed the boundaries since Caleb was here.” Hux was trying not to be patronizing, but he wasn’t trying very hard. “If you react the way you reacted, who the fuck is going to drive the car?”

“I will.” Phasma said. “We can put the bike in the back.”

“There isn’t a ‘back’ in a first gen Miata! It’s only got two fucking seats!”

“Shit.”

Hux took the helmet from Kylo’s hand. “Yeah. Shit. You stay here, I’ll go.”

Now it was Phasma’s turn to look surprised. “Can you even ride a bike?”

“Yes,” Hux said bitterly, “I just won’t enjoy it. Let's get moving.”

She’d only just left the interstate and already the road had become little more than two deserted lanes of winding woodland highway.

Rey squinted at the approaching sign and sighed. It was far too dark under the trees to read anything. Wasn’t she looking for ‘Trinity’? The sign looked like it had said something ending in County.

Was this even the right road?

The rear wheels suddenly lost traction and the engine died. But ‘uncle’ Wedge had bought her a driving experience at the Nürburgring track in Germany every year since her 18th birthday- so she just brought the car to a calm controlled stop.

Hux was leaning against a tree with a surprised look on his face. Beside him, in what must have been custom tailored leathers, sat an actual real live valkyrie on a Harley Davidson.

She winked at Rey.

Rey’s heart gave a funny little flip.

Suddenly driving all the way down here didn’t seem like so much of a hardship anymore.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to Rawringryu who asked a very good question that I didn't really manage to answer here. Whoops.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kylo watched from the window as a scruffy middle aged man supervised the loading of the Fury onto his tow truck. Phasma had told him that he could trust T.J. but he wasn’t convinced. He’d had that car almost ten years now. It was important to him.

There were many beginnings in the life of Kylo Ren. He used to joke about it, quoting The Interview With A Vampire in a deep voiced Brad Pitt impersonation.

“Shall we begin like David Copperfield? 'I am born...I grew up.' Or shall we begin when I was born to darkness…” And then he’d laugh in an unconvincing way. Hux was the only one who knew the whole truth of that particular story, and once it had been told Kylo had felt less need to paper over it with humour. But what happened in the summer house was only one beginning. The worst certainly, but perhaps not the most profound.

It was a week after his eighteenth birthday.

His parents had bought him a high end laptop, a new phone, and an unnecessarily sophisticated suitcase.

He hadn’t thought much about the last gift.

Han and Leia never really seemed to know what they were doing when it came to presents, or things for him in general. They were convinced that too much stimulation was the source of his ‘behavioural problems’ so he rarely received anything exciting.

Still, a new laptop was good. It was rare for him to get technology that was all his own.

He should have been suspicious when Leia kept talking about its video chat capabilities over dinner, but he’d been so happy just to be out of the house he hadn’t noticed her odd focus.

They’d taken him to New York, for dinner and a show.

They said it was to ‘make up’ for the incident at his birthday party. Ben thought it was to make him forget the terrible, but true, things Uncle Lando had said to him after a drink too many; or when the ambulance came to take Wedge away for reasons that had already slipped his mind. Wedge had been bleeding, at the bottom of the stairs, but he couldn’t remember why. Perhaps he’d never known.

Whatever the reason the meal had been good. The show, less so. He’d wanted to see Avenue Q but Leia had insisted that it wasn’t appropriate given her career, so they’d seen Wicked instead. Ben hadn’t really enjoyed that- he knew what happened to the wicked witch in the end. When he was small he’d dreamed of being whisked away by a tornado, but these days he empathised more with Elphaba.
He had still been looking forward to the next day at least, when there had been the promise of brunch and sightseeing, but Leia got a call as always, so back to DC they went.

Ben didn’t mind DC. Anything was better than the house at the Hamptons, but he was getting far too tall to sleep comfortably in the back of the car.

Which was why he was awake enough at 3am to hear Han say, “Are you sure this is the best thing for him? There’s nothing there!”

“Precisely.”

“No scratch that, there’s nothing there but planes and aviation fuel.”

Leia sighed. “He hasn’t started a fire in years.”

“If he messes with aviation fuel there won’t be a fire, there’ll just be a smoking crater where your brother’s compound used to be.”

There was an uncomfortable pause before Han continued, “What about college?”

“Do you really think Ben is going to go college? Ever? He’s not stable enough, Han, we can’t risk…”

“He’s a smart kid!”

“Maybe one day. Taking a break won’t harm him, and working for Luke is just the sort of character building colleges look for, especially given his educational history. No Ivy League school is going to take someone who went to so many ‘specialist’ schools unless they can prove they’re exceptional.”

‘Specialist schools’. Ben hated that phrase. Just call them what they were- institutions for the mentally unstable. Military school, boarding school, anger management camp. The intention had always been the same. To fix the broken kid.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Han said. “Maybe in ten years he can go to a local community college or something.”

Leia hummed but said nothing.

Ben stared out of the car window, wondering what to do.

Ben climbed out of the window and crept carefully down the fire escape.

He didn’t need to- Leia was already at the White House and Han had vanished like he usually did. The staff wouldn’t notice or care if Ben left, they always did their best to pretend he didn’t exist.

But climbing out the window was traditional way to begin running away from home, right?

He’d often thought about doing this, when he’d been stuck scrubbing floors with a toothbrush for answering back or standing in the rain for hours as punishment for getting into a fight he hadn’t even been involved in. But he’d never been in a position to follow through.

Running away as a child hadn’t made sense to him. The idea had always come to him when he was already in a shitty situation, and ending up living on the street didn’t seem all that much better. He was a tall, lanky kid with really distinctive features and very powerful parents. He’d have been
hauled home in days unless he hid really well, and living in the woods really wasn’t his style. So he’d put up with things. But he’d done some quiet research when he could.

And now he wasn’t a child anymore. He was an adult, and he was going to make his own way in the world.

Leia had always kept a bank account for him. It wasn’t a joint account- it was entirely his, she’d just never given him the documents. It contained eighteen years of birthday and holiday gifts from generous friends and relatives who’d been quietly told not to buy him physical things in case they induced an ‘episode’.

He’d seen the documents once, in her safe. Conveniently they were kept with his passport; driver’s license (which he’d been allowed to obtain at the earliest possible age but never permitted to use); birth certificate; and social security documents. Everything he needed, as a legal adult, to live an independent life.

Of course the safe had been locked, and Leia would never, ever have told him the code. But it was the old style, with the turning lock. It was easy for him to put a hand on the door and feel when the lock wanted to open. He always wondered why other people didn’t just do the same.

Taking the bundle of documents that were legally his property still felt oddly like stealing. He didn’t feel guilty about it, not really, just a strange kind of uncomfortable that made his skin prickle.

If anything leaving the note was even harder. It felt like beginning a trail of breadcrumbs when he didn’t really want to be found, or a cry for attention when he wanted none.

But he couldn’t just leave. Not with his mother’s position in the government, or shadowy hints about his father’s business. Leaving without a word would lead to a manhunt.

His face would be all over the news with a scrolling ticker tape of hysteria underneath- ‘senator makes tearful plea for return of kidnapped son’. He hated what Leia had done in the name of helping him, but not enough to do that her in return.

He started the note a dozen times. ‘Dear Mom’ no. ‘To Mom & Dad’ no. ‘Greetings parental units’ good god no, what the fuck was he thinking? ‘Leia’ no.

In the end no salutation worked so he just dove straight in-

“I won’t go to Ohio. I want to live my own life. I’ll do my best not to embarrass you any more. Please don’t look for me. Ben.”

He left it tucked inside Leia’s diary where the staff wouldn’t see it, but she would hopefully find it before she’d even realised he’d gone. It was the best he could do.

He’d thought about it often, but he hadn’t had a plan.

All kinds of grandiose ideas had come to him while he made his way to Union Station- he could go to LA and become a star; he could go to Florida and get a job at Disney; he could go to Hawaii and sleep on a beach as far away from the Hamptons as he could possibly get; he could have gone anywhere, and been anything.

He was a grocery bagger in an independant supermarket on the outskirts of Chicago.

It wasn’t glamorous, but no one would think to look for him here.
Getting a job had been harder than he thought. He was living in a motel, with no previous history and no references.

After eight interviews he’d gotten frustrated at the level of detail these people wanted for the most basic of roles. He’d snapped, “why don’t you just give me the fucking job?!”

His boss, a nice lady called Karen who was just trying to run the market singlehanded since the death of her husband, had blinked and said in a monotone, “why don’t I just give you flipping job?”

“You want to give me the job?” Ben had asked, suddenly confused at her tone.

“Yes, I want to give you the job.” A trickle of blood ran from her nose as she spoke, and Ben felt a little sick.

As quickly as the change came she seemed to recover, though her tone was still disorientated as she shook hands with him and showed him around.

He hadn’t known exactly what he’d done, but he’d resolved to be the best damn bagger he could be. The hours were shit, the pay was shit, the work was shit, but it was better than nothing.

He spent his off hours at the motel, bored out of his mind with only the internet for company. That at least was broadening his horizons. He’d always been good at the PT elements of military training, even if everything else had been beyond him, and having googled ways to make the heavy lifting involved in his job easier he’d found a forum dedicated to bodyweight exercises.

Three months on from leaving home and Ben was sure no one would recognise him anymore. He’d doubled in weight thanks to the tips and encouragement he’d gotten online, and now his hair covered at least half his ears he felt much more comfortable in his skin. Still out of place, but better.

His change in size had hidden benefits too.

“Yeah, man,” he said casually to a regular customer, “I think you wanna take that stuff out of your back pockets. You must have forgot to pay for it.”

He was getting better at giving a little push to his words, just enough to make people want to take his lead, but even the ones who resisted saw the muscles stretching the sleeves of his uniform and gave in.

“Dude, you should be working in loss prevention,” the cashier whispered gratefully.

Ben laughed, but filed it away to research later.

It was six months after his birthday that Ben heard it for the first time.

He was in a mall, shopping for something that might pass for professional enough to get him through the interview with a security company, when he passed a store he’d never really paid attention to before.

*I know this hurts, it was meant to.*

*Your secret's out and the best part is it isn't even a good one,*

*and it's mind over you don't, don't matter.*

Music hadn’t really been a part of his life. Han had listened to his terrible dad rock in car, and Leia
had favoured classical music when she needed to concentrate, but anything else had been deemed too exciting for Ben.

The young man behind the counter smiled sweetly despite all his piercings when Ben asked what the song was. The smile made Ben blush.

Four hours later Acheron was making Ben blush in an entirely different way.

Ben hadn’t managed to furnish his studio yet, not with what little he earned as a security guard at the grocery store. He had his savings of course, but that was for emergencies, and he didn’t want Leia to use her government connects to trace it. So his room was just a mattress on the floor and a sheet thrown over the curtain rail for privacy.

Acheron didn’t care. He’d just wanted to get his hands on Ben, and Ben had just wanted to let him.

That was an afternoon of firsts. Ben would have been lying if he said he hadn’t had some hurried experiences with other boys at the various schools he’d attended- and there had been that week last summer with Poe that Han had spoiled- but he’d never gone so far before.

Ben had never been kissed like this, or felt lust like this. It was his first time being fucked but despite the discomfort of the stretch within an hour he was begging for more. But it was the fact that Acheron stayed that surprised him most.

He’d never laid in someone’s arms and shared a clove cigarette while the other person talked about music, life, and fashion. He’d never received an enthusiastic blowjob that was allowed to linger as he was introduced to new songs and genres he’d never even knew existed. He’d never thought you could take the time to get to know someone like this.

When Acheron complained of being thirsty Ben got him a bottle of water from the mini fridge without thinking about it. He didn’t get up to do so. He’d lived alone for so long. There had been no one here before to think it strange that he could just reach out a hand and pull something to him without touching it.

Acheron stared wide eyed.

Ben braced for the screaming to start.

Instead his companion lit his next cigarette with a fingertip and blew a dragon shaped cloud of smoke at the ceiling.

Acheron broke Ben’s heart in less than a year, but that impossibly old warlock in the perpetually young body taught him so much that Ben never could find it in him to hate him.

It was him that suggested leaving an offering of cream to the local spirits for good luck. That had gotten Ben a job paying four times his previous wage.

It was him that told him that there was more to this world than mundane society might think.

It was him that introduced Ben to Fall Out Boy and My Chemical Romance and a hundred other bands that actually sang out the emotions that warred under the surface of his brain, and made him feel like perhaps his heart wasn’t so strange after all.

It was him that encouraged Ben to practice his skills and push the boundaries of what he thought he could do.
It was him that proved to Ben that he could start a fire in the underwear of a cheating boyfriend from a mile and a half away.

Ben never hated him. That didn’t mean he wasn’t angry.

He was heading west on Route 66 just outside Albuquerque when a bird hit the windshield of his shitty Oldsmobile. Between the glass crazing and the blood smeared across it, visibility was reduced to zero and Ben found himself in a ditch.

He climbed shakily out to check the damage and found his eye drawn back along the road.

It was a big fucking bird.

It was a man sized bird.

It was a man. Covered in blood, a few feathers, and an epic case of road burn, but not much else.

Ben looked at the damage to his car. The first impact point was definitely at the top of the windscreen. Nothing but the wall of the ditch had hit the grille, and the hood looked like its usual rusty self.

Ben looked around. There was nothing near him. He counted four tumbleweeds in the distance and a couple of scraggly bushes, but there was nothing above knee height. Certainly no trees the man could have fallen out of. There was a telegraph line running alongside the service road, but there no way a human could leap that distance.

Ben looked up. Surely anyone falling from a plane would have been going fast enough to cause a hell of a lot more damage to his car. Either way the dawn sky was clear.

“Mother fucker!”

Well, at least he didn’t have a dead body to explain to the police. However much radio silence he’d had from Leia and Han that certainly would have gotten their attention.

He walked around to the back of the car and punched the lock in just the right way to make it open. There was a black velvet duster that would probably survive the bloodstains better than his other clothes.

Ben stared off to one side as he approached the man now laid on his back and swearing. He had no problem with the naked body, but most people didn’t like to be looked at without consent, and Ben had no idea how this guy would react to anything. Besides, the sight of gravel burn there was making his eyes water.

“Hey man, can you stand? Do you want me to get you to a hospital, or do you want me call an ambulance?”

“Don’t call a fucking ambulance, are you stupid or something?” The man looked up at Ben and sneered. “Oh god, you are. Do I look like a need a fucking ambulance?!”

“Well your arm’s broken and you’re bleeding from approximately eighty percent of your skin, but you know what- fuck you.” Ben turned to walk away just as the man looked at his own arm and swore again.

“Hey get back here you little shit, you hit me with your fucking car!”
“Best I can tell you dropped from the sky onto my fucking car! I offered you help, you gave me
insults, you wanna try again?”

The man made a noise that sounded oddly like a pissed off bird of prey. “I guess you can take me to
the hospital.” He said as he sat up.

“Lucky me.” Ben said. “Here put this on.”

Another look of contempt, this time directed at the coat in Ben’s hands. “Hell no!”

“No offence but I don’t want your bloodsmeared naked ass on my seats.”

“A lot of fucking offence but your car is a piece of shit, besides I ain’t queer enough to wear that get
up and I’ve been living with my boyfriend for fifteen fucking years.”

Ben went back to the car and dragged an item from the trunk. It wasn’t actually his, he was
transporting cross country for a friend who was really into amateur theatre, but it was hilarious to
watch the man’s face when the huge glittery pink skirt of Glinda The Good Witch’s dress flowed
into view.

“Pick one.” He said with a nasty grin.

“So,” Ben said conversationally as they drove past a police car at five under the speed limit. He
waved a hand and somehow neither officer noticed the missing windshield. “So, do you have a
name, or should I just call you Mr Homophobia Death-Wish?”

“Fuck you, I ain’t phobic. I just think you look like an asshole.”

“Sure thing Mr Death-Wish.”

The man stuck his nose in the air. “Shut up. My name’s Woodburn Teratom.”

“Oh my god, that’s most made up name I’ve ever heard.” Ben laughed. “You don’t wanna tell me,
fine. You wouldn’t be the first half naked guy I’ve had in this car that didn’t tell me his real name.”

“Jesus, kid, have some self respect. How are old are you? Mid twenties?”

Ben shrugged, the amused expression melting from his face, “I’m nineteen.”

“Jesus.”

Woodburn directed him quietly to the nearest ER. A nurse there seemed to know him. She didn’t
react to his lack of clothes as she led him inside, though at least he kept the coat closed around him.
He was a lot thinner than Ben, so there was plenty of fabric to keep him covered.

“I’ll just go find a mechanic to fix my car then.” Ben said flatly as he walked away.

“No, you stay with me.” Woodburn called out. “I’ll see you right.”

It was more than a little uncomfortable sitting next to a stranger in a backless hospital gown who
clearly knew most of the hospital staff. The longer he sat there the more Ben worried about someone
noticing the blood on his car and alerting the police. He could distract them when they were in front
of him, but he’d yet to work out a way to make something invisible at a distance.

An elderly Asian doctor with an oddly… foxish… haircut spoke to Woodburn for a few minutes in
hushed tones. Ben tried not to eavesdrop and found himself staring at a point just behind her. He
almost jumped in his seat when a pure white bushy tail swished out of her long coat for a moment
before vanishing. When he looked up in surprise she winked at him.

“I’ll order you some x-rays.” She said. “And a sight test. It’s a highway Woodburn, you keep flying
that low with shitty eyesight you’re going to hit the power lines.”

As she left Ben heard Woodburn mutter a comment about ‘wearing glasses on a beak’, but he didn’t
understand it.

“I heard that!” She called back from the doorway. “Get laser surgery like everyone else!”

Awkward silence returned.

“Look, don’t worry about my car, I’ll sort it out myself,” Ben began.

“Shut up.” Woodburn snapped, then sagged. “Jesus, you shouldn’t have to sort anything. I was
pissed off, I thought you were older than you were, but she’s right - I shouldn’t have been so low
over the highway even this early in the morning. You’re just a kid, you shouldn’t have to pay for my
mistake. You never did tell me your name, boy.”

“Ben. Ben Solo.” It might still give him away but it better than sharing his whole name. He hadn’t
heard from Leia in a year, but that didn’t stop him being at least moderately careful.

“No, that’s not right.” Woodburn said. “That sits on you like a blanket, that’s not the name in your
soul.”

Ben shrugged. “I didn’t name me.”

“Maybe you should.” He said before changing topics. “Look. I’m a mechanic, I own a shop out
towards Petroglyph. Your car is fucked. Replacing the windshield’s gonna cost you more than the
car is worth. But I’ve got a few old trucks I took in trade, one of those might suit you.”

“I can’t afford…” Ben began to protest. He could afford a new car with money in his savings, but he
still didn’t want to touch it. And besides the Oldsmobile ran, it just… didn’t have a windshield
anymore. Provided he covered that up when he parked for the night he’d make it to California.

“I don’t expect you to pay me! I wrecked your car, I owe you a new one.”

She was beautiful.

She was the single most gorgeous thing he’d seen in his entire life.

She was an epiphany.

He’d always considered himself to be gay but now he knew he was wrong.

This car was his sexuality.

“You’re really fucking weird, kid.” Woodburn said in a disgusted tone.

They were standing on the back of his lot, staring at a car. Well to Ben she was a car. Woodburn had
described her as a heap of rusting junk.

“That thing ain’t gonna run,” Woodburn said, rolling his eyes. His arm was in a sling now, but at
least he was dressed at last in the grease stained jeans and Budweiser shirt his partner had brought to the hospital. Atherton hadn’t seemed all the surprised about the incident, and had agreed at Woodburn did indeed owe Ben a car.

“But could she run?” Ben asked quietly. For some reason he felt like he was insulting her with his question.

“Well… yeah?” Atherton said. “It needs most of a new engine, new suspension, reupholster and respray, but technically, yeah, any car will run if you put enough work in. Isn’t worth it though.”

Ben looked at the two skinny men, one with his arm in a sling, and then looked pointedly around the lot. “Do you guys need an apprentice? One who can do a lot of heavy lifting? You can pay me in lessons on how to fix that car…”

They looked skeptically at him, then at the car.

“You know that’s a ‘58 Fury, right?” Atherton asked skeptically. “Have you read that book? Cos you look like the sort of goth creep that probably has.”

Ben narrowed his eyes. “I see you two are just as charming as each other. Yeah I’ve seen the movie. Don’t worry I won’t paint her red, with either paint or blood.”

“Really fucking creepy.”

“Yeah well,” Ben snapped back, “a naked guy fell on my car this morning, I’m not having the greatest of days.”

She was beautiful, but she was a wreck.

Still, it was satisfying to work on her for an hour at the end of day. He could zone out, real peaceful like, and let his brain wander while his hands did all the work. Still, no matter how peaceful he felt the anger was always lurking below the surface.

Today he was fighting with the glove compartment, which was jammed shut by years of rust, and what looked like pigeon droppings.

“Come on, darling,” he muttered soothingly. “the sooner we get you clean, the sooner we can get you fixed. The sooner you’re fixed, the sooner you’re back on the road where you belong. Come on, for Ben, please?!”

The crowbar he was using slipped then, cutting into his thigh.

“Ah, you bitch!” He kicked the dashboard.

The glove compartment dropped open. Out tumbled a bunch of mildewed papers, a travel Scrabble set, and approximately one hundred angry bees.

“Waaaaaaaah!!!”

He threw himself out of the car and scrambled towards open ground.

At the edge of the yard he could just see Atherton and Woodburn pause in talking to a customer.

“Bees!!” He shouted, throwing up his hands in an effort to keep the insects away. It was hard to create a bubble around himself, rather than just moving individual objects, but there were far more
bees than he could possibly concentrate on.

He was soaked in sweat and had been stung at least twice by the time he’d managed to push them all away. They soon lost interest once they encountered the strange barrier around him, and slowly drifted back towards the car.

“Well, that’s a neat trick.” Atherton said flatly, from surprisingly close by.

Ben jumped. “Shit! You shouldn’t have got so close, you could have been stung!”

The other man made a noncommittal noise, and gestured towards the house. “Go get a shower, count your stings, if it’s more than ten we should get you to the ER. Woodburn and me will deal with the bees.”

“You’re gonna call an exterminator?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

It was probably the frosted effect on the bathroom window, or the steam in the air, that made Ben think he saw two huge birds sitting next to the car whilst he showered.

Yes, it was probably that that created the optical illusion of a man sized vulture and a slightly smaller blue and green cardinal-like bird sticking their heads into the glove compartment of the Fury.

Ben had almost entirely convinced himself of that when something shifted with a meaty noise, and he saw his bosses sitting naked by the now bee-free car instead.

Yeah, that needed more of an explanation than steam. Maybe swamp gas from a weather balloon was trapped in a thermal pocket and reflected the light from Venus.

Or maybe his bosses were shapeshifters.

That would explain the falling from the sky and landing on his car. Also the comments about ‘flying’.

Shit.

Okay, well it had been a month. There was no way he could say anything to them at this point- they really would think he was stupid.

“Hey,” Ben said to the car when he was absolutely certain no one was looking, “I’m sorry I called you a bitch. And I’m sorry I kicked you. I totally deserved the bees.”

He patted the dashboard gently, then jumped back in fright when another object dropped from the glove compartment.

It was just another Scrabble tile.

There were a dozen or so of them scattered across the rotten carpet. Five were facedown but the three furthest away spelled out his name.

Ben glanced around, concerned, but saw nothing else strange.

When he looked at the tiles again he realised it didn’t say BEN, it said REN and his brain had
misread it. Studying the rest of the tiles he decided there was no hidden message in KYLOREN. It was just a random collection of letters. Nothing more.

“Hiii…”

Why did all the best looking guys work at Hot Topic? Ben wondered if was something in the combined smell of patchouli and vinyl clothes that attracted them. This one was tiny, with dreadlocks that faded to sunset colours at the end and lips that looked like they could be kissed for days.

“What’s your name?”

Ben opened his mouth to reply, and for reasons he couldn’t possibly explain, he said, “Kylo.”

“Niiiice. Well met, Kylo.” The guy replied in a voice so divine that Kylo didn’t even think of correcting him.

It was strange, but somehow it felt right on his tongue. A later week so did his new boyfriend.

He placed a dish of cream on the Fury’s dashboard in thanks. The next day he discovered the wiring in the car wasn’t nearly so bad as expected, saving him a few hundred dollars.

He kissed the dashboard, and made the cream a weekly habit. Acheron had told him to always leave it where his home spirits could find it.

More than anywhere else this car felt like home.

He was single again, and happily so, when he when finally got to see Fall Out Boy for the first time in Anaheim.

He’d come out to California in his shiny restored Fury with a cute kitsune called Naoki in the passenger seat and a lot of hurt pride over his break-up with Jayden.

Jayden had helped him see a lot about himself, and with an undercut and the first of what would be many tattoos Kylo left the relationship feeling physically more comfortable, but emotionally broken.

As a skinny kid moving endlessly from school to school he’d never really had much romantic attention, and he suspected Acheron had gone someway to keeping him hidden in Chicago. Once he was free in Albuquerque, working outdoors with his muscles on display all day, he found he got a lot more interest, and he had had no idea how to deal with.

Whatever jokes he’d made with Woodburn Ben had been relatively inexperienced. To be suddenly faced with all that desire- written large and loud across people’s brains- it had been intoxicating.

Where Ben had been shy, Kylo was a lot more confident. And perhaps a little foolish. Ten men in as many weeks later and Kylo had vowed to take a break from flirting.

He was gonna leave the guys alone, and just be himself by himself for a while.
It had mostly worked, until someone took offense at his lack of response and shoved him, making him drop his beer.

Getting punched in the jaw was not the way most friendships started. But then again, from Phasma’s point of view, having half a cup of ice-cold liquid dropped into her bra hadn’t exactly been welcome either.

Six hours later they were falling about laughing in an all-night coffee shop, with bags of ice held to their bruises and days of conversation yet to come.

If he hadn’t had his heart broken he never would have met the woman who became one of his dearest friends.

Grinning as she recounted another story, Kylo quietly poured some of his coffee into the ashtray. He’d say thanks properly later.

Snapping out of his revery Kylo sprinted to the kitchen and grabbed one of the coffee creamer packets from the counter.

The mechanic’s team watched him with interest as he scrambled up the side of the tow truck to lean in the Fury’s window.

He tucked the creamer in under the paper-and-trash rose that lived on the dashboard.

“There. That won’t go off in the sun,” He said quietly, pressing a kiss to the steering wheel. “T.J. is gonna look after you, I promise.”

He felt a little sheepish when he returned to ground level but the mechanic just clapped him on the back. “Hey man, I’ve seen guys in their sixties crying over scratched paintwork. You love your car, nothing to be ashamed of man, she’s beautiful.”

Kylo gave a watery smile, then looked down at his feet.

He was standing barefoot on the sidewalk outside Phasma’s house. His head didn’t hurt.

He looked in the direction Phasma and Donal had travelled, and wondered exactly what was going on.

Chapter End Notes

The shapeshifters have weird names because their names are their own bird species-Atherton is a Blue-Bearded Bee-Eater (Nyctyornis Athertoni) and Woodburn is Teratornis Woodburnensis, an extinct for of giant bird still rumoured to live in New Mexico today. They think they're funny.
Chapter 13

Hux often found himself resenting Kylo’s ‘58 Plymouth Fury.

Although Kylo had spent years and thousands of dollars lovingly restoring her, while adding a few tasteful aftermarket safety features, it was a simple reality that she had been designed before the advent of comfort. She was beautiful, but not ergonomic. Or insulated. Like most classic cars she had suspension and handling that left much to be desired. Mostly by Donal’s knees after a long drive.

He was used to her, and he’d had many, many wonderful experiences in or with her, but at times he craved the comfort of a modern car.

As Rey swung the ‘93 Miata around a corner at a frankly horrifying speed Hux swore to himself and any deity that might listen that he was going to kiss the hood of that old and venerable lady just as soon as he saw her again.

He’d never thought of himself as a claustrophobic person, but crammed, as all of his six foot plus frame was, into the tiny cabin of Rey’s tiny car he found himself longing for the wide expanse of the Fury’s bench seats, and it’s seeming limitless leg room. If this thing had airbags- which was doubtful in itself- they’d probably remove his knees if they were ever activated. He’d gone through that once in his life, he’d rather not deal with it a second time.

Phasma was keeping pace along the centre line of the road. Her own height and the size of her Harley kept her head above the level of the car window.

It made Hux nervous.

Sheriff Buck had found them along this road before, and he had no wish for the man to suddenly pull out a blind spot. He’d never experienced it himself, but he’d lost good friends to roadside ambushes, and something told him Buck wouldn’t be above harming them that way. There were plenty of tall bridges around here. Tall rickety bridges that a car might easily be shunted off.

He forced his fists to open, suddenly aware of the way his nails were biting into his palms. Fear wouldn’t help. Buck could probably smell it.

As if on cue half a dozen large black birds erupted from the trees up ahead. To his left he saw Phasma make a gesture. For a moment he thought she was forcing them away like Kylo might, but she was just giving them the finger.

A car appeared on the road ahead of them. It didn’t look like the Sheriff’s Crown Victoria, but Hux couldn’t be entirely sure.

Phasma dropped back behind them to a safer position.

“How’re you feeling?” Hux asked Rey, his eyes fixed on the approaching vehicle.

“Tired from a really fucking long drive!” Rey snapped. “How else am I going to be feel?”


Rey turned to glare at him and Hux half instinctively reached for the wheel.
“Look, I don’t know what Kylo told you but I’m not insane!”

“Okay! Fine! I didn’t mean that but just watch the fucking road!!”

She turned to glare out the windscreen just as the approaching vehicle passed them, so she didn’t see the grey faced deputy staring into their car. Hux made eye contact with him for a moment, but there didn’t seem to be any sign of life in there.

He wondered if Buck could make human familiars.

“I wasn’t talking about what happened at your university,” he explained, “I meant what happened when you crossed the county line. When the engine died.”

She shrugged. “Oh that happens all the time. This car is a piece of shit.”

“It happened to Kylo. In exactly the same place. He’s had terrible headaches on and off ever since. Exposure to certain people makes it worse. But you’ve had nothing?”

“No.” Rey frowned. “Should I have?”

It was Donal’s turn to shrug. “I don’t know. Tell me if you notice anything. Anything at all.”

She glanced to her left as Phasma pulled level with them again. “My heart rate is going up. And I’m noticing…”

“Anything unusual!” He said quickly. “I have enough dealing with Kylo’s pantsfeelings without hearing about yours as well!”

He could feel himself flushing as she laughed.

“Anyone who is listening- save me from Skywalkers.”

That just made her laugh harder.

Kylo was sitting on the hood of Phasma’s truck when they pulled up to the house. He looked ridiculously like a model for a really niche softcore porn calendar. ‘Trucks and Emo Sluts 2016’.

“Get your lycra clad ass off my truck!”

Hux couldn’t help laughing at Phasma’s indignant yell. Or at Kylo’s total failure to actually get down when he snagged his leggings on the bullbar that ran across the grille. Judging by his briefly agonised facial expression the resultant wedgie had been unpleasant.

“T.J. brought it back half an hour ago, I thought I should keep it safe for you.” He said peevishly while he freed himself.

“I’m pretty fucking certain you could do that without getting ass prints on it.”

Kylo glanced up at the crow watching him from a nearby streetlamp.

Without taking her eyes off it Phasma stepped towards the flowerbed, found a rock and flung it with pinpoint accuracy.

There was an angry squawk and a shower of feathers, but the thing managed to hop away.
“I still say you didn’t have to sit on it. Hux?” She called. “Come help me move it into the garage.”

Hux looked up at her, down at his legs, and then across at Kylo. “I will, just as soon as someone gets me out of this fucking car.”

While Kylo moved to assist him Rey climbed out of the Miata with significantly more dignity than Hux only to trip over her own feet when she gazed up, up, up at Phasma.

“Holy wow.” She said. “How tall are you?”

She blushed as Phasma raised an eyebrow and pulled a card out of her back pocket. It read-


“I’m 5’7’’...” Rey continued, clearly floundering in the conversation. “So that’d be ten inches…”

“Who needs ten inches?”

“Shut up, Kylo!” The other three said in unison without looking at him.

“I haven’t seen a single major chain store all day.”

“Everything here is family owned, except for some of the big industry up river. The mills and some electronics factories that moved here in the 90s.” Phasma said. “Caleb told me Buck had a hand in securing the land for them, and he arranged some pretty favourable employment contracts compared to the rest of the country. It’s one of the reasons the recession didn’t have much effect here.”

While she spoke they passed the Sheriff’s car parked outside another row of small businesses. It was blessedly empty of either him or his unsettling younger son. Of course that also meant that he could be lurking anywhere nearby. Whether you could see him or not he was a constant threat.

“Why is the head of the police department in a position to be influencing property sales?” Hux asked. He was splitting his focus between the conversation and scanning the crowd for any sign of Lucas Buck. Kylo seemed okay at the moment, but Hux really didn’t want to risk his health with another unexpected encounter.

“Sheriff is more of a political office than it sounds,” Phasma shrugged, “He’s been in the role for over thirty years. And his family owns a lot of land around here. He has a lot of interest in the local businesses- investments, rents, favours given or brokered with others. It’s normal in a town like this.”

“I don’t think anything is normal in a town like this,” Kylo said peevishly, kicking a pebble into the gutter.

It was stopped by a foot wearing beaten up tennis shoes.

“Well now, that’s a bit unkind. Accurate, but unkind.”

Caleb looked… different, somehow. It was hard to put a finger on beyond his casual clothing.
Certainly the faded shirt and torn jeans clung to his muscles in a more flattering way than anything they’d seen him in previously but it was more than that. He looked like a man who’d survived a stressful exam season to come out the other side with straight A’s and a renewed confidence in his own abilities. He stood tall, but looked relaxed at the same time.

Perhaps the incident at the dinner party had affected him more than Hux had expected.

“Miss Phasma, Donal, Kylo— it’s nice to see you again,” he said with an easy smile. “I don’t think I know your friend.”

Kylo turned to introduce Rey but she wasn’t paying attention. Instead she was staring across the street with an intent expression. Her lips were moving slightly.

Like much of downtown, the buildings opposite were Victorian or Edwardian in appearance—tall and narrow red brick buildings with columned facades facing into the street.

Through the wide windows of a bakery they could see the figure of Lucas Buck leaning against the counter.

Judging from the Sheriff’s expression and body language alone the conversation was entirely civil—perhaps discussing the weather or a local sports team. But by contrast the man behind the counter—likely the owner—was red faced and gesticulating wildly.

Buck seemed unfazed by the flying spittle and finger waving. He just continued to speak normally. He even smiled once or twice.

“Huh.” Kylo said, drawing most of the group’s attention away from the Sheriff. “I feel completely fine.”

Caleb frowned. “Why wouldn’t you feel fine?”

“It’s complicated,” Hux said before turning back to Kylo, “No headache? No dizziness? No auras?”

“Oh, he’s leaving,” Rey interjected to no one in particular. “Something’s not right.”

Phasma followed her gaze.

Inside the bakery the angry looking owner was climbing a ladder to reach for several bags of flour stored on a high shelf.

“Totally fine.” Kylo said ignoring Rey’s comments.

Hux at least followed Phasma’s example and looked towards the bakery, which meant there were three witnesses to exactly what happened next.

Nathan hated the Sheriff. A lot of the townsfolk did, though most of them would keep their mouths shut on the subject, even in private. They always said that the Sheriff had eyes and ears everywhere but that was just small town paranoia.

He wasn’t paranoid. He was a man of the world. He’d lived in Charleston for a decade and he knew full well the limits of the law.

However much Buck might want to hint about threats and recriminations there was nothing he could do to harm Nathan or his business. Nathan had baked that cake for the Marshall wedding and if Deputy Floyd wanted one for his own ceremony then he’d just have to come up with the money for
the rush service. He was running a bakery, not a charity.

Still, the encounter had irritated him, so Nathan decided to make a start on the artisanal loaves. There was something about hand kneading bread dough that always made him feel better. He could imagine the dough was the Sheriff’s face.

He paused, looking for the best grade flour. It wasn’t where it was supposed to be.

A few seconds of searching revealed that it was, once again, on the open shelves above the simmering pot of soup waiting for the lunch rush.

Why they’d hired that saturday boy Nathan didn’t know any more, he thought as he dragged the ladder over. The boy was useless and completely incapable of following instruction.

The flour was probably ruined by the steam by now. That was another thing he shouldn’t have agreed to- the stupid open shelves his wife kept describing as ‘rustic’ even though he knew she thought that was a kind of salad dressing.

His thoughts followed this litany of complaints as he climbed the ladder and reached for the nearest bag.

Something moved behind it.

Nathan snatched back his hand and waited to see if there was more movement.

Mice as well? Just his damn luck. They’d be shut down for health code violations at this rate.

Nothing moved. Just his imagination then.

He took hold of the bag and tugged it from its place.

A huge black shape, all beak and claws and mad glittering eyes erupted from the space behind the bag, knocking bags the shelf and Nathan from the ladder.

He flailed, trying to arrest his fall, trying to find anything that might keep him from crashing backwards onto the glass display case below, but the bird continued to flutter and scrabble at his face, driving him further from safety.

One outstretched hand found the edge of a shelf.

The light wooden structure, made more for aesthetics than strength, collapsed under his weight.

The ladder went sideways from under his feet.

The flour and sugar tumbled through the air toward the gas flames under the soup.

As the floor rose up to meet him Nathan recalled the half hour safety training session he hadn’t really paid attention to at culinary school.

What was it about clouds of flour and open flames?

With a sharp boom the front of the bakery blew outward, scattering wood, glass and cupcakes across the pavement.

The explosion itself was brief but intense. The street filled with the smell of toast and caramel before
the scent of burning paper and wood began to establish dominance when the smaller fires took hold.

Phasma and Hux, with years of military training between them, moved forward first. They darted between the cars that had skidded to a stop in the street with Rey hot on their heels. She might not have been military but her studies, and her childhood working around her father’s aircraft, had taught her a thing or two about combustion.

Caleb followed after, shouting about structural instability and the likely collapse of the top heavy facade. Kylo stayed where he was and stared intently at the building, trying to understand Caleb’s words.

The inside of the bakery was a mess of destroyed furniture and food. Small fires burned amongst the wreckage where scraps of paper had been ignited by the blast.

Hux put a hand out and held Phasma in place for a moment. When Rey and Caleb reached them he raised the other hand to signal that he was listening.

Two sounds reached them—the groans of the stores owner coming from beneath a pile of debris, and hiss of gas escaping from somewhere nearby.

“Dust explosion,” Hux said quietly, “should be safe for now but it sounds like there’s a gas leak in there somewhere…”

He was cut off by a creak and a shower of mortar as the front of the building sagged. The columns that had stood between the windows were damaged or missing—nothing was holding the weight of the upper floors any more.

Suddenly the dust from above stopped as if an invisible barrier where pressing upward against the bricks.

Hux glanced back to see Kylo with his hands spread palm up by his hips, his whole frame trembling with effort.

“Phasma? Caleb?” Hux turned to each of them. “Do you think you can get him out fast? I’m not agile enough.”

Caleb nodded and pointed out the clearest route. Without another word they both ran inside. Gently Hux urged Rey back towards the roadway.

“We need to give them room to get him out a safe distance.”

She nodded, her eyes fixed on the pair as she followed his lead.

“He’s not trapped,” Phasma shouted with relief.

It was the work of seconds to pull the barely conscious man free of the wreckage. However they were delayed when the half a foot of height difference between the rescuers made carrying the man together into an unexpectedly difficult task.

The small fires that were burning all over the store were spreading towards the stove and the ominous hissing.

Although the store was now open to the outside, the gas was leaking into the enclosed space behind the cabinets where it could build up to dangerous levels.
Just as Phasma made the decision to sling the man across her own shoulders there was a whoomph as fire finally met fuel again.

The heavy metal doors of the cabinets were thrown outward but stopped by the remains of the ladder. The cheap wooden structures that had stood behind them however were reduced to so much splintered shrapnel and flew out in a fiery cloud towards the three fleeing figures.

This time it was Rey who moved. A single outflung hand as the other covered her mouth to stifle a scream.

Inside the store the fireball changed direction, crawling abruptly upward to char the ceiling before it dissipated.

Unaware of how close they came to an unpleasant death Phasma and Caleb scrambled over the remains of the windowsills and out into the street.

Deputies from the Sheriff’s office just down the street and volunteer firefighters were making their way through the gathering crowd when Phasma placed the baker on the floor near Kylo’s feet.

Hux touched his shaking partner gently on the shoulder.

Kylo was cold to the touch and drenched with sweat. At the pressure on his shoulder he relaxed.

The front of the building collapsed in a roiling cloud of dust. Around them the crowd moved back coughing and cursing, but for some reason the effect was lessened around their group. Only the back of Rey’s head receiving a light coating of dust.

Caleb was kneeling by the baker and using his shirt to stem the flow of blood from a shallow wound in the man’s side. He was murmuring into the man’s ear, pausing now and then to listen to his replies, but talking too quietly for the others to hear.

Sitting on the hood of his car, calmly watching the relief efforts, Lucas Buck looked completely unmoved by so much destruction in the heart of his town.

The local news anchor’s teeth glittered and flashed as she gave a completely inappropriate smile for the first headline of the evening.

“There was unexpected drama this afternoon when a bakery in the historic old town area of Trinity exploded in a double fireball, destroying the building in the process. Let’s go to Gloria Kirby who’s at the scene with Trinity’s own Sheriff Buck…”

Phasma turned the television off with a noise of disgust and threw herself into an armchair. She pretended to concentrate on sipping her well earned beer, but really she was watching the two cousins who were deep in conversation. In the other armchair Hux seemed to be asleep but she strongly suspected that he was feigning too.

“What did you feel? When you used it? The power?” Kylo asked.

Rey sat next to him on the sofa, staring at her fingertips. “I… I don’t know. Warmth I guess. It was so sudden…”

“Stopping the gas explosion was sudden, but after wasn’t.”

She looked at him in confusion. “After?”
“When you stopped the dust cloud from reaching us. You barely even reacted.”

“I didn’t do anything. I thought it was you.”

Kylo shook his head. “I could barely stand. It was you, I could feel it.”

He smiled but she just turned pale and looked even more concerned.

“I don’t understand, how can I use it without knowing?” She asked then almost wailed. “What is this?”

“Do you really think I know the answer to that?” He said in a tone that was half kind and half tired. “This isn’t something I was raised to. Everything I know I learned for myself. Things happened to me, things I don’t ever want you to have to know about. I don’t even know if it’s just us. Until you called me I thought it was just me, but thinking back… Sometimes Leia would say something, or Luke did something, and it felt… a little like it did back there.”

“That’s all a little… dramatic.”

Across the room Hux made a soft noise that might have been a suppressed snort of amusement. Definitely faking.

“What do you remember of my childhood, Rey?” Kylo asked gently. “Before I was old enough to be sent away?”

She looked at him for a long unhappy pause, then looked back down at her hands. Rey didn’t say anything but she shook her head.

“I know I’m being… ‘dramatic’, I’m sorry.” Kylo sighed. “I don’t think I know any other way to be.”

“But, I didn’t have any of that. I had as normal a childhood as dad could manage. I mean. It wasn’t normal, but…”

“I know. What happened to me wasn’t Leia’s fault or Han’s. It was… out of their control I guess you could say. Bad shit happened and they coped as best they could.”

Hux actually sat up at that, his mouth hanging open in surprise.

“Bad shit happened to you too,” Kylo went on without acknowledging his partner’s reaction. “Maybe if it had happened earlier it would have been triggered sooner. Or maybe it was and you didn’t know. How many times did you fall out of trees and not break any bones? How often did you get your own way when you probably shouldn’t have done?”

Rey stared blankly in space. Her brows were drawn together as she tried to concentrate but the effort of questioning all her childhood experiences seemed like too much right now.

She turned the subject back to Kylo.

“What can you do with this?” She asked.

“Watch my face,” Kylo said then held her gaze. Phasma frowned when Rey started backward.

“I didn’t see your lips move!”

“Because I didn’t say anything out loud, that wasn’t ventriloquism, it was telepathy.” Kylo grinned.
“Look down.”

Rey shrieked and grabbed for the back of the sofa when she realised she was hovering a few inches above the cushions. Gradually a small solar system of objects began to orbit her in increasingly complex patterns.

“Put me down! Kylo I swear to god I’ll kick your ass all over again if you don’t put me down!!”

The instant her feet touched the floor they were up again and jerking fitfully as she giggled and screamed.

“You rat bastard, stop tickling me too!!”

Suddenly Kylo was off the sofa and sitting in the middle of the carpet with a dazed expression. “You pushed me,” he murmured vaguely.

“Oh my god! I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean…”

“No, this is great!” He exclaimed. “We know you can use it without thinking but this’ll be a great way of training you to get used to recognising the sensations!”

Phasma offered him a hand to haul him to his feet. He took it but didn’t really use any of her strength to right himself. He was too distracted to properly interact with the world.

She raised an eyebrow when he darted toward the coffee table and grabbed two of the decorative wicker balls sitting in a bowl on the surface. He threw one to Rey.

“Here! Think about fire!”

“Wait, what, no!” Phasma said, jumping to her feet with her beer held ready to throw over both of them. “Not in my house you won’t!”

Kylo raised his hands in a defensive gesture. “I do this all the time at home, I can light it and extinguish it faster than the eye can see, there’s no danger.”

“Not from you, but she’s a complete novice! She’s only been in town six hours! I’d rather she not burn my house down just yet, thank you!”

“Oh as if she could actually manage…”

“Kylo.” Hux said.

“… to set fire to anything…”

“Kylo!”

“… it took me three years to get past the smouldering…”

“KYLO! For f**ks sake!”

Kylo finally stopped talking and turned around. “Oh… Holy shit…”

Rey was sitting right where he’d left her, except that now she was holding a two foot tall weeping willow tree, complete with bright green leaves and roots that were trailing down towards her knees.

“What do I do?!” She whispered.
“I don’t know!” Kylo cried pulling at his hair. “What did you think about?! Because last time I checked fire doesn’t look like that!”

Rey shrugged. “Thinking about fire hurt so I thought about the sun instead.”

As she said it the tree grew another six inches.

“Oh my god.”

Phasma made a decision before her living room was engulfed in foliage.

“I think what we do is plant that thing in the garden and absolutely forbid any more indoor experiments!” She said, reaching out and snatching the tree from Rey’s hands. Something tingled through her nerves, like some kind of twisted muscle memory. “Hux, can you help me? I’ve just remembered some other things about Trinity that might want to go into your notebook.”

Like the twenty foot tree that grew in a single afternoon on Caleb’s sister’s grave, she thought.
Chapter 14

The dark wood panelling echoed faintly with the sounds of crockery and chewing.

By some horrid optical illusion the architecture made the room feel as if it were too big and yet closing in at the same time. Newcomers would have found it disorienting, but Gail had felt as though her whole life was like that for so many years that the impression no longer affected her. It was like a numb patch of skin or a blind spot in her vision- she knew it was there but she’d learned to work around it.

“Mommy, I’m tired.”

Gail swallowed down a sigh and pasted an approximation of a smile onto her face. From the corner of her eye she could see her husband staring at their daughter. She’d really rather that look didn’t turn into a glare.

The windows were dark now behind Lucas where he sat at the head of the table. The lights hanging above him didn’t seem willing to reach his face. It had been a long day after all. He probably wanted peace.

Daniel tried to suppress a yawn with a forkful of mashed potato and almost choked. It really was far too late for dinner, but whatever else Gail might be willing to sacrifice family meals were important.

“I know you're both tired, Rebekah,” Gail said to her daughter, “but just think how tired your daddy is.”

“Why? What did daddy do this time?!" Daniel asked with more sass than might ever be safe.

Lucas gave him a quelling look. “Nathan’s bakery blew up.”

“*You blew up Nathan?*” Rebekah cried. “What did he do?!”

A shiver ran up Gail’s back when Lucas said, “I didn’t do anything to Nathan.”

*No*, she thought, *by your morality you didn’t. Nathan brought it all on himself. They always bring it on themselves. I did.*

“Caleb went in after him.” Lucas continued and Gail’s heart turned to ice. She knew about the explosion but she hadn't heard about this particular detail.

“W...what happened?” She fought to keep her voice level for the sake of the children, but she couldn't help the way her eyes strayed to Daniel. If Caleb was gone…

Last time Lucas had died Caleb had tried to kill her. If Caleb died would Daniel do the same? Now, or only when Lucas died? Would he hurt Rebekah?

“After the facade came down it looked like Nathan was trapped. Caleb and Phasma pulled him out before the gas ignited and destroyed the whole building.” As Lucas spoke the room seemed to darken even further around him.

“Is he okay?” Rebekah asked.

“He’ll live.”
It wasn't until the children were in bed and Lucas had retired to his library that Gail realised she wasn't sure which ‘he’ Lucas had meant.

He'd rarely needed to refer to his father's books over the last twenty years. Things had always been so simple. And what hadn’t been simple had been intuitive in the end.

Then Phasma came. As a retired Army Captain she put his nerves on edge. Caleb had become a good, docile boy after the incident, but today's events seemed to prove he wasn't nearly as disinterested as Lucas had believed.

The boy had become an architect, building homes and services for the needy, yes he spent too much time in the gym but that hadn’t ever equated to running into a burning building. Lucas had felt sure he’d broken Caleb of that when he’d resurrected. The heroism had been unexpected, but not entirely unwelcome.

Either way, could Caleb handle Phasma? Any other generation and her lesbianism wouldn't have been a concern. Any other generation and she wouldn't still be resisting. No, any Buck but Caleb would have had her enthralled or dead by now.

Lucas ignored the tremor in his fingers as he unlocked glass cabinet. Preparations must be made. There was no time for distractions.

Kylo seemed small in a way Hux had rarely seen before.

He often tried to make himself seem small in that manner that was characteristic of a certain kind of large man. The ones who are aware of their power but can’t quite control it. The ones who don’t mean any harm but always seem to cause it against their will.

Hux had seen Kylo do that more times than he cared to count, but he’d almost never seen him look like this before.

He was standing by the only lamp in just his boxers, staring at Phasma’s borrowed shirt in his hands. He looked... diminished.

By the soft orange light Hux could see the outline of every muscle and the worrying inward curve of his belly. Kylo was stacked, he was proud of his physique and worked hard to maintain it, but he hadn’t been involved in competitions for years. Still, he had that dehydrated look of a professional bodybuilder paired with something else that was harder to define.

The five of them had been a mess when the Police and Fire service finally let them leave. Dust and ash from the explosions and sweat from so long standing in the sun had made their clothes and skin disgusting.

They’d hosed off the yard, and Phasma had lent them clean clothes straight from the dryer to avoid tracking filth into the house, but Kylo looked like the colour had been washed out of him in the process.

Even in the warm lamplight Kylo’s skin looked grey, his hair hung lank but dull, and his eyes hardly reflected a photon of light.

It made Hux’ heart ache and his fingers clench around the mass of amulets he was guiltily holding under the sheets.
“Do you think I’m darkness?” Kylo said in quiet tones as if he were speaking only to the shirt in his hands and not to the man in the bed at all.

Hux managed to keep his face straight, but only just when he replied, “I think that’s the most emo question I’ve ever heard and I won’t dignify it with an answer.”

In response Kylo turned to him with an empty look. “I’m serious. If you can’t be…”

“Oh, get over here,” Hux sighed, pulling the covers back with a flourish. The movement revealed the mass of metal in his hand, as well as the welcoming space against his side, but Hux thought it might telegraph that he too was serious, in deeds if not in words. “I won’t have this conversation with you while you freeze your arse off over there.”

Although Kylo took a long meandering route to bed, pausing to check the salt and talismans scattered around the windowills and cardinal points until Hux wanted to scream with frustration, he eventually made it between the sheets.

Icy cold to the touch, he settled down with his head beneath Hux’ chin and pulled the hand with the amulets around until it rested against his own heart. A depressing kind of cuddle, but a cuddle nonetheless.

“Seriously Hux, do you think I’m darkness, or entropy, or destruction…”

“Those sound like the names of Addams Family B-listers. Entropy Addams.” Hux sighed. “No, I don’t think you’re the embodiment of evil, Kylo.”

Kylo huffed through his nose and Hux was ridiculously relieved that the breath against his chest was warm. They had enough to deal with as it was without Kylo becoming an undead of some kind.

“I don’t mean evil in the human religious sense, I mean… The opposite of life. ‘Destruction, disorder, and chaos’. The end of all things. Something inherently opposed to creation.”

“Full offence- what the fuck are you on about?”

Again Kylo made a noise and looked at his hands. They couldn’t see one another’s faces at this angle but the gesture still felt like Kylo was avoiding his gaze.

“I didn’t want to upset Rey but… I can’t do what she did. I’ve never done what she did. And I have tried.” His voice sounded thick like he might be holding back tears but the lashes fluttering against Donal’s neck were dry. “One of the camps I was sent to, some knockoff 4-H agricultural thing, had merit badges based on ability. I wanted them so bad. If you had enough you got extra privileges. The chance to sleep with the lights off and call home more than once a month. I did everything I could to win them fair and square, but I failed. So I tried to use my… I didn’t really know what it was back then. Everything green within a quarter mile rotted and died overnight.”

“So?”

“You don’t think that’s fucked up?”

Hux shrugged as best he could under Kylo’s weight. “Plants are weird. I don’t pretend to understand how they work other than that they mostly grow where no one wants them to, so it just sounds like one obstinate bastard meeting a whole bunch of other obstinate bastards but… you tried once and it scared you too much to try again? That sounds normal. That sounds like trying anything intimidating.”
Kylo shifted like he was going to protest but Hux put his hand over his mouth.

“Beginner’s luck is at least sixty percent not knowing how difficult a task is going to be. Have you ever seen an indoor skydiving set up?” Hux asked. “You jump into a ten foot tube over a powerful fan and it lifts you into the air as if you were really falling through the sky. I’d wanted to be a parachutist since I was a small child. I was obsessed with it. I knew all the theory long before I joined the Army. First time I tried one of those things I overthought it and crashed into the wall. Broke my nose and knocked myself out. Five minutes later I’m telling the paramedics who the prime minister is while a five year old girl is doing backflips.”

“So?” Kylo echoed Hux’ earlier question.

“You said you were trying to grow things by legitimate means before the blight. You knew the theory of how it worked. Well, presumably you did.” Hux said with an ironic smile. “But Rey wasn’t trying to grow a tree. Rey wasn’t trying to grow anything. She was supposed to be starting an ill advised fire. You’re impressed because it’s something you can’t do but you’re ignoring the fact that it was the opposite of the intended task.”

“She made life where there was none.” Kylo replied obstinately. “Already she creates and I destroy.”

“So does cancer.” Hux snapped. He would not have Kylo regressing on years of progress just because his baby cousin seemed to be beating him at his own game. “You know redwood forests need fire to develop, right? Without regular destruction there’s not enough light and the seeds need heat to germinate. You stop the fires and the forest dies. You export rabbits to Australia where they have no predators and life runs rampant. The dichotomy of life and death, light and dark, good and evil… it’s bullshit, Kylo, and you know it.”

Hux set his jaw, determined to refute whatever crap came out of Kylo’s mouth next but the only noise was a pitiful sort of whine.

“Oh, Kylo,” He sighed and pulled the now trembling man up by the chin for a gently quelling kiss. “You don’t destroy. Look at me. You made me whole again.”

Kylo’s eyes flickered down towards Hux’ knees.

“Fuck my legs, I meant my soul.” Hux clarified. “You make me better than I ever expected to be, and you have done so much good.”

“Have I?”

“You fucking held up a building from 60 feet away with only your will! Rey was right there with me and she did nothing.”

Kylo shook his head. “She protected us from the second blast. I felt it, like wings unfurling. Ever since she got here I’ve felt… better, I guess, more able to cope with the town. My head doesn’t hurt any more. She’s so powerful.”

“But did she mean to do it? Does she have control? You manifested with this as a child and worked all your life to master it. She’s 21 and some kind of intellectual prodigy to have finished a Masters at that age. But she’s never actively worked with whatever this power is until now. Maybe it innately helped her with understanding… whatever Metallurgy is about, but really you’re comparing apples to oranges.”

Hux kissed Kylo again. “And even if she is more powerful than you- what do you care? It’s not like you’re going to be fighting her for control of the universe or anything.”
“Metal.” Kylo said indistinctly against warm soft lips. He was starting to warm up himself and it took Hux a second to realise the pleasantly solid body pulled tight against his chest had spoken at all.

“What?”

“Metallurgy is the study of metal. And urgy.” Kylo grinned and something like his old starshine glow was back in his face. “The clue is in the name.”

Hux rolled his eyes, but frankly he was too relieved to do more than mutter, “you twat” before pulling him close and silencing his stupid, beautiful mouth with as many kisses as he could manage. That turned out to be a lot.

The sky was turning a soft orange pink outside before they finally fell asleep. Kylo thought it was the colour of Hux and somehow that made staying awake so long just a little more worthwhile.

She didn’t smoke.

That’s what she’d told her father at least once a month since was 16. That was the story, and she was sticking to it. Besides, she mostly didn’t. She’d tried vaping for awhile but that was different.

No, she definitely didn’t smoke, she told herself as she blew a cloud of grey clove scented smoke towards the twilit sky. This wasn’t her third cigarette from the pack she’d liberated from Kylo’s pocket and she wasn’t replacing the fear clogging her throat with a horrible jittery kind of sickness.

None of this was happening. None of it at all.

She’d studied too hard the night of the party and fainted in her dormroom.

This was all a dream.

Hah. Maybe she was still in the hospital after the swordfighting incident that ruined Kylo’s face and won him the love of his life.

She hadn’t won much lately. Nothing she wanted anyway.

Rey sighed and dropped her head into her hands. She didn’t want this power. On some level she’d known Kylo had had something and she’d never, ever wanted to be pushed down the path Ben had trodden. She knew he hadn’t chosen it. She’d always seen his pain. She had when others hadn’t.

Somehow that made her feel worse about rejecting that path. He’d had no control over his life.

Poor deluded child that she was, she’d thought that she did.

All that work. All those years of study. All that pushing to get out of the cornfields and know the universe in her own particular way.

Now magic was real and nothing made sense any more. Everything she’d thought she knew was just so much bullshit.

“Hey.”

Phasma was standing in the kitchen doorway, a quilted blanket clutched in one hand while the other twisted into her hair. The light spilling out behind caught the short blonde locks and made them glow.
Rey would have thought it looked like a halo if her brain didn’t reject that as too heavy handed. Still, her heart clung to the conclusion and tucked the image safely away for later consideration.

“Hey.” She tried to smile, but it was just a twitch of one cheek like her face was weight down with grief and worry.

The door closed almost silently under Phasma’s hand as she replied with a weak smile of her own. Silent commiseration felt better than speech right then. Rey hoped it would continue.

She sat obediently still while Phasma draped the blanket around her shoulders and then sat down on the step beside her.

The blanket was big enough for both of them, even if it meant sitting thigh to thigh with the Captain. Rey wasn’t at all surprised to realise she didn’t mind that particular circumstance and edged closer to include the other woman in her new shelter.

“Thanks,” Phasma muttered, and took the cigarette from her hand to steal a drag or two. The filter was stained red with lipstick when she passed it back. “Rough day.”

“Rough week.”

“Rough year.” Phasma kept on staring at the sky instead of looking towards Rey.

“You win.”

The blanket shifted a little as Phasma raised a noncommittal shoulder. “I don’t think anyone wins.”

“No. No, I don’t think we do.” Rey said. “I don’t want this.”

“You came here by your own free will,” Phasma said almost to herself. “You knew someone who could help you, who would help you because he’s a good guy even if he never believes it himself. We all get dealt hands we don’t want, but at least yours has a pair of jacks in it. As far as I can tell my hand has a Joker and half a beer mat in it.”

Rey laughed at that and felt a little of the stress peel from her bones, even if she did feel a little guilty that she knew nothing about Phasma’s own trials.

“Free will? Someone brought you here?”

Again Phasma shrugged and the blanket slide down a few inches to let the cool night mists reach their skin.

Rey tugged it back into place and tried not to think about the warmth of Phasma’s neck against her knuckles.

“Something,” Phasma said. She shifted her head so her cheek brushed against Rey’s hand in silent thanks. “I don’t really know what. The town maybe. Or the earth. One day I’m in Atlanta, going about my life, the next I’m waking up on the highway. Driving in my sleep…”

The sky darkened from soft purple to the deepest blue-black as Phasma recounted the last year or so of her life, pushing back through her years in the Army to her childhood. She seemed to be remembering, or maybe rediscovering, things about her mother and grandmother as she spoke.

Rey soon realised that Phasma needed someone to hear her just as much as she did. Except Rey had Kylo, and Donal to some extent, while by all accounts Phasma had no one but curious onlookers and
actual adversaries.

That was a strange thing to think about outside the context of fiction- a real life enemy intent on doing specific terrible harm. Rey pondered on that for a moment or two before her exhaustion slowed brain reminded her that as an veteran Phasma had probably had hundreds such enemies in her time.

Considered like that it seemed strange that Phasma had apparently accepted her fate by finding a house and putting down roots here.

“But…” Rey began, wondering how to frame the question. “But, from you’re saying other women in your position have been murdered and assaulted for all of this, how can you stand to stay?”

The look Phasma gave her was unhappy but resolute. “If I ever managed to leave here then one of my cousins would just be called in my place. Could you make that decision? To doom someone else? I’m a soldier Rey, this is where I should be- fighting.”

For a moment Rey considered whether she’d give up her new powers if it meant pushing them onto someone else. It made her chest ache to realise that she didn’t actually know.

“I wish I had that confidence in myself. I wish I knew how to fight.”

“I’ve seen Kylo’s face, you can fight fine.”

Surprised laughter startled a handful of bats from the trees at the end of the garden and they both turned their heads to watch them go. A dark bird sat atop the lamppost just beyond the next house.

Phasma stood, letting the blanket fall. “Come inside,” she said with a shiver, “it’s getting cold out here and I need some help with a bottle of whiskey.”

She held out her hand.

Rey took it without a thought. Somehow that felt like more than the acceptance of just a drink.

These woods were more like home than any house he’d ever lived in. There was something soothing about the way the damp trees flashed past just beyond the glow of the headlights. It was like a heartbeat, or the breathing of something far bigger than himself.

Caleb felt… strange. It wasn’t the terror of losing his sister to the man he’d thought was his father. It wasn’t the skin-too-tight-brain-too-fast feeling he’d had as a child when Lucas ‘died’. It was… Pre-exam nerves for a test he knew he could ace with his eyes closed.

Stepping up to deadlift more than his previous record when he was sure he was ready.

The moment when he was learning to ride a bike and he realised no one else was holding on anymore.

A deer lay in the road ahead, a huge black crow pecking at its eyes.

Without a thought Caleb hissed at it, as if the noise from inside the car could scare the bird away when the sound of the engine had no effect.

The crow tipped its head at him, but before it, or Caleb, could react a bobcat dove out of the underbrush and snatched it up by the neck.
By the time Caleb could hit the brakes the cat had vanished into the trees again with its very dead prize.

Shaking his head Caleb climbed from the car and hauled the deer to the edge of the road where at least it wouldn’t cause an accident. The forest stood silent all around him, as if it were holding its breath, but he didn’t notice.

He’d done a lot in the last twenty four hours without much conscious thought.

He’d spoken to Phasma and her friends about all the things he’d held secret for so long.

He’d run into a ruined building knowing that he was denying Lucas’ wishes.

He’d gone to the hospital and walked into Nathan’s room like he had any right to be there. The worst part of that was- no one had stopped him. Not even Nathan. Caleb had projected an air of ‘I am allowed to do this’ and everyone had looked at him like they looked at his father.

Then he’d done the one thing he’d sworn he would never, ever do. He’d made a deal with Nathan.

Wiping his hands on his soot stained jeans Caleb slid back into the driver’s seat. The car seemed to know where he wanted to go. The woods seemed to whisper that they’d get him there safely.

His soul felt like it was his own again. He wasn’t sure that he’d ever been aware that it hadn’t been but something had changed. The world seemed to be in focus again.

The forest opened up as the road changed to stoney track. Above him the sky was filled with stars and possibilities.

Ahead he could see the dark shape of Boone sitting on the porch railings. On the second floor Madison sat unnoticed on her bedroom windowsill.

Caleb raised his hand to them both.

Madison nodded and slipped back inside while Boone moved down the steps to meet him.

Suddenly Caleb realised he had no idea what he intended to say. Speaking to Phasma and the others it had all seemed so clear and sensible, but with the man in front of him… The once married man, his best friend for more than twenty years, the man who meant most to him in all the world…

Could he really risk losing him by admitting how he felt?

“I had the police scanner on again today,” Boone drawled without meeting his eye, “you know how the voices calm down the little ones.”

Caleb nodded. He did know. Why baby alpacas would like listening to radio chatter he’d never understand, but he’d spent enough time in the sheds behind the farm helping out that the voices had become background noise to him.

“They said there was an explosion.” Boone went on. His voice was shaking. “They said you went in. Then there was a noise loud enough to spook the mamas. Betsy kicked the scanner to pieces. I… I never got to hear if you came out again…”

Oh no. He hadn’t thought. He hadn’t imagined that Boone would hear about any of that until he told him himself.

Staring so sadly at the ground Boone looked a lot like he had as a child, all stick thin limbs and
clothes that were perpetually too big for him. Caleb had wanted to hug him then, especially when he’d moved away for college and left him behind.

Unable to think of a reply Caleb stepped forward and finally, finally wrapped his arms around those narrow shoulders.

“I called the sheriff’s office,” Boone continued against Caleb’s chest. “I called them and they said you was in the hospital. But when I called them they just said patient information was for families only.”

“I was just visiting Nathan, making sure he really was going to be alright,” Caleb said reassuringly, “I wasn’t in hospital, I swear.”

Boone let out a shuddering breath. His body relaxed forward while his arms came shyly up to wrap around Caleb’s waist.

Caleb turned his head until his nose bumped against Boone’s cheek.

“I’m sorry.”

“Just… don’t you ever do that again, you son of a bitch.”

Neither of them moved forward first. Instead it was a slow shifting of body weight from foot to foot until their lips gently met.

“I promise.” Caleb murmured when they parted. There was still so much to say to one another but right now the kiss seemed to be enough.

“So then…” Rey giggled slightly, fighting to be less drunk that she seemed, no to seem less drunk than… ah, whatever, she was relaxed and happy, and Phasma was the one laying on the floor by the couch, not her. No Rey was still firmly situated on the couch cushions, thank you very much… Wait, what was she saying?

“The bannister?”

Oh yes. Right. “So then, Kylo is half way down the bannister ahead of me, he’s just rounded the last curve when he sees what we forgot!”

“What?!”

“The fucking brass pineapple at the end!”

The noise Phasma made was half shriek of laughter, half sympathetic groan.

“Did he… You know… Hit it?”

Rey snorted at the mental image of her cousin sliding crotch first into that monstrosity. “No, numbnuts there threw himself off to the left while I went to the right. Which meant that I rolled to a graceful stop on the stairs, while he crashed through a Queen Anne table and two dozen orchids!”

“I’d have loved to see that.” Phasma said with a glint in her eye.

“What, Kylo soaking wet covered in splinters and flower petals? It certainly was a look.”
“No.” Phasma reached out and gently took hold of her wrist. “No, I meant I wanna see you roll…”

If she’d been sober perhaps Rey would have anticipated the sudden tug on her arm. Perhaps she’d have kept her balance. Perhaps she wouldn’t have ended up sprawled across Phasma’s chest with her nose full of the warm, soft scent of her.

Thank god she wasn’t sober. There were red, slightly scarred lips only inches from her own and maybe sober Rey would not have been so impulsive as to kiss them without invitation.

It seemed that Phasma didn’t mind at all.

She tasted of whiskey, and lipstick, and something that felt like home. How odd to find that here, so far away from reality.

Finally, slowing, totally unwillingly, Rey drew back and licked her lips.

Phasma smiled a little nervously and glanced to the side. “Are… are we floating?!”

Whatever Rey had been doing stopped abruptly and dropped the giggling pair five feet onto the couch.

Kylo staggered down the stairs with one hand scratching at his aching back. Behind him Hux followed with stiff limbed movements more suited to a GI Joe than a real human being.

“I think… I think we’re getting too old for those sorts of shenanigans,” Hux muttered.

“What, the heroics or the sex?” Kylo asked as he headed towards the kitchen.

Hux stopped midway down the stairs to stare at his husband in horror. “Hey now, let’s not go too far!!”

He bristled slightly when Kylo shushed him but followed his pointed finger towards the living room.

Looking sickeningly peaceful there on the couch slept Phasma, with Rey curled against her chest, thankfully both still fully dressed in the clothes they’d been wearing the day before.

With a wave of his hand Kylo covered them with the blanket that had slipped to the floor, and gently pulled the doors closed.

“You get the waffles going,” Hux said. “And I’ll get started on the hangover cure.”
The pillow beneath her head was warm, firm, and breathing... oh.

Part of Rey’s brain tried to debate whether she should sit up or feign sleep, but it was overruled by the very large portion that was loudly chanting ‘you kissed Phasma!’ over and over again. Some ancient reptilian structure deep within told everything else to shut up, then demanded to know why they were collectively pickled in alcohol. Since it lacked language it did this by body-slamming her with a headache.

“Arghghhh...” She moaned weakly.

Her pillow chuckled.

Rey tickled it in protest only to find that the squirming woke up her stomach, and just like her brain it wasn’t impressed with the situation.

“Nooooo....”

Something cool and damp nudged her forehead.

She peered at it long enough to establish that it was a sweating glass of something vaguely red and a bit lumpy. She let her eyes follow the glass to a hand and a wiry forearm covered in ginger-blond hair.

“Hi Donal. Is that a magic potion?”

He didn’t laugh, though she could see his grin.

“Maybe. Drink it and see.” Hux kept his voice low in deference to her headache.

It probably wasn’t wise to drink an unknown magical potion, but then it hadn’t been wise to drink all that whiskey either, and she’d already done that so it probably couldn’t get any worse.

By a system of mutual shoving and pulling she and Phasma made their way into a vaguely upright position.

Rey found that her nose kept making its own way into Phasma’s cloud of blonde hair, drawn in by the smell of whiskey, motor oil and coconut that seemed to hang around her like a cloud. It smelled infinitely better than the contents of her glass.

Beside her Phasma held her own nose and poured the concoction down her throat in one movement. Somehow even the way her throat moved when she swallowed the horrible mess was attractive.

Oh hell, Rey thought, you’ve really fallen hard, haven’t you?

Her heart didn’t bother to respond but her brain reiterated its complaints about her hangover. She looked suspiciously at her glass.

“What’s it like?” She asked Phasma.

“Like gazpacho that’s already been eaten.” Phasma replied a little doubtfully.

“Urgh.”
“My head feels better though. Possibly in self defence. I don’t think I’d survive a second dose.”

Hux snorted, but offered no further comment.

Copying Phasma’s movement, Rey held her nostrils closed and poured the horrible mess down her throat.

The weird texture made her stomach revolt, which made her cover her mouth to keep from being sick. To do that she had to let go of her nose, which meant the smell hit her full on.

“What the fuck?”

The main flavour was… all of them. Ginger, cinnamon, bacon, celery, chilli, tomato, rosemary, thyme, egg, tabasco, pepper and salt. It was like a riot on her tongue and everyone was on fire.


“Every hangover cure ever invented, plus every vaguely medicinal herb in Phasma’s cabinets, all in one.”

“There’s bits of fried egg in this.” Phasma said flatly, staring at the residue in the bottom of the glass.

“Yup.”

“Why?”

“It’s part of a traditional English fry up,” Hux said with a grin, “just be glad I couldn’t get black pudding on short notice.”

Phasma raised an eyebrow. “Do I want to know what black pudding is?”

“Blood sausage.”

“Why do you hate us?” Rey moaned.

“Are you still hungover?”

The women looked at each other.

“No.” They answered together.

“You’re welcome. I’ll leave you to get yourself sorted.” Hux took the glasses and turned back toward the kitchen. “Kylo is making waffles in the kitchen if you fancy it. You might want to be quick though.”

“Do you, uh, remember everything from last night?” Phasma asked quietly once the door closed behind Hux.

Rey tried to give a reassuring smile. “Yeah, do you?”

Phasma nodded. “I’ve never levitated during a kiss before.”

“Me neither. My ex would have loved it, she was a pilot. But I’m glad it happened with you instead.”

“Do you think it’ll happen again?”
“Only one way to find out,” Rey replied with a grin.

It was maybe ten minutes later when they finally came down enough (figuratively and literally, the floating really was fun) to make their way into the kitchen. Showers would be necessary sooner rather than later, but they both needed some kind of food to exorcise the taste of that awful beverage.

Rey blinked at the sight of her cousin’s ass sticking out of the refrigerator while he searched for something. He was thankfully wearing shorts, but they left little to the imagination. The words ‘all you sinners stand up sing hallelujah’ were tattooed on his inner thigh. She made a note to toss that CD in the trash when she got home. If she got home.

She swallowed and turned her gaze away. There was a stack of a dozen waffles on the counter next to the coffee machine.

“How do you expect four of us to eat that many waffles?!” She asked.

“What?” Kylo turned to look at her with five jars of preserves balanced in his hands. “I don’t know what you guys are eating but those are mine.”

Rey and Phasma both laughed at the joke.

“Kylo, you have to share.” Hux chided from his seat at the dinner table with a pot of coffee and single waffle.

The noise Kylo made was a little like a dog being ordered to give up its favourite toy.

“Kylo…”

“Can’t I just make them some more?” He whined.

“No. There’s no mix left. Just eat more eggs if you’re still hungry.”

Finally Rey realised it wasn’t a joke and crinkled her nose in disgust. “You were really going to eat twelve waffles to yourself?”

“I know, disgusting isn’t he?” Hux laughed. “All those muscles take some feeding. It’s better not to pay attention to his plate.”

“It’s not the muscle, it’s the…” Kylo waved his hand vaguely and made the jars orbit his head. “I’m fucking exhausted.”

“Then maybe stop doing it?” Hux said with an unsympathetically raised eyebrow.

Kylo shrugged, muscles rippling, and sent the jars over to the table. “At least my head doesn’t hurt any more. I guess that’s one positive in all this.”

“Thanks for reminding me how shitty my life is,” Phasma grumbled. “I was having a really good morning. I’d forgotten all about fucking Trinity. I hate this town… No, scratch that, I don’t. I hate the goddamn Sheriff.”

Hux kicked out a chair for her and poured them both coffee while they settled at the table.

“I’ve been trying to think of ways we can help,” he said. “I really wish I had access to those books but… I can’t imagine any being in the universe would genuinely be dumb enough to keep instructions for destroying himself in his own house. I mean… that’s proper comic book villain
territory. Still, the things Rey brought with her have helped.”

There was a brief pause as Rey held out her fist to be bumped. Hux just looked at it until Kylo leaned around his chair and did it for him.

“Sorry about anything you had to see in order to get to those.” When he spoke Kylo wore an expression of ‘please don’t tell mom’ embarrassment. He looked like Ben, not himself, in that moment and the sight made Rey uncomfortable.

She felt bad until she remembered the box of sex toys. Then she decided he probably deserved to feel a little bad. “It was certainly a novel security system.”

To cover his embarrassed coughing fit Hux noisily rifled through his papers.

“Anyway,” he said, “I’ve been looking into this kind of locational magic. It’s hard to say exactly how it’s been set up without witnessing the original ritual. Even written accounts aren’t all that valuable because they often miss gestures, intonation, details that don’t seem important at the time.”

“I could try to find the location? Watch the past like I did at Caleb’s old house?” Kylo volunteered around a mouthful of waffle.

“That’d be a last resort I think. Depending on the culture- or even species if the magic started with the fae - you’d likely just generate a ton more research that wouldn’t be valuable. The best way forward is to look at how it functioned in the past and try to spot some loopholes.”

Phasma gave a unenthusiastic laugh. “If there are any.”

“There are always loopholes. Ritual magic isn’t contract law. It doesn’t involve a dozen lawyers and documents thousands of words long. Intention matters, but you can usually get around things by either pedantry or science.”

“Hux has like +10 advantage for pedantry.” Kylo said from his place on the window seat. He had a waffle in one hand, strings of syrup arrested in mid air by his powers, while his other hand was fussing with his hair.

“Eat your fucking waffles.” Hux muttered, then turned to Phasma. “Anyway, what’s the endgame here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you want to end the curse? Or game the curse?”

“Are we even sure it is a curse?” Kylo asked quietly.

Rey frowned. “Of course it’s a curse. Look at all the harm it’s done to the women involved! Rape and murder going back three hundred years.”

“How much of that was down to men though?” Phasma asked.

“You think an entity that would give that much power to men really thought they’d share it?”

Hux shrugged. “Depends how old it is really. I mean, I’ve met things that are thousands of years old and mostly exist outside our reality…”

“Met them and fucked them!” Kylo said through a coughing fit like anyone would be fooled.
“Bite me.” Hux snapped. He rolled his eyes when Kylo walked over and very gently did just that. “I’ve had conversations with things who don’t understand why we aren’t matrilineal, or are baffled that we live in family groups. Some things don’t breed via intercourse. A lot of those never even meet their mate or their parents at all. They probably wouldn’t see an issue with a division of labour like this.”

“We could ask.”

Everyone turned to look at Kylo with raised eyebrows. He made a gesture that roughly translated as ‘I’m just making suggestions’.

“You can barely even exist in this town,” Hux said. “I doubt you’d survive asking questions of whatever controls this place.”

“Phasma could try. She’s part of all this.”

“How the fuck do you ask a town a question?” Phasma snapped while Hux covered his face with his hands. “Magic sigils? A pentagram? Tune the TV to a dead station? Sacrifice a fucking goat? I know where we can get a llama at least. Would that work? Or would that just piss it off?”

The disdain in her voice made Kylo bristle but Hux leaned against him a little to calm him.

“Kylo, you’re basically asking a kidney to have existential conversation with the brain that controls it.” Hux said before Kylo could formulate a response. “No offence!” He added quickly to Phasma who looked a little offended at being compared to a body part.

“It’s just that… ok it’s hard to explain but like… your digestive system is controlled by your brain, right? But it also does some things independently, and all the things it does aren’t on an ‘I think therefore I am’ level. Ancient eldritch powers that control entire towns aren’t usually capable of communicating in a way we can consciously understand.”

“Phasma said Lucas has books on the subject though,” Rey said. She wasn’t entirely following the conversation and that was making her frustrated.

“That’s probably knowledge from decades of lived experience,” Hux said. “Most books on such subjects are like that. You know, like any horror movie where the college kids find the abandoned cabin of some researcher who dedicate his life to the study of something terrible. Thing is, that kind of study can get really dumb really quickly.”

“Is this about the live octopus again? Because I put it back!”

Once again everyone looked at Kylo.

“Yes, exactly,” Hux continued, “it’s hard to repeat any experiment when the incorrect outcome might destroy everything in a five mile radius. You get a lot of false positives. But with many books, written over a long period of time, it becomes easier to sort the wheat from the chaff.”

“Or the octopus from the firework.”

Hux and Kylo nodded sagely at each other.

“Are you going to explain what the fuck that’s about, or am I going to have to hurt you for being pricks at the most inappropriate moment in my life?”

“I can’t imagine you’re ever happy to see a prick whatever… ow.” Kylo rubbed his arm but didn’t
Phasma turned to Hux with her fist still raised.

“There was a really poorly written book by a guy who kept transposing ‘d’ and ‘b’. Squid and squib you see? Kylo here thought a spirit haunting a theatre could be scared away with a live octopus. He was not correct.”

“Yeah, but the firework thing wasn’t right either!” Kylo said defensively.

“True. A lot less slimy though.”

The confused silence that followed was eventually broken by Rey sighing heavily. “I have no idea what the fuck is going on. Do you want those books or not?”

“Wrong question.” Kylo said as Hux said ‘yes’ with far too much glee in his voice. “I don’t think Donal has ever seen a book he didn’t like. ‘Pansexual’ in his case includes ‘bibliosexual’.”

“Fuck off.”

Kylo ignored him. “What you mean is- do we need them?”

All Hux could do was shrug. He really didn’t know.

“Forget the books a minute,” Phasma said with a dismissive wave. “What did you mean by ‘game the curse’?”

“Hi, Caleb? About that date?” Phasma tried not to sound too awkward. There had to be some way of giving the verbal equivalent of a wink but she didn’t really know how to do it. “Do you think I could meet you for a uh, chat first?”

Caleb’s apartment was in an upscale converted warehouse overlooking the river.

The living room had the same exposed brickwork and bland modern furniture look that Hux had come to associate so closely with young professionals that it took him a moment to realise that it was totally out of place in this old fashioned town. There was very few personal items on display, but given the man’s history that probably wasn’t surprising.

“You know, when Phasma mentioned a date, I didn’t expect to see all four of you,” Caleb said as he shut the door.

“Aw you’re breaking my heart there, Caleb,” Kylo drawled on his way towards the huge floor to ceiling windows. “I was really hoping to…”

“Stop! No! Don’t you dare!” Rey shouted over the rest of the sentence.

Hux cut in before it descended into a patented Skywalker Family Argument.

“Okay, okay, settle down. We have some proposals for you and…” He stopped when Phasma put her hand over his mouth.

“It’s my life,” She said quietly, “Please correct me if I mess up, but otherwise let me do the talking, okay?”
The other three nodded. Hux and Rey settled obediently onto the couch while Kylo continued to loiter at the window, idly twisting the ends of his hair through his fingers.

“Do you remember what we talked about at dinner? The magic around Trinity? The things Lucas said?”

For a moment Caleb’s face froze as if his brain was too busy accessing his memories to animate it.

During the pause he looked far more like the man Hux and Kylo had first met in the diner, enough that both men reached for their pockets. Caleb had made progress recently, but there were no guarantees that it was permanent.

“I… do,” He smiled, then gave a nervous laugh. “It’s… it’s bullshit…” He didn’t sound convinced.

Phasma stepped closer, her face tense with determination. “No. It’s real. I didn’t come to Trinity because I wanted to, and neither did Gail. You said you could talk to your sister once, after she died. I believe you. We think she’s still with you in a way. You said that when Lucas died you became someone else- I believe you. My great grandmother told me everything she knew about this town. It wasn’t a lot, I think Lucas is the only one who knows it all, but I do know it’s real.”

“Magic isn’t real.” Caleb muttered. It sounded more like an automated response than a belief.

“Beg to differ.” Kylo said the words as if they were almost a quotation.

Caleb covered his mouth with one hand and took a step back, while instantly Kylo held his own out at his sides to show he wasn’t a threat.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a soothing tone. “I forgot. That’s what Lucas said when you denied being his son, just before you burned your house down.”

“How do you know that!??”

Kylo wriggled his fingers. The curtains billowed around him without a breeze, the cushions began to levitate from the sofa, and in the kitchen area every cupboard door banged open.

“I’m magic too. We’re just different kinds.”

“That’s enough with the goblin king routine, thank you, Kylo.” Hux murmured.

“Look,” Phasma said, trying to push down her irritation with her friends so she could speak to Caleb properly. “I know this is a sensitive topic but… we - that is Hux, Kylo, and me - we know how you came about… What happened with your mom I mean. It isn’t the first time it’s happened in Trinity, I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s happened for generations. Lucas’ parents were married, but doesn’t prove anything about whether his mother was happy. Gail is married to Lucas but you said that was out of character. Lucas wants you to get with me. Right now he’s pushing you to date me but we know he has no objection to more extreme…”

Caleb looked disgusted at the direction of the conversation. “I wouldn’t do that. I would never force you to…”

Phasma placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “I know.” She patted his cheek then let her smile turn into a smirk. “And I’d rip you in half like a phonebook if you tried.”

She shrugged and stepped back. “But that’s the way Lucas thinks- that this town is split between what he sees as his side and my side- Gail’s and your mom’s side. Authoritarian control and
maternalistic nurturing. As far as he knows that’s how it’s always been and that’s the way it should be.”

“And you think you can change that?”

“I think changing everything would require very, uh, drastic action. But the bounds of the arrangement are more flexible than you might think. We get along fine now that we know each other, we both love someone else, I don’t see why we have to hate each other, and I don’t believe it’s necessary. The arrangement benefits the whole town. The recession hasn’t touched it, god knows w”

“Can’t you just end it though?!” Caleb sounded desperate. “What if we get along until the instant Lucas dies and then I turn into him?!“ He turned to Hux with a beseeching expression. “Please? Please, just... end the whole damn thing so we’re normal people again!”

“There’s a damn good chance that you’ll be a normal corpse,” Hux sighed, “Or you might never have existed at all. Or Trinity gets permanently separated from the rest of reality. Or you split timelines. Or... well pretty much anything you can imagine in the venn diagram intersection between terrible and stupid. We have no idea what we’re dealing with at the heart of all this. Poking it with a stick will probably just make it explode.”

“So, what do we do?” Caleb asked. He was pacing back and forth in front of the door now, his face slowly turning pink with frustration. “We marry and wait for Lucas to die before we can be happy? Because I vote we just kill Lucas now.”

Rey gasped at the anger in his voice but the rest were unsurprised.

“I vote for that!”

“For fucks sake, Kylo, put your hand down!”

“I don’t think we have to marry. Your parents weren’t married or living together. IVF exists.” Phasma shrugged. “I’ve considered having a kid one day. Or you could raise them. Boone already has a kid so you know where to look for support. Did you manage to talk to him? About the two of you?”

Caleb’s sudden blush completed the transition of his face to a brilliant shade of red.

“Oh, yeah, I uh... kinda did.”

“Good for you, buddy.” Kylo said mildly then turned back towards the window.

Just when Phasma opened her mouth to continue Kylo suddenly exclaimed, “Shit!”

Hux was the first to reach his side. After a quick glance outside he tugged Kylo back and out of view.

Parked haphazardly in the street below were four cars with Sheriff’s Department livery, and one very familiar Crown Victoria.

“They might be here for someone else,” Caleb said. He didn’t sound convinced.

Just on the edge of hearing, booted feet tramped up a distant staircase.

“What do we do?”

It was Rey who asked the question, but everyone turned to look at Hux.
“You’re sure you didn’t find any sign of the redhead?” Lucas asked the sweating deputies shifting nervously in front of him with their hats in the hands.

“No, Sir, no sign of him.” Floyd said the words to his boots rather than look the Sheriff in the eye. Beside him Deputy Healy shook his head in emphatic agreement.

“You searched everywhere?”

A flat-toned chorus of voices replied, “we searched everywhere.”

Lucas frowned, more than a little disconcerted. Something wasn’t right here. There’d been nowhere for the skinny outsider to go other than the roof or the river, and he’d had men watching those and the street for the entire two hour search. The man had definitely gone into the building, but he hadn’t come out.

Still, he had two out of the three. Getting rid of 66% of his problem would be better than nothing. He’d reach out to the rest of the town in the meantime. If the man was outdoors he’d be spotted eventually.

Across the river the sky filled with a cloud of wheeling black birds.

In the back of the Crown Victoria Kylo tightened his hold on Rey’s hand. It was shaking, but not with fear.

In the apartment three floors above them Caleb and Phasma sat silently on the couch, patiently waiting for the last of the deputies to leave after the ‘drugs bust’. It was a tenuous, bullshit charge- an obvious excuse to get rid of newcomers who had offended the Sheriff- but they both knew better that to question it outloud.

Kylo and Rey knew what they were doing, they’d just have to cope by themselves for a while.

Crammed into the space between Caleb and Phasma, sitting bolt upright, Hux bit his lip and tried not to move too much. They’d done the whole ‘the man you’re looking for isn’t here’ hand waving mind control schtick before, but never for this long.

Ten feet away the deputy yawned and stretched.

Hux really, really hoped that Kylo’s mind-trick wouldn’t wear off anytime soon…
Chapter 16

After an interminable wait the deputy finally left with a nod to Caleb and a reminder than his father didn’t approve of this kind of behaviour.

It took a lot of Caleb’s hard earned self control not to point out that Lucas didn’t like anything much. But since the ‘behaviour’ in question was a total fabrication Caleb knew better than to risk answering back. They were just lucky that Lucas hadn’t chosen to come up to the apartment himself. It wouldn’t be wise to push that luck with everything they still had to face.

They all waited with bated breath while the last of the car doors closed in the street below.

The engine sounds were just fading into the distance when Phasma asked, “So… What the fuck do we do now?”

Squashed awkwardly between them Hux stretched as best he could. Climbing off the couch would have been difficult even for an able bodied person- as it was Hux half fell, half popped out of the space like a cork, and ended up clinging to the coffee table to get his balance.

Another stretch, long and slow with much cracking of stiff joints followed before he fished a notebook from his back pocket.

The lack of urgency made Caleb’s blood boil in a way he hadn’t felt for years. Why the hell were they just sitting there when there was only one obvious solution?

“We kill Lucas.” He said. “I’m tired. This town is tired. We’re all tired of living in fear. And we’ve been tired for twenty fucking years. I want…”

Phasma cut in quietly. “Have you ever killed someone, Caleb?”

Above him Hux and Phasma were both staring at him with the same blank expression. He’d forgotten that they had been soldiers.

Caleb looked at his hands in shame. Technically he had killed someone, and there had been plenty more that he hadn’t been able to save. But this was different. It had to be.

He sighed, suddenly exhausted. “I don’t want to worry about this any more. Turning into him, I mean. If it happens it happens. I just want him gone. Destroyed.”

“Caleb, stop.” Hux said in a voice that brooked no arguments. “That won’t help you. Not right now. Lucas has Kylo- I have every reason to want an end to this, and so does Phasma. But anger isn’t the answer. Remember what I said about intentions? It matters, more than you probably realise. If you go into this angry then you’ll be all the more likely to end up like him.” He glanced at the book in his hands. “Think about what you actually want. Not right this second but for the rest of forever.”

Phasma had shifted slightly as she stood. Less relaxed, less open than she’d been before, even through her fear. She looked like a woman at the edge of a battlefield, awaiting her orders. “What do you have in mind, Major?”

Hux looked up from his notes.

“Do you trust me?”
The sun was just beginning to set as the Sheriff drove them out of town. Light broke through the dark woods at only the steepest of angles, briefly illuminating the dust in the air like ribbons of gold before it vanished again. The sight would have been beautiful in any other circumstances. Now it just felt like time running out.

Lucas had monologued for a while, making ridiculous threats and promises that the pair in the backseat knew better than to acknowledge. Now he was silent and so were they. But then, they didn’t need to speak to communicate.

Are you okay?

The words whispered into Rey’s head as if Kylo feared even psychic eavesdroppers. Glancing left, Rey could see just the glint of Kylo’s eye through the mess of artfully teased hair that covered the right hand side of his face.

I’ve never been in a police car before. She admitted. Campus security had driven her in after the incident that revealed her powers, and somehow she couldn’t bring herself to think of them as real law enforcement. Then again, neither was the man driving the car.

I can’t even remember my first time… the fire? Or was it the windows? Or was it that mall santa….

Kylo, this isn’t funny. She rolled her eyes. That was one of her earliest memories, but really not appropriate for the situation. What the fuck do we do?!

Somehow Kylo projected the mental sensation of a shrug into her mind. He wasn’t exactly the planning type.

Can you read his mind? She had no idea of how the process worked, but now they were in the car she was all out of ideas.

I ain’t even gonna try because I don’t wanna die… hey that rhymes!

Oh god how she wanted to hit him. CAN’T YOU TAKE ANYTHING SERIOUSLY??!

Kylo winced like she’d really shouted. No, and it’s a real problem. Also it’s the only thing keeping me sane.

Debateable. She thought coldly, though she did feel a little bad.

He replied with laughter, Sanity is a spectrum.

With little else to go on, Rey glanced towards the rear view mirror.

Think you can read the deputy in the car behind us? The guy is sweating like a pig. Heh. He does not want to be following us.

From here with no direct line of sight? Kylo sounded doubtful.

I don’t know how it works... What about looking through my eyes?

Again the shrugging sensation. A psychic trickshot? Might work.

The sensation shifted until it became something like a tension headache directly behind her eyes. Rey tried to relax and let Kylo take control, but there were so many miniscule eye adjustments that she’d never noticed before- it was almost impossible to let go.
She stared at the mirror until tears blurred her vision. Just when she felt sure she would vomit the feeling lifted.

Kylo shook his hair back from his pale face. His nose was bleeding and he’d burst a blood vessel in his eye leaving the sclera stained a horror movie red. Glancing down Rey’s realised she’d tightened her grip until both their knuckles were white.

_Fuck._ Kylo’s mental voice was unsteady and almost breathless. _Have you seen Mad Max? The first one_?

What does that have to do with anything?

Well, _I can either describe something in gruesome detail, or I can just reference the final scene of the movie..._ He trailed off hopefully.

_I’ve seen Road Warrior and Fury Road._

_Shit._ Kylo shook his head restlessly and tried to project an image of the film into her head. It was vague, like an impressionist painting. _Well, at the end of the first movie Max finds the guy who killed his family looting a fatal car crash. So he handcuffs his ankle to the car and rigs the tank to explode. The guy can cut his foot off and maybe survive, or try to cut through the cuffs and definitely die._ Buck did that to someone on this road. Except he caused the car to crash first. Just inside the county lines.

The last part was much clearer- a memory of an event rather than of a movie.

_Oh my god. What did Lucas’ guy do?_

_Ran a protection racket._

Ray felt her jaw drop just a little. _Wait, isn’t he running a protection racket?!_

_He blew up a bakery over a cake, let’s not be surprised that hypocrisy is in his repertoire._

Rey snorted and turned it into a coughing fit. The noise still attracted the attention of the driver.

In the rear view mirror they could both see Lucas frowning at them through barely human eyes. He looked old, far older than he should have done, but in the same way as a petrified forest- stone where once there had been living wood. It didn’t sit well on a human face.

Lucas’ eyes flickered to Kylo’s forehead for an instant before returning to the road ahead.

Kylo hadn’t moved to wipe the blood from his face.

“Y’all better not be bleeding on my upholstery,” Lucas sneered.

“No, Sir, this is the ‘92 model- it’s practically a collector’s piece. I wouldn’t ever show so much disrespect.” Kylo replied in his best attempt at a deferential tone. It wasn’t a tone he was used to employing, and the lack of practice showed.

“Little late for respect isn’t it? Ah well… not far to the county lines now… then you’re someone else’s problem.”

Whose problem wasn’t really clear but Rey knew she didn’t want to think about it. Instead she watched the birds wheeling across the thin sliver of sky still visible above the road.
“America is good at taking old things and making them seem new again.” Hux explained, still flicking through the pages of his book. “Cryptids are rare where there are strong oral traditions. A stranger out on the North York moors might see a black dog or horse with glowing eyes and wonder what it is, but the landlord at the nearest pub can tell him it’s a gytrash or shagfoal, assuming he survives the encounter. But you encounter something here where the oral history is disrupted and no one living locally remembers its name any more, well, suddenly you’ve a hashtag on your hands and a dozen conspiracy theorists in anoraks climbing trees.”

Despite all their bickering, or possibly because of it, Kylo was especially good at calling Hux on his bullshit. It was a vital service for the good of all concerned and as Hux felt himself slipping deeper into lecturing mode he sincerely missed the snark that would have derailed him. Thankfully Phasma came to his rescue.

“Is this really the time for a history lesson?”

Hux rolled his eyes to mask his gratitude. “Do you know what a red string of fate is?”

“Like in anime?” Caleb asked.

They both turned to stare at him in surprise.

“What? I got into Naruto at college.” He said defensively. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Yeah. Like anime, and East Asian folklore. It traditionally connects two people by their little fingers. Soulmates and the like, usually, but it’s a powerful concept all the same.” Hux wriggled his pinky finger as if in demonstration. “I assume you know about pinky swears?”

Phasma opened her mouth to speak, thought better of it, then tried again. “Are you really suggesting we use a schoolyard promise to defeat Lucas?”

“I’m suggesting that you use one to protect yourself within the curse. We have no idea what this thing is, but we know how something as simple as a pinky swear works.” He said, as if anyone else in the room had any idea what he was talking about.

“Last week I’d have said that was the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” Phasma sighed, “but now I’m not sure it’s even in the top ten.”

“I’m willing to try it,” Caleb said.

“Is there a plan B if this turns out to be a bust?”

“Well, yeah.” Hux walked over to the kitchen area and pulled a knife from the block by the stove. “But frankly I don’t wanna try it. Hand to hand combat isn’t my speciality any more.”

While Phasma took the knife away and returned it to its proper place, Caleb said, “So, what do we do?”

Hux began opening cupboards. “Where’s your salt?”

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*Kylo, what do we do?!* She was trying to keep the fear out of her inner voice as the sky darkened but she wasn’t terribly successful.

*I’m thinking.*

*Think faster or I’ll do the thinking for you!* Rey snapped.
Hux had drawn a haphazard shape on the floor with table salt- a circle with two loops intruding inward into it. A dozen battered sugar packets were arranged a seemingly random intervals, making the strange display seem all the more comical.

“Don’t you need like... runes, and a five pointed star?” Caleb asked doubtfully. At Hux’ look of disappointment he shrugged. “It’s just a little underwhelming, you know?”

“It’s a ritual not a summoning. Not everything needs to look like an Alice Cooper album cover.”

“Who?”

Hux gave him the finger and strode stiffly around the circumference looking for faults. Finding none he gestured to them both.

“I need you to stand here and here,” he pointed to the point beside the junction of each loop, “and step into the centre of the circle, pausing in the smaller circle along the way. I wish I had Kylo with us to be certain it worked, but we’ll just have to cross our fingers… not literally.” He added when Caleb crossed his fingers on both hands.

They did as they were bidden, then turned to look at Hux for more instructions.

“Link the pinkies on your dominant hands…” He shuddered at ‘pinky’. “It’s been years and that word still sounds weird to say.”

They did as he asked, even if Phasma rolled her eyes just a little.

“Now repeat after me, as close together as you can-” He cleared his throat, then intoned solemnly- “We will work together for the good of Trinity and its people. We will not harm one another, or by inaction, allow harm to befall us, our families or our romantic partners. This we swear.”

They followed him haltingly, word for word.

Nothing happened.

All three glanced at one another.

Hux made a helpless gesture. Without Kylo he couldn’t really test anything at all.

Phasma raised her fist and punched Caleb square in the face.

Or at least she tried to.

“Ah fuck that hurt!” She hissed, clutching her hand to her chest. “That was like punching a fucking wall!!”

Caleb reached out and grabbed her arm. They stood there awkwardly for a second or two.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to pinch you because I didn’t want to go straight for the nuclear option of punching you in the fucking face?!”

“Huh.” Hux said in surprise. “It worked.”
“That’s not reassuring.” Phasma replied. “You should not say shit like that out loud, just keep it to yourself… And did you base that oath on Asimov?”

Hux grinned, entirely pleased with himself. “Hell yeah!”

He rubbed his hands together and turned to Caleb. “Okay. Now what?”

“What do you mean- ‘now what’?!”

They were approaching the point where the road passed under a bridge of some kind. Unlike the rickety wooden trestle bridges they’d seen elsewhere in the town this was modern, solidly built from concrete with steep earth embankments on either side. Something felt strange about it, something Kylo could only just sense at the edge of everything, like a doorway he couldn’t see.

Lucas flexed his fingers on the wheel.

Rey started to think to Kylo, *You don’t think he’ll*... when a single vicious jerk of the wheel had the car swerving abruptly towards the curb beside the road.

A jolt, a moment of weightlessness, and then a horrible tumbling as the vehicle rolled.

With a muffled cry, Rey flung out her hand and pinned Kylo back against the seats. Her fingertips sank so deep into the flesh of his chest and he felt sure she was drawing blood.

It was hard to tell the in swirling disorientation of the roll but the man in the driver’s seat seemed to be flickering like a candle flame in a gale. Kylo could feel some exertion of power, something old and arrogant struggling against an unfamiliar force as if it hadn’t faced an opponent in decades.

Biting his lip Kylo focused his mind and joined the fight by pushing as hard as he could against that ancient power.

Then the car smashed roof-first into the embankment.

Caleb groaned and clutched at his head.

“Lucas is… oh god... I don’t know what he’s doing but fuck it hurts.” He reached out and grabbed both of Phasma’s hands in his own. “Help me. Help me to see, please. The birds.”

Rey awoke to a wicked grey beak striking toward her eye socket faster than she could possibly blink. Abruptly it vanished in a swirl of white fur.

A mink paused by the shattered window, a crow hanging limply from its bloodied maw.

The animal paused for a second, staring at her with strangely blue eyes, before it shook the bird and dropped its corpse, leaping toward another. In the distance a bobcat pounced in another shower of feathers.

There was a caw to her left, then a wet crunching sound. Kylo had punched the bird into the crushed headrest in front of him.

He shook his fist out as he turned the look at her.

Blood was pouring freely from a gash that disappeared into his hairline. One eye was already
beginning to swell shut and he was dotted with bloody broken glass, but otherwise he seemed to be whole.

She tried to reach out to him, but her right arm responded only with pain. It must have broken when she held him back. A quick assessment of the rest suggested that was the worst injury, but the glass wounds stung so much she couldn’t be sure.

Kylo nodded towards the seat in front of him, unable to see the Sheriff from his vantage point.

The airbag had not deployed. There was blood smeared across the steering wheel and splashed up the remains of the windshield. The Sheriff wasn’t in his seat.

He was laying in a crumpled heap on the ceiling above the passenger seat.

Suddenly reality and perspective reasserted themselves. She wasn’t sitting in her seat, she was hanging from her seat belt. Which was strange because she hadn’t actually been wearing it.

She dropped onto the ceiling with a graceless flump.

“Fuck!”

“It’s best not to think about this shit,” Kylo said. He twisted and punched out the window beside him. “Come on.”

Gravity behaved strangely for a minute or two while Kylo scrambled out of the car and flipped himself the right way up before reaching into help her.

The weird disorientation didn’t help her while she struggled to clasp his hand with her one functional arm, but after what felt like forever he was finally hauling her out.

Although Rey did her best to use her core strength to keep herself out of the glass and bloody feathers without slowing both of them down, her boot still caught on something.

At first she thought it was a seatbelt or the strap of some luggage she hadn’t noticed before. Then the grip subtly tightened around her ankle.

She looked back, directly into the demonic emptiness of Lucas Buck’s eyes.

Slowly he smiled at her. Blood painted his teeth so dark in the twilight that his mouth seemed like a black hole that would expand to consume everything she ever was or would be.

Rey did the only thing she could.

She kicked him directly in the face with every ounce of rage in her soul. The steel toe of her Red Wing boots probably helped a little too.

The horrid crunch of breaking cartilage was followed by the slightest slackening of his grip.

Another kick and Rey had enough momentum to help Kylo pull her free of the car.

All around their feet the ground was littered with feathers, blood, and broken glass. There was no sign of the mink she’d seen before.

On the road a little way off they heard the Deputy getting out of his own car.

Behind them—standing between them and the Deputy, his coat hanging bloody and torn around his
shoulders like ruined wings- stood Lucas Buck.

“Going somewhere?”

Phasma and Caleb staggered down the stairs towards the parking garage, barely seeing where they were going, clinging to one another’s hands like flotsam in a stream that was rapidly becoming a waterfall.

Too many eyes. Too many viewpoints. Too many angles.

The taste of blood and feathers and dirt clinging to their razorsharp teeth and vicious claws.

Hux stumbled after them, twisting Caleb’s car keys fitfully in his hands. The others couldn’t tell him what was happening. They could barely manage to get to the car without falling arse over teakettle down the stairs.

All he knew was that things were bad.

He’d sometimes wondered, in the darkest moments, whether he’d know when Kylo died.

He hoped he’d never find out.

Kylo felt a rush of cold under his skin, tendrils of an old familiar power following the many branching paths of his blood vessels to crackle between his fingertips.

He wanted to tear this smug faced good ol’ boy limb from limb.

He wanted to vapourise him.

He wanted… Rey tightened her grip on his hand and the power subsided. Just a little.

“Lucas?! Lucas!! Jesus Christ, what the hell happened?!” The Deputy was staring at the Sheriff with eyes wide as saucers, set in a face that should not have been able to achieve both deathly grey and near-heart-attack purple at the same time.

Buck rounded on him, snarling like the wounded beast that he was, but where the Deputy had been a cowering spineless wreck not an hour before, he now shook with something that might have been shock, or maybe anger.

“Ben Healy don’t you dare…”

Behind them there was an almost inaudible whumph as leaking gasoline quietly ignited inside the engine block of the ruined car.

He felt like the world’s most unlucky chauffeur. He was doing ninety on roads he barely knew and taking directions from a couple of semi-human beings who could hardly even manage a grunt any more.

Still, the road was flying by under the tires with almost supernatural ease.

Hux cursed himself. ‘Almost’. Of course it was supernatural. The whole fucking town was supernatural.
He was driving a car with two out of three local foci of power in the back seat, of course the road was favouring them.

Out of self-preservation he decided not to think too hard about what might happen when the two newcomers got closer to the current oligarch.

A flash of colour at the side of the road drew his eye for a millisecond.

There were animals running along the verge as if they were following the car.

He’d seen far stranger things over the last few years, so he elected to keep his eyes on the road. Weird animals were almost always much less of a concern than crashing into a tree at ninety miles an hour.

The fuel that had been silently flowing from the ruptured tank ever since the crash had conveniently—and against the laws of physics—formed a circle around where Kylo and Rey were confronting Lucas. When it ignited, it drove the Deputy back with far greater ferocity than the quantity of gasoline should have produced.

Rey, after years on the airfield and racing circuits, reacted instantly, not physically but with the same ability that had manifested outside the bakery. The flames wavered around her and Kylo like an invisible sphere was pressing down against the fire. Nothing could touch them.

While his cousin protected them both Kylo found himself frozen. The flames all around him; the pain in his head; the crackling power at his fingertips; the man with the devilish inhuman smile. Lucas stared at him and Kylo couldn’t help but stare back.

“What are you?” Lucas asked. He looked like hell, despite the cocky expression he was wearing. He clearly hadn’t intended to be involved in the crash and the dried blood seemed to be settling into his skin to highlight every flaw. He might have aged a decade in a day.

Beside him Rey took his hand again. Squeezing tight. Kylo felt a little of his power seep away. Something else crept in to take its place. An alien thing, bright and warm and flowing like water.

The Sheriff’s wrecked car was well ablaze when Hux finally brought Caleb’s vehicle to a halt in a spray of gravel and tire tracks.

He could just see three figures in amongst the flames while one of the Deputies was stumbling haphazardly towards their car. The man looked scared half to death, and Hux knew he should have been wary about showing his face in front of law enforcement but…

Kylo was standing in the middle of the flames, his baby cousin at his side and immense evil in front of him. Hadn’t Kylo sent his own life into a spiral that lasted two decades just to protect Rey from a fate like this?

Kylo had faced a challenge for his soul before and barely made it out.

Hux hated fire. He hated the smell of it, and the sensory memory of it crawling over his skin, but there wasn’t a force on earth or in any other realm that would keep him away from Kylo now.

He all but threw himself from the driver’s seat, managing an awkward half run as he dashed towards the flames. Someone shouted behind him, but he didn’t bother to listen.
“Kylo!!”

Hux’ voice carried even over the roar of the unnatural flames. Even over the thundering of his heart and the whispering of that horrible voice that had followed his nightmares for so long.

“What am I? I’m Kylo Ren. This is Rey. We’re Skywalkers.”

Lucas sneered to cover his confusion and something else. The old man was wavering, like all the strength was leaving his limbs. He looked exhausted. He looked like he’d had enough.

*Do you feel that?* Rey asked Kylo in the privacy of their heads.

He did.

It felt like a fresh breeze coming in from the balcony in late spring- clean, hopeful, powerful.

It felt like Hux’ breath in winter when he laughed against Kylo’s lips, his tongue still hot from coffee drunk too quickly.

It felt like running through the wheat fields beside the airstrip and imagining he had no fears at all, even if he knew it was just an illusion.

*Think of fire. Kylo replied. Think of power. Think of everything you love.*

________

When Hux had bolted it had seemed logical to follow him, in so far as either of them could truly think logically with so much information pouring into their minds.

Phasma had almost dragged Caleb’s stumbling form after her, toward the fire and the figures inside. Rey was in there. Phasma could feel her, like a brilliant quicksilver radiance amongst the dark body-landscape of the town.

They overtook Hux easily.

They leapt the fire easily.

Power met power.

The two halves of the town- control and care- met the light and the darkness.

They met and they blended and together they turned to face the thing that had stood unchallenged in Trinity for decades, if not centuries.

________

Hux never could quite find the words to describe what he witnessed. Not accurately. Not with the grandeur it truly deserved.

He spoke later of the fire spreading out like tendrils until it seemed to be flowing into the roots of every tree within sight of the crash.

He fought to describe the screaming of the man, and the birds, but mere words couldn’t capture the cacophony.

He had paced and waved his hands as he tried the capture the beauty of the sapling that burst from the ground, that burst from and through Lucas Buck like he was nothing more than a paper lantern. The tortuous noise as the tree raced to the height of a redwood; the rushing pattern of colours as it
flowed through blossom and fruit a dozen times in as many seconds; the strange peace that followed it.

He tried his best to capture all those impressions, but they faded from his memory so quickly in favour of the things he could describe.

The way Kylo tumbled into his arms, smelling of blood, ash, and cherry blossom. The joyous shriek as Phasma lifted Rey and spun her without warning, trailing glittering flashes of power behind them like stardust. The relieved laughter from Caleb as he collapsed onto his back on the asphalt, finally free at last.

Thirty feet away the Deputy babbled into the radio, trying to reconcile the scene in front of him with the one flowing away from his memory like the outgoing tide.

“Floyd, there’s been an accident… The Sheriff’s car came off the road, and hit a tree. You’re gonna want to send someone to the Buck house to sit with Gail… Lucas didn’t make it… Who? Oh, those kids? They’re fine… well, maybe not fine. Send an ambulance… What were they charged with? I don’t think they were charged with anything…”

Groaning slightly, Caleb rolled over and staggered to his feet.

“Ben?” He called, his voice so like his father’s that it made the Deputy jump. “You look like you need to sit before you fall down. Pass me the radio. I’ll get this all squared away with Floyd.”

The Deputy stared at Caleb in fear, but did as he was asked, handing him the radio and sitting in the passenger seat of his own car with his trembling hands in his lap. He seemed to be waiting for a blow to fall.

“Deputy Floyd?” Caleb asked with a bright toothed smile. “It’s Caleb here. Can y’all do as Ben asked? I’m afraid he’s right, Lucas didn’t make it, and until the county can elect a new Sheriff someone has to be in charge. I think that should be Ben. Me? Oh no, Floyd, I intend to be far too busy building houses to get involved in politics.”
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Maybe they should have stayed to document everything for Hux’ journals. Certainly they should have stayed to help Caleb with the funeral of his monstrous father- or at least the disposal of what few parts of Lucas Buck had been recovered from the crash site and the branches of that strange tree. But Caleb didn’t need them. Not any more.

Caleb had faced his power and accepted it for what it truly was, free from the centuries of social twisting that produced a man like Buck. The first real deal he ever made, with Nathan in that hospital room, had been the first concrete step toward escaping that shadow. The deal didn’t benefit him personally at all, it left no favours to be called in later, or threats to hang over Nathan’s head. It benefited only the town.

The bakery would be rebuild by a company specialising in training former felons in construction skills, and once it reopened it would become a culinary school for disadvantaged youth. More such enterprises followed until the county would have won awards if anyone out at Columbia ever remembered it was there.

Trinity had always been insular. The town provided for itself. Caleb would continue that tradition but free it from fear.

Perhaps he would have benefited in some way from Hux and Kylo’s support, but they didn’t stay to give it.

Phasma certainly didn’t need them.

When Rey declared that she intended to take a break from school to ‘help out’ they said nothing, though Hux slipped a number of objects into her pocket with hastily scribbled instructions- just in case. Those items still sit there now, unused and gathering dust, on their mantelpiece, next to their wedding photos.

Kylo had been running from his problems for decades, but in that flight he’d found the things he needed to survive and grow. His path had taken him to the friends and lovers that could show him his true nature, and though there had been pain he would never have become himself without the journey.

Sometimes running is the best option. Even when there’s nothing left to run from, there’s still a joy in the act itself.

When one of the deputies drove them to T.J.’s lot where the Fury sat, fully repaired and gleaming, they looked at one another and knew without words what they needed to do.

One day they’d come back. But for now, they’d run.

[Present Day]

The sun was just starting to set as they passed by the off-ramp signs for Daytona Beach.
Usually Hux hated driving in the daytime, when the highways were busy and Kylo wouldn’t be able to resist the urge to engage in backseat road-rage, but today the car was unusually quiet.

Somehow Kylo had succeeded in getting sunstroke in November. Hux strongly suspected this had more to do with the mysteriously free tanning beds at the last hotel than the weak Virginia sunlight, but Kylo didn’t want to explain, and Hux was enjoying the quiet too much to start an argument about it. Whatever ridiculous thing Kylo had done this time, he’d confess it and ask for help when he was ready.

For now Kylo dozed against the door pillar, his bright-pink skin slathered in aloe vera and his Ray-Bans hanging off one ear.

Even though he’d been driving for eleven hours now, it was relaxing to listen to Kylo breathing, and the sounds of the I-95. They were in no rush to get where they were going, so for once Hux could just chill. His mind was empty and he was one with the highway.

Which why he nearly swerved across two lanes of traffic when his peace was shattered by an unexpected burst of Beck from somewhere near his knee.

Kylo had left his phone in the driver’s side door pocket.

Without glancing at the screen, or stopping to consider whether he recognised the music, Hux swiped to answer the call in the hope that he could stop the noise before it woke the sleeping man in the passenger seat.

“Y’ello.” He murmured as he raised the phone to his ear.

“We’re pregnant!”

That wasn’t a normal phone greeting, no matter how excited the person on the other end of the line might sound about it. Generally people started with ‘hello’ or ‘how are you?’ or heavy breathing. This was just rude.

Hux frowned slightly, weaving carefully through traffic while he tried to remember the last time he’d slept with anyone where that was a possibility and if they’d been a species that could delay conception. There’d been one or two- but that was years ago now.

“Madame, I’m happy for you, but I’m 95% sure you have the wrong number.”

“Hux? It’s me- Rey!”

He blinked and glanced at the cupholder. Sadly the only can of Red Bull in there was empty. He was definitely under-caffeinated to be dealing with this sort of bullshit.

“Okay, well I know I haven’t slept with you, and if you’re calling about Kylo I’m pretty sure that’s illegal in twenty-four…”

“EW! HUX!” Rey practically screamed down the phone, jolting Kylo awake. “Stop it! I meant me and Phasma!”

While Kylo shook his head and peered blearily at Hux, his sunglasses still askew, Hux took on a sarcastic singsong tone. “Oh hello Hux! How are you? Haven’t seen you in eighteen months, left you to deal with the Skywalker Family Thanksgiving drama all by yourself last year, thought I’d give you a heart attack on the freeway by forgetting how civilised conversations work!”
“Is that Rey?” Kylo said thickly, reaching a hand toward the back seat to summon a bottle of water to his hand. “Did the IVF take?”

Hux tossed him the phone. “Oh here, you talk to her, I’m too fucking tired for this.”

As they talked Hux quietly took the Orlando exit onto the I-4, hoping that Kylo wouldn’t notice. He’d worked too hard on this surprise to spoil it so soon.

The conversation felt like it went on forever in that strange half-code of people who grew up together and had a thousand little in jokes and references an outsider could never hope to decypher. At least Kylo seemed to know something about Rey’s news in advance, which was more than Hux could say. Not that he had any interest in his cousin-in-law’s reproductive choices, so maybe Kylo had mentioned it before and Hux just hadn’t listened.

The sun had set and he was laughing to himself about passing though a town called ‘Heathrow’ when Kylo finally hung up the phone.

“Phasma and Caleb are having twins,” he announced, “so Phasma and Rey are keeping one and Caleb and Boone will have the other.”

Hux had already gathered from the snippets of conversation that the two powers of Trinity had decided to take his advice on gaming the system by having a child together willingly, but the second piece of information was a complete surprise.

“You do know that’s the setup for either a horror movie or a lesser class of comedy, right?”

It was hard to tell inside the darkened car, but Kylo made a gesture that might have been a shrug.

“Oh I know. Leia kissed Luke once. That’s not a story you want to hear about over Christmas dinner where you’re eleven.”

“Leia… as in your mom?”

“And Luke as in my uncle, her twin brother, yes, I know. Han thought they were dating for a while.”

Hux shuddered at the mental image. It didn’t matter that they’d probably been teens at the time, his brain was insisting on showing him his middle aged mother-in-law making out with the grey bearded pilot he’d only met a handful of times. “I wish you hadn’t told me that.”

“If I have to suffer, you have to suffer. It was in our wedding vows.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Rey apparently didn’t know either, so that’ll be a fun conversation to have with her dad,” Kylo said with far too much glee in his voice. “At least that means they’ll reconsider it. Maybe swap the kids month by month or something, so they’re both raised in each household some of the time. If one of them is going to inherit the town’s powers…”

“This is definitely a horror movie scenario.”

“If anyone can make it work though, it’s them.”

“Yeah.”

They sat in silence for a while, watching the lights of the cars outside the window, until Kylo turned to stare at a hotel as it zipped by.
“Why did that sign say ‘Sheraton Orlando’? I thought we were going to Miami?”

Now it was Hux’ turn to shrug. “I figured it’d be more fun to watch the Disney New Year fireworks from inside the resort this time.”

“It’s November.”

“Maybe I want a really, really long break from driving, one that involves room service, cocktails, and waterparks,” Hux said quietly, not yet ready to discuss the real reason - that his father had called a week before to say his grandfather Sheev had finally decided to give into death. Hux had long theorised that the old man was dead already- he’d always looked it- but in making it official Hux would inherit the old bastard’s title, lands, and surprising amount of money.

It had been embarrassing enough being a Viscount, but now he was Donal Armitage Hux, Major The Earl of Palpatine (Retired) and frankly there wasn’t enough Long Island Ice Tea in the world to deal with that mess. Or Kylo’s inevitable reaction to being promoted to Count for that matter. But he’d definitely make a spirited (ha!) attempt once he got to a bar.

Apparently Kylo sensed his discomfort, because he just gently touched his shoulder and reached for the music system.

Hux felt his teeth grind in an almost Pavlovian reaction to the heart monitor beep-beep-beep that began to come from the speakers as the first song began to play. After four years together he still couldn’t cope with all that Panic! At The Chemical Fallout Cutie nonsense.

“Kylo, correct me if I’m wrong but didn’t we agree to follow the rule- ‘driver picks the music, shotgun shuts his cakehole’?”

“Yeah!” Kylo’s smile glittered in the dark when he pushed his hair back from his face. “This morning you asked for ‘Classic Rock’, this is as classic as it gets.”

“The Black Parade came out in 2006 Kylo, it is neither classic nor, technically, rock. Either you put something else on, or you can bloody well drive.”

“Urgh, it so is rock, I swear you’re the oldest 33 year old I’ve ever met… must be all that time you spent literally away with the fairies.”

“Goblins.” Hux snapped back with a grin. He knew then that he was being baited, but he couldn’t resist.

“Whatever… Here, this is the oldest thing on my iPod. Better?”

The distinctive guitar started and Hux felt his grin stretch wide as his fingers automatically tapped on the steering wheel. “Iggy Pop? Much better.”

“Who the fuck is Iggy Pop? This is Siouxsie & The Banshees.”

“Oh no, no I’m not falling for that. I’ll believe in mothman, bigfoot, fairies, vampires, leprechauns, the jersey devil, and whatever species of psychic monster you turn out to be, but I refuse to believe that anyone who’s heard of Siouxsie & Th…” He trailed off and turned to look at Kylo as they pulled up at a red light. “You’re fucking with me, aren’t you?”

Kylo kissed him, fast and sweet. “Yeeeeaaaaah.”

“Remind me- why did I marry you again?”
"I think you said it was my rugged good looks, amazing voice, and the contents of my Levis…"

“Kylo?”

“Yes, General Deepthroat?”

“Shut up and sing.”

“Only if you join in.”

“Fine… I am a passenger, I stay under glass, I look through my window so bright, I see the stars come out tonight, I see the bright and hollow sky, over the city’s rip-backed sky, and everything looks good tonight… Singin’ - la la la la-la-la la, La la la la-la-la la, La la la la-la-la la la-la-la…”

Even though they had a destination in mind, just for a minute, the road rolled out forever beneath the wheels.

- Fin

Chapter End Notes

That's all folks.

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