The Fever

by Daffodil76

Summary

“It’s part of the attack. I’ll give you a little tranquilliser.”

She injects the medicine into his arm so gently he barely feels anything. Then she climbs onto the bed, like she did yesterday, and puts her arms around him.

Kylo curls into her, his head buried in her chest. He’s shaking and crying noiselessly, and in his mind images flash. Red and black, the throne room; black and white and red, the Starkiller base forest; white and red, Crait; blinding red, Hosnia. Han Solo’s face: his lips parted in shock when he falls down from the catwalk.

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Days after Crait, Kylo Ren collapses twice in public and is taken ill. First Order physicians are unable to identify the problem, so a renowned specialist from Coruscant arrives on the Finalizer to examine the Supreme Leader. She is not into politics and isn’t easily intimidated, not even by the most powerful, brutal and unstable man in the galaxy. She looks at him like nobody else does and makes him look into his own soul more than he ever has.

Notes

This story started from a little fantasy about a female doctor looking after Kylo while he’s...
staying in the med bay, ill and weakened (and half naked). But it has developed into something bigger and much more serious! I hope you’ll enjoy it – and don’t hesitate to check out also my main story, Star Wars: Enough to Hope, still ongoing and updated regularly. Tell me what you think and thanks for reading!
The doctor

The blue lightsaber is hovering in the air. Rey is on her knees before him, immobilized, looking into his eyes, calling his name. Terrified. Kylo slowly clenches his fist. The saber was supposed to fly across the room and cut Snoke in half. But it flies to Snoke’s hand instead. The Supreme Leader catches it without even glancing in that direction, and slowly descends from the throne dais. Kylo needs to grab Rey and run before Snoke’s lightning strikes. But he can’t move.

As Snoke approaches, Kylo realizes he will have to watch Rey get killed, then face his own death or at least a horrible punishment. After she is dead, what is there for him anyway? But again, nothing goes as expected.

Snoke stops by Rey’s side and hands her the lightsaber. Rey stands up and looks down at Kylo, who now finds himself kneeling. She raises the blue blade, just like Kylo raised his sword in the throne room, pretending he was going to execute her. But Rey looks at him in a very different way than she did in the turbolift. With a distinct air of disappointment. With revulsion.

And then she strikes, cutting him open from his forehead down, across his whole body. She strikes in the same way as in the Takodana forest, but much deeper. To finish the job. Kylo cries out in agony; the pain is blinding, it pierces him through.

**Wake up!**

He is falling face down on the floor, but the floor isn’t there any longer, the ship is breaking in half and burning. Rey and Snoke are standing together at the edge of the gaping abyss. They are watching Kylo as he is sinking into the blackness of space, his body disintegrating but the agonizing pain still present.

**Lord Ren, you need to wake up.**

Someone is gripping his shoulders and shaking him. Pulling him up. The blackness around slowly gives way to an unpleasant, bright light…

**Open your eyes!**

He jolts awake and up, screaming in terror.

The woman bending down over him lets go of him now. She doesn’t look startled in spite of his violent awakening. She just sits back, on the edge of an unfamiliar bed Kylo is lying in. In fact, he is half-sitting now, propped up on his elbow, breathing heavily.

The woman leans towards him again and takes his hand.

“You’ve had a nightmare and your fever has spiked. I had to wake you. Please lie back down now. You need to rest.”

“Who are you?”

“I will tell you. But you need to lie down first.”

She places one hand on his bare chest and pushes him down gently. He is still so stunned and terrified by the dream that he complies without arguing.
She must be a doctor or a nurse because she is wearing a white medical coat. Judging by how unintimidated she seems, a doctor rather than a nurse. He has never seen her before on the ship. She is more or less his age, has dark blond hair partly tied up at the back of her head, partly falling on her shoulders, green eyes, and she is wearing glasses. The calm and confidence emanating from her make Kylo pause before he gives in to his urge to demand immediate explanations. He thinks better of it and remains silent.

He is in a medical facility. His chest and legs are bare but as far as he can feel, he is wearing his underwear, and a thin piece of fabric is covering his hips. And yet, though he is almost naked and his body is exposed, he feels unbearably hot. His head is spinning.

"Why is it so hot here?" he manages.

The woman in white gets up and goes to a medical table nearby. She picks up a cloth.

"You're running a high fever," she explains, sitting by his side again, wrapping the cloth around her hand and touching it gently to his forehead and cheeks. It is wet and pleasantly cool. As she swipes it across his face carefully, he feels better. She then spreads the fabric, places it on his chest and moves it slowly up and down. This brings such a relief to his burning and prickly skin that Kylo closes his eyes and hums with pleasure.

"Is this nice?" the woman asks and he can hear a smile in her voice.

"Yes."

"I'll get you more."

She comes back with an armful of white, almost transparent wet cloths. She wipes one slowly along his both legs, then places two others around his ankles. She cools his arms in the same way and leaves two more cloths on his chest and shoulders. Then she wipes his neck, lifts his head to cool his nape, and places a small cloth on his forehead.

She takes a small stool, brings it closer to the headboard of the bed and sits down. Then she reaches to move a few unruly strands of hair from under the thin wet fabric she had placed on Kylo’s forehead.

"This is also nice," Kylo says quietly.

"What is? The cloth on your forehead?"

"That too."

"It’s nice when I touch your head?"

"Yes."

"You’re still having a bad headache?"

"Yes."

She looks at him and hesitates briefly. Then she slides her hand into his hair and slowly begins to massage his scalp with her fingertips.

Kylo shudders. This light touch is a tremendous relief; it somehow appeases the blinding ache in his head and the burning of his skin. He must really be in bad shape. He inclines his head towards her, to
lean into her touch, and opens his eyes to look at her again.

She isn’t smiling but looks down at him with attention and kindness. She moves her fingers in circular motion and it sends a shiver down his spine. Which also, incidentally, brings him some relief from the fever. He doesn’t want this to stop.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Annelyse. I’m a doctor on Coruscant. Your people contacted me and brought me here by shuttle after you collapsed upon your return from the planet.”

He came back to the Finalizer after the meeting with Coruscant leaders. He remembers how sick and faint he suddenly felt on the turbolift. He must have passed out in the lift or just after getting out of it. It was a second time in the space of a few days.

He collapsed the first time less than a week ago on Crait, in the old Resistance base, just after Rey closed the door of the Falcon in his face. Kylo found himself unable to breathe, gasping for air, his heart beating wildly, and then he fainted. He was picked up and transported onto the Finalizer. The doctors said the battle and the events of the previous days had taken their toll. After all, just before going to Crait he was in a fight and got seriously knocked out on the Supremacy. And some days before that, he was gravely injured on Starkiller. He needed to rest and recover.

He felt better after Crait, so he thought it was an isolated incident. But now, less than a week later, he has fainted again, on board the Finalizer orbiting Coruscant. He has come to the planet to talk to the local assembly about the next steps in the war and request support of Core Worlds for the First Order’s new leader. The meeting went rather well. Kylo felt fine. Then he rapidly deteriorated when he was back on his ship.

No wonder this time the First Order decided to call another specialist. So they have dragged this woman here all the way from the planet.

“Why you?”

“I’m a diagnostician. I specialize in strange conditions for which nobody can find an explanation. The leaders of Coruscant recommended me when your general was searching for doctors. I was asked to come.”

So Hux was kind enough to seek a specialist for Kylo? Was she really asked, Kylo wonders, or rather forced to come? In any case, the matter must be serious if First Order doctors have been deemed insufficient.

“Well, thank you for accepting.”

“It’s my job. And you’re important. But in the end, it wasn’t really necessary.”

“Why not?”

“In my medical opinion there is nothing seriously wrong with you. Fortunately. After examining you and running some tests, I’m pretty sure it’s your body’s reaction to extreme stress and exhaustion you’ve experienced in the last weeks. You’ve simply done too much. You must absolutely rest and recover.”

“Do you know who I am?” Kylo asks, frowning.

“Obviously. I know you are a Force user, if this is what you mean. It shows because a normal person
would not be capable of such exertion just days or weeks after the injuries you’ve sustained. But even you are human, my lord. Your body is telling you to slow down. I suggest you listen to it.”

His first reflex is to protest angrily but after all – why not slow down, indeed? The war is not over but almost. There is no serious enemy to fight against anymore. Hux might be trying to stage a coup, taking advantage of Kylo’s weakness, but six Knights of Ren, all loyal to their master, arrived on the Finalizer just after Crait. They are on the General’s tail all the time, making treason impracticable.

Kylo feels extremely tired and battered, worse than he has ever felt, worse than even after Takodana, or the throne room, or Crait. He must have been running on pure adrenaline. The fatigue, physical and mental, catches up with him and makes him feel slightly groggy.

“And the fever?”

“I think it’s also psychosomatic, due to stress and exhaustion. It spiked when you had a nightmare, which only confirms my view. Again, I can only recommend rest.”

“Are you sure nobody is making me ill?” Kylo asks, watching her carefully. He needs to know he can trust her.

Annelyse frowns.

“Do you have suspicions that someone might be trying to harm you?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“It’s not poison. I ran tests for all kinds of toxic substances.”

“Is there anything else you might not have thought of?”

“Nothing that the tests wouldn’t have revealed. And I’ve run hundreds. Also for underlying diseases of the brain, the heart, and the other internal organs. Everything is ok. You have an inflammation but that’s because of the fever.”

“So I should just sleep for a few days?”

“Essentially, yes. And avoid fighting, training, waging war and swinging your saber for a few weeks.”

She says the last words with a smile and removes her hand from his hair to rest the back of it against his cheek, as if checking his body temperature. When she lets go, Kylo is surprised to realise he misses the touch. Her fingers were soft and cool, and it’s been so long since anyone touched him like this.

“I’ll refresh the cloths. So that you can stay cool all the time.”

She proceeds to wrap him in fresh cloths and then, just as he hopes, she comes back to her seat beside his head and slides her fingers into his hair again. They are both silent for a long moment. Annelyse leans towards him; she has clever eyes, boring into him, as if she was reading his mind. Seeing all that he is and all he has done. She must know anyway. Everyone knows. She knows she has been called here to tend to a supernaturally strong, cruel madman who has ascended the throne following a mysterious and violent murder of the previous leader.

She has probably not been given much choice as to whether to come or not. And she is still here, though it has turned out he isn’t suffering from anything serious. Perhaps she has been given no
choice in that matter, either. Perhaps she has been instructed to tend to his whims and waste her time by his bedside, as if she was his private nurse and not an eminent medical specialist, whom other patients might need much more. And yet she doesn’t take her hand away from his head, and looks at him kindly.

“I can give you another shot against the pain. For the headache.”

“No. I’d prefer you to continue…”

“All right,” she says gently. “Try to sleep now. I’ll stay with you.”

Kylo closes his eyes and slowly drifts away under her touch.

When he wakes up again, he is covered by a sheet from the waist down but feels less hot than before. Annelyse is reading in a big comfortable armchair by his bed. The armchair wasn’t there before; she must have requested it when he was asleep.

She looks up when he stirs, and closes the book.

“Supreme Leader. How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Kylo croaks. He coughs a few times before he can get his voice back. “I think I have less fever. And no headache anymore.”

“I have massaged your headache away,” Annelyse smiles, moves closer and puts her hand on his forehead. “Indeed, much less fever. Rest heals you.”

“I’d like to sit down.”

Annelyse pushes the button under his bed and the upper half rises slowly to the sitting position.

“I was even going to suggest you stood up. I thought a cool shower might do you good. You have been sweating a lot because of your fever.”

It is a good idea. Kylo sits on the edge of the bed and puts his legs down. When he stands up, however, his head turns and he staggers, grabbing Annelyse’s arm to steady himself.

“It’s the fever, and also the drugs I’ve given you,” she says calmly, propping him up. “It will pass.”

It has already passed. He straightens up, towering above her, suddenly conscious of his undressed state. He is wearing his boxers and nothing else. And while it's nothing to be embarrassed about – as a doctor she must have seen more embarrassing things than a man in his boxers – it occurs to him that she may feel somewhat intimidated, or even threatened, now that he’s up, stronger, and half naked.

She tilts her head up to look at him. She seems slightly taken aback at how tall and broad he is.

“You’re certainly a big man.”

“You don’t need to be afraid of me,” Kylo says.

“Why would I be afraid?”

“I know you’ve been told things about me. You don’t need to be afraid.”
She is looking at him very attentively again, as if deciding what to think, then nods.

“After the shower you can dress and go to lie down in your quarters,” she suggests. “No need to stay
here any longer. I will walk with you and see to it that you have everything you need. Then I’ll come
to examine you again tomorrow morning.”

So she is staying on the ship for the night because they have told her to. He should order her to go
back home, he will be fine now. He has doctors and nurses on the Finalizer, and these will be
perfectly sufficient if he isn’t suffering from any serious condition. But he finds himself unwilling to
dismiss her. If she offers to stay until tomorrow, he won’t argue.

After the shower he dresses in loose casual clothes a droid has brought. Annelyse is waiting for him
and they walk together to his quarters. She is carrying a bag full of medical supplies.

It is quite a long walk and Kylo treads slowly; she has suggested a wheelchair but there is no way he
will allow anyone to wheel him along the ship’s corridors, for everyone to see the Supreme Leader’s
weakness. Either he can walk, or he should stay in the med bay until he is stronger. It turns out he
manages the distance without major problems.

When they enter his quarters, Kylo gestures to the sofa, inviting her to sit. Annelyse puts her medical
bag down and opens it.

“I wanted to suggest something,” she says hesitatingly. “It’s not what I was called for and I do realise
you have medical personnel of your own, but I want to offer anyway.”

“Suggest what?”

“I saw the scars on your neck, chest and side. And there is this scar on your face. All of them seem to
be very recent.”

“They are.”

“They look like you haven’t applied enough bacta, or not for long enough. They should be much
better healed and much less visible by now.”

Kylo doesn’t reply.

Annelyse trails her fingers along the line of his scar, from his jaw to the neck.

“It’s a little bit puckered, too. The skin hasn’t grown together properly.”

“I didn’t look after it as I should have. There was no time. I had other things to think about.”

“Perhaps now, that you can afford to rest for a few days, we could remedy that? I brought special
bacta patches and other supplies. I could treat your scars if you let me.”

Actually, for some time he toyed with the idea of leaving the scars be. Let them be visible and
painful, and ugly, so that he remembers for ever what he has done. The long scar Rey gave him, and
the one Chewbacca’s bowcaster left. That one still hurts. Kylo knows it hasn’t healed properly. It is
his punishment. But suddenly the idea of punishing his body – now that his main tormentor, the one
who always enjoyed inflicting pain on Kylo, is dead – seems much less appealing.

“All right,” he says. Annelyse seems pleased and relieved.

“Maybe you could lie down in your bed? I will then apply bacta. It’s good if bacta can do its work
for some time without you moving too much.”

He leads her to his bedroom. She pauses in the doorway; the room is dark, with a black bed frame, black bedsheets, and simple, sparse chrome decorations. The only warmer accent is a small reading lamp on the bedside shelf, with a green lampshade. Annelyse seems interested by the stack of books and holopads beside the bed.

“I see you won’t be bored.”

“No. But I might just sleep some more. I feel like I need to sleep for weeks.”

“Sleep will do you a lot of good.”

He sits down on the bed and looks to her for instructions.

“Take your shirt off, please.”

She sits next to him and for the next twenty minutes or so she works carefully, applying bacta patches to his side, then bacta gel and special tape with microparticles onto his thin, long scar on the face, neck and chest.

Her fingers seem much warmer now, probably because his own body temperature has decreased. She presses the patches gently to his side, along the edges, to attach them well. In other circumstances, it would be pleasant, almost like a massage she gave him earlier. However, even this light pressure is somewhat painful on the bowcaster wound and he winces.

“It hurts?” she frowns. “You’ve had surgery on this one, correct? Are you sure they did a good job?”

“I think so. It was a serious wound and it’s very fresh. Less than three weeks. I didn’t stay in the bacta tank afterwards, like I should have.”

“All right, the patches should help. I’ll look at it tomorrow. If it’s as painful as today, we should consider some exams to check if it’s properly healed inside.”

Her touch gives him goosebumps and he hopes she hasn’t noticed. Well, of course she will have noticed – but at least he has an excuse because the bacta is cold on his skin.

“We’re done here,” she says and smiles to him.

Kylo wants her to stay. It would be nice to talk to someone. He is curious about her, her career, her life on Coruscant. Even her political views. So rarely is he able to talk to someone casually, apart from his Knights.

“Maybe you could stay a little?”

She looks very uncertain, even slightly anxious. She touches her hair and moves a few loose strands away from her shoulders. Kylo regrets and feels a tinge of irritation; it is upsetting to think she might refuse or, worse, accept only for fear of consequences.

“I’m not sure it is done,” she says with hesitation. “Is that… I mean, you’re the Supreme Leader…”

“Only if you feel like it. I won’t insist.”

“I’m not saying I don’t feel like it. I just wonder whether your general won’t be angry that I was bothering you outside of what was strictly necessary.”
“You would be bothering me at my request. It’s none of his business.”

“Ok then,” she agrees. He puts his shirt back on and sits comfortably on the bed, amassing pillows behind his back. To his surprise, she doesn't hesitate to join him. She shakes her shoes off her feet and climbs onto his bed, sitting next to him, against the pillows, and shifting onto her side in order to face him.

“I ask a question, then you ask one?” she suggests. Kylo is amused at this serious approach to a casual conversation he has hoped for; perhaps she just is a very serious person.

“You first.”

“Why black sheets?” she asks, frowning. Kylo almost laughs.

“Why indeed. You know I wear mostly – well, only – black?”

“Why? You don’t like any other colours?”

“Well, you’re all dressed in white. This is just one colour, too.”

“But it’s my uniform.”

“So is black for me. Including the bedsheets. Some people come here to inspect the room after droids clean it. Some others might peek into the bedroom from the living room. I need to uphold my image.”

“So you want everyone to be afraid of you?”

“Is black so scary?”

“A little,” she admits. “Frankly though, I’m mostly asking because it’s the first time ever I have seen black bedsheets.”

She laughs and relaxes.

“Now you,” she encourages him. “Your turn, my lord,” she corrects herself, probably fearing she is becoming too informal with him.

“Did they force you to come here? What did you think when they contacted you?”

“They didn’t exactly force me. But they were very persuasive. And just before your general’s call, the head of the Coruscant assembly commed me and he was very insistent, too. What I thought? Nothing. I came to do my job. It’s not my job to have opinions about my patients.”

“Ah. So you're saying politics doesn’t concern you.”

“I have no major interest in politics. I am no good at games, diplomacy, small talk and networking. Or galactic wars. I am a scientist.”

“You do care what galaxy you’re living in, though?”

“Yes, but I will try to mind my own business for as long as I can. I want politics to stay away from me. I am passionate about my job and medical research. I don’t want to be part of the war. I find both sides tiresome; it’s all black or white for them, all or nothing.”

It takes her a few seconds to realise what she has just said, or rather who she has said it to, and Kylo
watches her literally sink into herself.

“T’im sorry,” she utters slowly. “That was a very stupid thing to say. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful. I don’t know very much about the First Order, really. I probably have a totally wrong impression.”

“You have a totally right impression. Both sides of the war are indeed tiresome, uncompromising and narrow-minded. The whole narrative of heroes and villains is false. There are killers and those who get killed on both sides. And both of them think their political vision – be it the absolute rule by terror or democracy by direct representation – is the only right one, and the answer to all problems. They’re both wrong.”

“One of them is your own organization. If this is what you think, why don’t you change something?”

“I want to change many things. Find some middle ground. But I’m just starting. And I can’t really get down to work because I keep passing out.”

Annelyse laughs wholeheartedly now, takes her glasses off and puts them on the bedside shelf. Kylo has actually found her interesting with the glasses on; she looked like a doctor, a scientist and a bookworm who doesn’t spend much time joking around or partying. Without them, she looks no less interesting but different, like a normal young woman.

“Next question is about your work. Why this medical specialization?”

She shrugs.

“I like difficult problems. Of course, being a doctor isn’t easy anyway, but often doctors have to spend most of their days dealing with common and repetitive conditions. When people come to see me, every time it’s different. I learn all the time. There’s never anything boring.”

“Apart from today.”

She shakes her head and smiles.

“Nothing boring about today.”

He almost smiles too, when she interrupts:

“My turn. Can I ask a sensitive question?”

“Go on.”

“How much of what they say about you is true?”

Ah. This had to come up at one point.

“You need to be more specific. I have no idea what they’re saying exactly.”

“Is it true that your mother is leading the Resistance which you almost destroyed at Crait?”

“Yes.”

“Is it true that you can choke people to death without touching them?”

“Yes.”

“And have you ever done that?”
“Yes.”

She is silent but doesn’t make a face. She is trying to use her scientific mind. To be objective and non-judgmental.

“Is it true that lightsaber wounds do not bleed?”

“Yes. The wounds cauterize on impact.”

“That’s interesting. Very practical if you want to avoid a mess.”

She says it so seriously he snorts.

“Is it true that you killed your father?” she asks with hesitation.

Kylo is silent.

“Yes,” he says finally.

“I’m sorry. I had no right to ask about it. Or about any of this. I will just stick to medical questions.”

“Medical questions?”

“Is it true that a Force-user can heal with the Force?”

“Yes. The Jedi were known to do that.”

“Can you?”

“No, I’ve never managed to learn that. But I intend to start now. I think I’ll be able to do it.”

“Are you a Sith? Because you’re not a Jedi, correct?”

“No, I’m not a Sith. But not a Jedi, either.”

“Something in between? Beyond these categories?”

“I like to think so.”

“Are you the most powerful Force-user in the galaxy?”

Kylo considers.

“I’ve met one other as powerful as me. But untrained, so not up to her full potential. Apart from that, I might indeed be the most powerful. Before me, it was the former Leader.”

She looks at him with more curiosity than awe. She’s not easily impressed.

“So what’s the most outstanding thing you can do with the Force that doesn’t involve killing?”

“Remember this shuttle you took to come onto my ship? I can lift it off the ground with the Force and hurl it a few kilometres away.”

“You’re joking.”

“No, I’m not.”
“What else?”

“I can decompose any object down to its smallest parts.”

“Down to the molecules?”

“Yes. Atoms, even.”

She looks at him very seriously now.

“Only objects?”

“If you mean to ask whether I can do it to people, I suppose the answer is yes. That would be much more difficult and I’ve never tried, but probably yes.”

“Good. Please don’t try.”

“But what will probably impress you more, is that I can read minds.”

Her eyes widen.

“So that’s true too…”

“What is?”

“They say you torture people like this. You tear their minds apart and extract information.”

“You can use it in that way, yes. But to know what people think is also a very practical gift you can use to defend yourself.”

“Can you read my thoughts now?”

“I could if I breached your mind. But I won’t do it. If I did it seriously, it might hurt you.”

She frowns.

“How does the Force work? Some things sound so logical, as if it was conscious manipulation of energy present in all objects and living organisms. But some of it, like mind reading, just sounds like magic.”

“Well, this is a good question. But not a question I can answer easily or quickly. People spend their lives studying this. I’ve spent years, too.”

“Your turn now,” she invites and makes herself more comfortable on the bed.

He thinks for a second.

“What’s your goal? What do you want to do with your life?”

“I would like to make a big medical discovery. Something that would change people’s lives. Something that would change medicine. That’s why I’m doing research.”

“What kind of research?”

“On genetics. I want to find an algorithm that would make it possible to heal anomalies. Like a new gene that could be introduced into the genetic code to act as a watchdog. To be activated only when a genetic anomaly is detected, and to repair it. Whatever the anomaly is.”
“That’s interesting. I’d like to see some of your research.”

“I would love to show it to you. And what’s your dream?”

Dream? Does he have any?

“I could say my dream is to make this galaxy less messy. More law and order. More peace. More equality.”

“Well, this is like my research. A long-term goal. You need to move step by little step, every day.”

“Yes. And I don’t know if I have the patience or the skills. But beyond that, I suppose my personal goal is just to be free to do what I want.”

“And you don’t have that freedom? You’re the most powerful man in the galaxy, after all.”

“Yes, but I don’t have that freedom. Not yet. I hope I will one day.”

His other dream, to use this kind of sentimental vocabulary, is probably not to be so lonely anymore. To have someone. One week ago he thought he might have found that person, but it seems he may have been wrong. Yet he can’t tell this dream to a woman he barely knows because it would come across as needy and creepy. One thing he definitely doesn't want to appear is creepy.

Annelyse is looking at him in this special way again, both kindly and attentively. The doctor’s look. She's sitting cross-legged on the bed.

“That’s the highest rate of completely new things I’ve ever found out in one single conversation,” she states.

“So at least I’m informative. It means you haven’t wasted your time completely.”

Annelyse smiles.

“I’ll leave you now. I’ll ask a droid to bring you dinner, and a dessert. You need sugar to restore your energy. Tomorrow morning I’ll come to examine you and change these bacta patches.”

“Hope you will feel better tomorrow,” she adds a moment later, reaches out and casually moves some strands of his hair away from his forehead, just like she did earlier, in the med bay. It is a familiar and affectionate gesture. On the one hand, it's bold and surprising; on the other, overwhelmingly kind.

She smiles, noticing he has closed his eyes, relishing her touch.

“You do like that, don’t you?”

Before he has the presence of mind to reply, she laughs quietly.

“If someone had told me this morning I would end the day in the Supreme Leader's bed, I’m not sure I’d have believed.”

“Now you know it’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Well, it’s much less scary than I would have anticipated.”

When she finally removes her hand from his hair, she does it a bit reluctantly. At least that’s Kylo’s impression.
“Goodnight, lord Ren,” she says and gets off the bed. He watches her go with regret, yet he can’t think of anything appropriate to retain her any further. Asking her to stay to dinner seems too much after all the time she has already devoted to him.

“I will see you tomorrow morning. Please rest until then.”

“Thank you. I trust you have been assigned comfortable quarters?”

“Yes, thank you. Your general gave orders to accommodate me as well as possible.”

A last smile and she is gone.
Panic

Chapter Summary

Kylo curls into her, his head buried in her chest. He’s shaking and crying noiselessly, and in his mind images flash. Red and black, the throne room; black and white and red, the Starkiller base forest; white and red, Crait; blinding red, Hosnia. Han Solo’s face: his lips parted in shock when he falls down from the catwalk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Annelyse returns the next morning, at 11 o’clock standard time. When she enters, wearing her white medical coat, Kylo is reading on the sofa.

“I’m glad to see you aren’t working,” she comments, then sits by his side and takes hold of his wrist to check the pulse. She also uses a small device to measure his blood pressure.

“How are you feeling today, lord Ren?”

“It’s Kylo,” he says. She glances at him, surprised.

“How are you feeling, Kylo?” she tries. Apart from his Knights, nobody calls him by his name. Neither by his chosen name nor by the real one. Rey used to, but that was before.

“I slept for a long time but I’m still feeling tired. I’ll spend the day here reading, I think.”

“Perfect. Do that. Now, will you let me see your scars?”

When he nods, Annelyse first peels the bacta tape off his face, then gestures that he should take his shirt off.

“Would you stand up? I can examine you better if you’re standing.”

Kylo complies in silence and leans against his desk so as to bring himself down to her level. Earlier this morning he removed the bacta patch from his side before taking a shower, so now she just peels the rest of the tape off the neck and chest scars. She examines them carefully, touching them and the flesh around. She doesn’t look into his eyes. He finds the whole exercise interesting.

“It’s much better,” Annelyse states. “Would you like to see in the mirror?”

They approach a big mirror on the wall next to the entrance and Kylo leans forward, inspecting his face. The scar isn’t puckered anymore; the skin has grown evenly together and the line is much thinner and less red. The same on his neck and chest, though this of course is less important.

“Annelyse kneads his side scar carefully with her fingers.

“I’m sorry if it is painful,” she says. “But I need to check thoroughly. Does this hurt at all?”

She kneads around the edges and at the top. It’s not painful.
“And this?” she asks, pressing her fingers into the middle. Yes, it hurts here a little. But nowhere near the pain he felt yesterday.

Annelyse nods, satisfied, and gets back to the sofa to get a new set of bacta patches and tapes from her medical bag, then applies them to his face and body.

“Tonight your chief medical officer will come to take them off, he’ll let you shower and then will apply fresh ones for the night. The same tomorrow morning. And then it’s fine. You will be like new.”

“Thank you,” Kylo says. His skin looked awful where that bowcaster wound used to be. Now it’s fine, the scar is still visible but not repulsive anymore.

Annelyse finishes the job and pats his chest lightly.

“You need to take better care of this body,” she says. “And of your heart, too.”

His heart?

“Metaphorically speaking. This is a cry of the body that has had enough. Not just of physical suffering and excessive exertion, but also enough of mental and emotional stress you’ve been under. It’s the war. I have seen these things. When the mind is traumatised and pushed to its limits, the body reacts.”

It’s the war, yes. Takodana, Starkiller, the throne room, Crait. But it’s also so much more than that. His father. The agony of Hosnia. Rey. And perhaps above all, Snoke. Snoke’s lightning, his tortures, his cruelty, his impossible demands, his toxic presence in Kylo’s mind and life, now gone. It’s as if Kylo’s body only now dared – and felt free to – scream.

And at this thought, he feels faint again. Annelyse notices that and grabs his forearms.

“Are you feeling unwell? Do you want to sit down?”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

He closes his eyes and inhales deeply a few times. He feels warmth radiating off her body; she’s close, her hands are now on his head, combing through strands of his hair, then stroking his cheeks in a soothing manner. She’s being affectionate, and he desperately craves it. He puts his arms around her waist and clings to her, his head on her shoulder. Annelyse remains silent and doesn’t object; she reaches to his neck and strokes the nape.

“It’s fine,” she says. “A post-traumatic reaction. It will pass.”

It’s not passing yet, and he’s panting now, because his lungs tighten again, like the previous two times.

“Breathe with me,” she whispers and he tries to follow her calm, deep breathing. “Don’t think about whatever it is you’ve been thinking of. There must have been many bad things happening recently?”

“Yes. Very many.”

Annelyse leans back to look into his eyes and holds his face in both hands, stroking his neck slowly with her thumbs to help him calm down. Kylo feels ridiculous. He can’t bring himself to let go of her, so he clutches her waist like he’s drowning, his thoughts whirling around madly in his head. He rests the top of his head against her shoulder again; he needs someone’s touch to stay on the surface.
He feels like he’s been kicked non-stop for the last weeks. Or years.

“You can cry,” she says. “It’s fine.”

Cry? He’s not crying. Is he? There are tears flowing down his cheeks that he hasn’t been aware of. Kylo wonders what will happen if it leaks to the media that the Supreme Leader cried like a child on his doctor’s shoulder, shaking and having a panic attack.

He gets cold and hot intermittently; he shivers, then, all of a sudden, his skin is flushed.

“Let’s get you back to bed,” Annelyse suggests and throws Kylo’s arm over her shoulders to help him walk. His legs feel impossibly heavy. He barely manages to get to the bed, and falls on top of it. Annelyse takes a blanket from a chair and covers him with it.

Kylo turns away from her and closes his eyes, mortified. He’s very anxious about what is going on with him. Now that his nightmare with the war and Snoke is almost over, he is sick? Suffering from what seems to be some kind of mental illness? His heart is thumping madly and he turns back to Annelyse.

“My heart beats strange,” he manages. She brings her instruments and listens to his chest carefully.

“It’s part of the attack. I’ll give you a little tranquilliser.”

She injects the medicine into his arm so gently he barely feels anything. Then she climbs onto the bed, like she did yesterday, and puts her arms around him.

Kylo curls into her, his head buried in her chest. He’s shaking and crying noiselessly, and in his mind images flash. Red and black, the throne room; black and white and red, the Starkiller base forest; white and red, Crait; blinding red, Hosnia. Han Solo’s face: his lips parted in shock when he falls down from the catwalk.

Annelyse holds him tight. She keeps stroking the nape of his neck and pulls the blanket over both of them. He’s warm again. His heart calms down slowly; his muscles hurt from the tension of the attack but now they gradually relax. Annelyse smells of something flowery and fresh, like summer.

Waking up some time later – he has no idea how much later – Kylo finds himself feeling much better. He’s lying in the same position, in her arms. She is still here, with him. He realises from her stillness and the even sound of her breathing that she’s asleep, too. She’s holding him close in his sleep.

The weakness has passed. Again. How often will it happen? Will it get worse? Will he be able to predict it? What if it happens in a large gathering?

Is the Force bond with Rey doing it to him? Or at least, has the bond contributed to his exhaustion? Has it weakened him, like the Force projection on Crait weakened and in the end killed Luke? Kylo has tried to re-open the bond several times since Crait – in fact, every day – but Rey snapped it shut every time. Perhaps he should stop trying, for his own sake?

Annelyse stirs and yawns above him. Before she moves, she tightens her arms around him for a moment, and rests her cheek on top of his head. It feels good. He stirs too, extracts himself from her embrace and sits, just in case this closeness embarrasses her now that she’s awake.

Annelyse looks a bit sleepy but alert. She’s a doctor again. She sits up straight and smiles.
“Feeling better?”

“I am. Not sure it’s the tranquiliser that has helped, though. It might be you.”

“Well, that’s too bad. I can’t be with you every time you feel unwell…” she smiles and pats his hand. It’s a perfectly normal, friendly gesture that nobody has dared to offer Kylo for many years.

“Seriously though,” she resumes, “I will give you light tranquilisers that you should take for a few weeks as a precaution, to avoid surprises, but don’t worry too much. These things will eventually pass, I promise. On the condition that you slow down. You need to change something. You can’t function anymore like you have so far.”

He needs to heal. It’s time to let go of the past and start thinking about the future, now that he can finally shape it. He is the Supreme Leader.

“What’s your plan for the next days and weeks?” she inquires, as if she guessed what he was thinking of.

The truth is he doesn’t know. Since Crait, they’ve been planning for the short term. Talking to the media. Managing the fallout. He’s been learning the job, talking to his military chiefs, reading reports. Beyond yesterday’s meeting with Coruscant leaders, not much forward-looking strategy has been agreed yet.

Except the little visit he’s planned to pay in the next days, and this is where the Finalizer will be heading tomorrow. But this is not something he can tell Anelyse, especially that it risks being less restful and less stress-free for him than what she would authorise as his doctor.

“We are leaving Coruscant’s orbit tomorrow, for a series of other meetings around the galaxy.”

For a moment, she seems surprised, or perhaps even disappointed, but she quickly regains her professional composure.

“Well, see to it that you don’t exert yourself. And if you need any further advice, here is how you can contact me,” she hands him a little chip. “It has my personal comm data.”

“So you are willing to give free medical advice to the First Order?” he jokes.

“Let it be my contribution to the peace effort.”

They’re still sitting on his bed, quite close to each other. She leans slightly towards him, and for a few crazy seconds Kylo thinks she might… but no. She turns around and slides off the bed.

“I’ll be leaving now. I’ll go to see your medical officer again on my way out.”

“Thank you,” Kylo says, standing up as well. He walks her to the door. Surely there must be something else he can say? It seems too abrupt, too final, to let her leave like this. They’ve just woken up in each other’s arms in his bed. She has definitely gone above and beyond what he could reasonably expect from a doctor. The memory of her soothing touch, her attentive, kind eyes, her warm embrace, makes it very difficult to accept he’s not likely to see her again.

“I will write to you,” he offers, without thinking, when they’re standing in front of the door leading to the corridor. He doesn’t really know what he means by that. Write about what? To say what?

“I’d like that,” she replies and smiles to him in her calm, reassuring way.
Then she leaves, and he’s alone again.

Annelyse is right about the cry of the body and the need to slow down. Kylo’s own perspective has changed since the health problems started. It made him feel fragile. He’s been punishing his body for too long. And not just the body. He spent years being used as a killing tool, existing inside a shell full of pain. Not doing anything with his life, not heading in any direction, not having any goals or plans. Just serving an evil creature like a dog.

Hux, at least, has goals. He cares about power, order, military glory. He used to have a plan for the galaxy. It may have been a sick plan – the destruction of the New Republic and a total subjugation of the rest of the galaxy – but it was a plan. Everything he’d been doing for years was to get closer to his goal. What has Kylo been doing, what has he achieved? What has he done with so many years of his life?

On a personal level: he’s never had a relationship. Not just with a woman; he doesn’t have any friends, either. Now he has the Knights. But this is very recent; before, Snoke kept them away from Kylo for years.

He’s had sex with several women but every time it was a rather… sad experience. He doesn’t like to think about it. Actually he wishes he’d never done it at all.

He’s been around the galaxy, but hasn’t seen anything. Or, more exactly, he hasn’t enjoyed any of the things he has seen. He’s killed many people, not all of them deserving to die. He’s murdered his father. He’s famous but not in the right way; his name elicits fear and hatred. It isn’t a beacon of hope. He has enormous powers, which he hasn’t ever used for anything worthwhile or good. Well, apart from killing Snoke – that was very good, and not just for Kylo. For everyone. But nobody even knows Kylo did it, everyone thinks it was Rey. If the First Order is defeated and the Republic rises again, Kylo will be imprisoned, put on trial, and will likely never see the light of day again. It’s only because such a scenario – the First Order’s defeat – seems unrealistic that Kylo can feel safe. So he’s in fact hiding inside the organization that is guilty of annihilating forty billion people. A whole galactic system.

What has he done? And why does his body need to show him that for him to finally realise it?

Kylo Ren feels such mad rage at Snoke that he’d like to resuscitate him just to scream all this to his deformed, horrible face: that he doesn’t care about Snoke’s lies and manipulation anymore, and is not afraid of him. That Snoke isn’t his master and Kylo’s not his fucking apprentice, he won’t be doing Snoke’s dirty work for him and won’t let Snoke use him. Then he would kill Snoke all over again, this time more slowly and more painfully. With some lightning, too, for good measure. Kylo has never conjured the lightning but that’s because he has never felt so angry yet.

He knows he needs to let go of this hate and anger, or he will end up doing mad things again, but for the moment the hate feels good. It feels powerful. The dark side is his ally in this.

Annelyse said he needed to start living differently so he bloody will. He’ll end all the mess, and right now.

Chapter End Notes

She’s gone for now, but I have a feeling she will be back ;-) Please let me know what
you think, and thanks for your kudos and subscriptions so far. If you like what you're reading, don't hesitate to check out my other story, *Star Wars: Enough to Hope*. Both are updated weekly!
Chapter Summary

“The First Order will not be the same anymore. A new order for the galaxy will be built, without the war, and in cooperation with others, including those who have been our adversaries so far. I imagine not all of you can accept this new reality, and a new leadership. This is why whoever wants to leave the Order, can do so without any consequences within 24 standard hours. After that, I expect your total loyalty and cooperation.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Supreme Leader?” the duty officer on the Finalizer’s bridge responds immediately when Kylo comms him.

“Get General Hux to my quarters, now.”

“Right away, sir.”

A few minutes later the door slides open and Hux enters, his black greatcoat swooshing about him, his hands clasped at the back (to hide the shaking, Kylo likes to think). Hux’s face is set in his usual grimace of displeasure.

“General,” Kylo says simply and points to a chair next to his own, beside his desk. It’s morning hours; yesterday, after Annelyse left, Kylo spent most of the day resting and letting the medics tend to him, but he also wrote a statement he wants to show Hux now. The Finalizer is en route to Dantooine, one of the First Order’s worlds. Recently, there have been reports of unrest there, and of rather violent clashes between the locals and the First Order. The Order’s governor, whose name is Pryce, as Kylo found out – he doesn’t know the guy – explains this as pushback against his initiative to clamp down on crime. But is this true, and why is crime on the rise in the first place on this sleepy, agricultural planet? Kylo wants to see for himself, especially that Dantooine is not the only place with such problems, as he discovered after Crait when he started to get himself acquainted with the state of his empire. In fact, there is an alarming number of First Order’s worlds that are notorious for unrest. Kylo starts to suspect the Order’s presence might not be as uncontroversial and warmly accepted by local populations as Hux’s propaganda makes everyone believe.

During his stint as Snoke’s apprentice, Kylo never felt the need to explore any deeper. His devotion to the First Order’s cause – bringing peace, order, justice and prosperity to the whole galaxy – relied entirely on Kylo’s loyalty to Snoke. Never once did Kylo question his master’s superior wisdom and truthfulness. Nor did he wonder whether the order and prosperity should really be brought to the galaxy at any price, such as the price of the blood of thousands. Billions, as it turned out after Hosnia. But at that point Kylo finally started to catch on.

And now, when he’s his own master, he wants to understand what’s really going on, but for the time being his understanding is embarrassingly limited. A week ago, after ascending, he knew next to nothing about the day-to-day running of his empire: the governance structure, the sources of money, other resources available, the nature of agreements with the leaders of all the worlds that have
submitted to the First Order, the standard of life of local populations and how it has changed since the First Order took over. Whatever he has found out so far, has given him food for thought. Hux is a precious source of information; he doesn’t seem to keep much from Kylo because he cannot imagine Kylo would object to any of the methods he never questioned when Snoke was alive. And Kylo doesn’t make any comments that could raise Hux’s suspicions. The moment Hux understands the new Supreme Leader wants to change things, he will begin to hide information.

Well, this moment has just arrived.

When Hux sits down, Kylo hands him a piece of paper. Hux frowns at the sight of a handwritten note but stops himself from rolling his eyes.

“I want this to be broadcast today at 18.00 standard time via the holonet as our official announcement. You or anyone else you appoint, subject to my approval, will read it. Then it will be published.”

Hux is going through the note and his face turns reddish. Kylo is waiting for the usual “are you mad, Ren?” reaction, to which he will respond by a brief Force-choke, just to restore some respect here, but the reaction never comes. Hux must have become more careful after Crait. Or maybe he’s plotting something. In any case, the absence of an immediate explosion of rage may be a bad rather than a good sign.

“You want me to read this?” he hisses finally, anger boiling behind his cool façade. That’s better. They’re on familiar ground.

“What’s your objection?”

“Lifting the bounties on the Resistance fighters’ heads? Announcing amnesty for them, and the end of hostilities on the First Order’s side? An invitation to sign a formal peace agreement?! You think I will read that?!“

“Are you sure of it, General?” Kylo asks, his eyes boring into the other man. For whom, Kylo thinks, the war has become a purpose in itself. Upholding the order is what Hux thinks – or says – he is after, but it’s just a pretext to enjoy unlimited power and control. He’s a controlling man, one can tell by looking at his perfect uniform and hair. And he actually enjoys the war. Which is not Kylo’s case. For Kylo, it has always been about more than his own power and glory; it’s been about a higher purpose, finishing what his grandfather started, building a better galaxy, ending the chaos. For Kylo, it has never been so cold and calculating as it is for Hux; it was always burning and raging, always emotional. Extremely emotional.

And now it is also with extreme emotion that Kylo approaches the task at hand. He simply can’t think of the war anymore without revulsion. He wants it over, and right now. He can’t take it any longer. He will end it and then start working on improving the situation in the galaxy. He even considers asking his mother for opinion. She’s not stupid, she understands the Republic model is finished. She’s had a lot of time to think about it and she’s probably already figured out what the galaxy needs next.

Hux is seething silently.

“You want to let the woman who killed Supreme Leader Snoke, and the whole band of these
“Did they go unpunished on Crait? How many of them are still alive?”

“The Jedi needs to be captured and executed. We can’t grant amnesty to those who assassinated our Supreme Leader! Next thing, the whole of the Resistance will be after you, if they see they can get away with it so easily.”

“Nice to hear you care so much about my safety. But read on.”

Hux continues reading and almost chokes.

“So you’re not even willing to say she killed Snoke?! It looks like the ‘change of leadership’ came from within the Order! Are you mad? Are you so smitten by this desert rat that you’ll even cover for her?”

Here we go.

“I’m not covering for her. It’s the truth.”

Hux looks at him with his eyes wide open. There’s a moment of silence.

“I knew it!” he finally hisses. “I knew you helped her! But I didn’t think you’d go as far as to kill him yourself! Well, you will regret it. I won’t let this pass!”

“Read it again, carefully.”

This is the part where Kylo first acknowledges and apologises for Snoke’s terrible crimes against the galaxy – to begin with the destruction of the Hosnian system – and then announces the recent change of leadership in the First Order. Snoke needed to be removed from power for the organization to finally live up to its promises of bringing peace and justice… etc.

Hux reads this part again, and slowly raises his eyes to Kylo.

“You want me to read an apology for Hosnia?”

“Yes, I think it would be best if you did it. But someone else from the High-Command can also read the statement. However, I hope you do see what’s in it for you.”

What’s in it for Hux is that the whole blame for Hosnia goes to Snoke. It says in the statement that the former Supreme Leader forced his High-Command to execute the reprehensible order. It takes the burden and the infamy of 40 billion deaths off Hux’s shoulders.

Hux smiles like a viper he is.

“I see very well what’s in it for you, Ren. Nobody will dare to stage a coup against you after this display of benevolence, broadcast to the whole galaxy. Your ass is safe. For now.”

“You mean you won’t dare to stage a coup? Good.”

Hux is watching him coldly.

“This is to save your mother and the girl, right?” he asks finally. “You cooled down after Crait and thought better of it. You do realise this jeopardises the First Order’s interests? Are you sure you’re not a traitor?”
Rey’s and Leia’s well-being are of course important factors in this decision, now that Kylo’s mad anger from Crait has indeed cooled down, but the key reason is that Kylo is sick of the war. The war is making him ill – literally, as Annelyse said. This, however, is not an explanation he’s willing to offer to Hux. Kylo might be obliged to reveal one weakness or another to justify why he wants to end the war so abruptly, but it won’t be a physical affliction he will admit to. Let Hux think it’s all about sentiments.

“Am I a traitor? You won’t know the answer to that question when your corpse is thrown out of the airlock after I choke you. Or when the statement is amended to put, rightly, the blame for Hosnia on you, and announce your demotion and imprisonment. We’ll see if your faction in the Order is brave enough to continue supporting you after that. The choice is yours.”

Fury flashes in Hux’s eyes – along with something resembling stupefaction, at being so outsmarted by the man Hux used to consider as a half-wit – but the General remains silent for a long moment.

“I won’t read it myself. Admiral Ghelns will. And I want a role – a very important role – in whatever it is that you will be building after the war. In whatever you’re planning to transform the Order into.”

Kylo smiles.

“This is well noted, Grand Marshal.”

Hux’s mouth drops in surprise – he can hardly hide his delight, but he is trying to anyway, because he hates Ren, even when Ren promotes him.

Suddenly he starts laughing.

“You bastard. Of course you finished Snoke off! You had been preparing to do it for years, hadn’t you? It had nothing to do with that pathetic little scavenger. You just used her. What you wanted was power.”

“I wanted freedom,” Kylo says.

“In this case, it was the same thing.”

“So I take it that we have an agreement.”

Hux rises and walks towards the door.

“Hux,” Kylo says. The newly appointed Grand Marshal stops, reluctantly, and turns his head, but not the whole body, towards Kylo.

“I’ll be on the bridge next to you when Admiral Ghelns will be reading this statement. If he happens to change a single word in what’s written here, you won’t hear the end of the broadcast. Is that clear?”

“Why don’t you read it yourself?” Hux snaps. “You’re the Supreme Leader, aren’t you?”

“I’m the king, not the messenger. Not one word changed. Remember that.”

When the statement is being read by Admiral Ghelns from the bridge of the Finalizer, Kylo remains out of the camera’s angle of view, watching his troops to gauge their mood. Nobody knew, apart from Hux and Ghelns, what the announcement was going to be about. A stony silence reigns when the bounties are lifted, but as soon as the end of hostilities is announced, Kylo registers a frantic hum
of hushed voices from the officers behind him. He raises his hand impatiently and they fall silent. When the apology for Hosnia is offered and the change of leadership gets casually mentioned, there are unmistakable gasps in the room.

Soon after that, as Admiral Ghelns calls on General Organa to contact the First Order and accept to enter into peace talks the Supreme Leader is proposing, the announcement comes to an end. Kylo turns around; his officers, and there must be more than a hundred on the bridge at the moment, are all talking. He blinks; he expected angry silence. They are surely mad about being prevented from taking their revenge on the Resistance? So many of their comrades have died, on the Starkiller, on the destroyed dreadnought, even on Crait. But then again, his officers were on Crait with him, so they know the Resistance has already paid dearly. And it looks like they’re almost as sick of the war as Kylo. The admirals and the Grand Marshals might be mad – he can’t know for sure as none of them are here apart from Ghelns – because their lives have never been on the line. But these middle-rank officers are more relieved than angry. Judging by that, the stormtroopers will be ecstatic. And then the Grand Marshals had better think twice before they protest.

Kylo suspects everyone is somewhat baffled by the very vague mention of Snoke’s demotion. He smiles; it’s rather amusing to think of it this way. Let them wonder. The less they know, the more careful they’ll be not to step out of line. The culture of ruling by fear is not what he wants to foster in the long term – because it cannot work anyway – but for the time being his reign is still fragile. He needs to consolidate it; he needs to gain respect. And the subtlest suggestion, like the one in his statement, that Kylo may just have had something to do with Snoke’s disappearance, will make his troops respect him more. Respect or fear, in any case not hate. How many of them loved Snoke, after all?

But fear isn’t his only trump card; he has just given his people something very precious. He has given them peace.

“The war is over,” Kylo says slowly but in a loud voice and the hum ceases immediately. It is the first time he’s addressing the officers in a large gathering as Supreme Leader. There has been no official ceremony or coronation. He would have hated that.

“The First Order will not be the same anymore. A new order for the galaxy will be built, without the war, and in cooperation with others, including those who have been our adversaries so far. I imagine not all of you can accept this new reality, and a new leadership. This is why whoever wants to leave the Order, can do so without any consequences within 24 standard hours. After that, I expect your total loyalty and cooperation.”

He looks directly at Hux when saying the last sentence. The six Knights of Ren step forward and stand behind Kylo in a half circle. It’s a show of power, but also a show of fairness. And judging from the faces of the officers gathered here, who have so far considered Kylo Ren to be insane and gratuitously cruel, it has gone down pretty well.

When the gathering disperses and everyone goes back to their work stations, Kylo turns around to see Bajeera, still standing behind him, with a smile on her face.

Bajeera is the most formidable of his Knights and their unofficial leader whenever Kylo happens to be absent. She is a very tall, red-skinned Togruta, almost Kylo’s height, with a pattern of white stripes around her eyes and arms. She is his most trusted confidant, too; two days after Crait, when all the Knights arrived at the **Finalizer** to stand by Kylo’s side, he told Bajeera about Rey, the bond, and what happened in the throne room.

“What are you enjoying the first hours of peace in the galaxy, Supreme Leader?”
“Let’s wait for the Resistance’s answer, but yes, I do feel relieved.”

“Once the peace agreement is signed, what will you do?”

“What do you mean?”

Bajeera gestures to the area around them.

“This. All of it. The life on the starship, the Supreme Leadership, the stormtroopers. What will you do with all of this?”

“I don’t know,” Kylo admits. “I’m going to build a new order for the galaxy. But I’ve had no time to think about the details of what it will look like.”

“Have you thought of quitting?”

“Quitting? You mean leaving the First Order?”

“Well, it was Snoke who put you up to all this. Becoming a second Vader, fulfilling your destiny, all this lofty nonsense. You have no destiny because there is no destiny. You don’t love politics and you don’t love the military. Why don’t you try and see for yourself what kind of life you’d like to lead? Isn’t it high time you were free to do whatever you want?”

Yes, it is. But Kylo can’t let go. And also, isn’t being the Supreme Leader what he really wants, even if it’s difficult? It’s not mistaken illusions of grandeur, or greed for power, that drives him. It’s because he needs a purpose. Something important and big. He has suffered all the pain, loneliness and hardship because it was supposed to lead him somewhere. Now, he can choose where that will be. Now that he doesn’t need to cower before Snoke any longer, it’s not the time to drop everything. It is the time to figure out what he wants to do with the galaxy and with his own life. So for now, he is holding on to the old dream, even if just one week ago he advised Rey to stop holding on. Perhaps not everything from the past is worth killing. Sometimes it might be enough to modify the plans. To adapt to new circumstances.

He tells that to Bajeera, who nods and remains silent for a moment, before deciding to take up a new – but very much related – subject.

“Have you tried to re-establish the connection?” she asks quietly though there is no risk they could be overheard.

“Yes. A few times in the past days. But she cut me off every time.”

“Well. I’m not surprised.”

“That’s hardly encouraging.”

“Maybe it was too much for both of you. The Force, the darkness and the light, the Resistance and the First Order, the duty, the destiny. It’s too heavy. Not great conditions to start a relationship.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be an ordinary relationship. It was as much about achieving great things, better things, together, as about the personal connection. She is special. I was so sure it was meant to be.”

“Yes, she is special and it sure looked like it was meant to be,” admits Bajeera. “But now, she refuses to talk to you. You had the time to cool down and reach out, and she hasn’t responded in kind. So either you ignore this simple fact and continue to stalk her because it’s meant to be; or you
cry after her for the rest of your life and feed your darkness with your pain; or you move on. Start living. Be grateful to her for her help in getting rid of Snoke, and move on. Remember her fondly, and move on. You killed Snoke, so don’t keep living as if he was still around. If it’s meant to be, she will finally reach back. But for now, give it a break.”

“I need to talk to her at least once,” Kylo insists. “I can’t just give up like that.”

Bajeera shakes her head.

“You’ll get yourself hurt, Master.”

After a moment of silence, she says casually, looking away:

“I once had a relationship with someone who didn’t care for me as much as I cared for him. I was always hoping one day he’d understand it was meant to be, and he never did. Finally I grew tired of it.”

“So what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I wouldn’t waste my time chasing after a person who doesn’t want me.”

“Maybe it’s not that. Maybe she’s just hurt.”

“Was she the only one who got hurt? Didn’t she hurt you, too? She should also care to make an effort to reconnect.”

Yes, it feels mortifying to chase after someone who only makes him feel more and more unwanted. He has felt unwanted for ever. Being pushed away by Rey time and again, every day, as he tries to re-open the bond, reminds him of all the other relationships in his life. It rings a bell too much and too painfully. Because does it mean he is always, perhaps unconsciously, looking for relationships in which he will be unwanted? Does he choose to pine for those who don’t care about him enough, who will ultimately reject him, confirming his deep fear that he is unlovable?

As Kylo walks back to his quarters, having ordered his comms officers to prepare a report on first media reactions to his announcement, he wonders whether his mother has heard it. Of course Leia will have heard it by now, even if she didn’t listen to it live. All the main media must have already picked it up. He will give General Organa a few days to get in touch. He doesn’t want to push too hard; he believes she will respond.

It is fortunate that the Resistance’s top commander is his mother. If Leia had died when she was sucked into space, and if anyone else was now the leader of the Resistance, Kylo has no doubt they’d be too afraid to get in touch for the peace talks, as they would ultimately have to reveal their location. But Leia is alive and she is still the General. Perhaps at least his mother won’t leave him knocking at her door for ever.

Later that evening Kylo inspects his scars in front of the mirror. Annelyse’s treatment has helped. He doesn’t look so bad after two nights of good sleep, and his weakness has not returned since yesterday. The tranquillisers Annelyse left him are quite light, he doesn’t feel groggy or tired after taking them, and at the same time they seem to help him sleep. He will likely enjoy another quiet night before the Finalizer arrives in the skies above Dantooine tomorrow morning.

Looking at his healed body now, Kylo wonders whether to send Annelyse a message. She did say he could write to her. It wouldn’t be strange to just send a few lines and thank for her care, and say he’s feeling better, would it? Perhaps she has heard the peace announcement, and she will mention it
when she writes back? He won’t write to her about it himself; he doesn’t want to boast.

On the spur of the moment, Kylo types the message on his datapad and sends it. He knows she might never answer. She may have given him permission to contact her with medical questions, and no more than that. But his message is so innocent and casual, and Annelyse has been so kind to him, that there is really no reason why she shouldn’t answer. If nothing else, it would simply be polite. A few short sentences would be enough.

When he checks his datapad a few hours later, just before going to sleep, there is no reply. It’s unreasonable to feel disappointed; she might be busy, or out, or she might have decided to answer later. But it hurts. Perhaps he needed that one encouragement after a long, tense and, essentially, lonely day during which he has been busy changing the fate of the galaxy.

It seems to be his curse to make overtures and find himself invariably turned down.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Thanks for reading and please leave a comment to let me know what you think!
The beginning of the reign

Chapter Summary

“Are you hoping I'll kill them? So that you will be the only Grand-Marshall left?”
“Why, you don’t intend to kill them?”
“They’ll go to prison. Like Pryce.”
“What’s happened to you, Ren?” Hux asks, visibly put out. “Doesn’t your lightsaber work anymore?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning the Finalizer arrives at its destination. Kylo orders the ship to stay out of orbit; he doesn’t want his people on Dantooine to know in advance he’s here. It's a surprise visit. He only takes his command shuttle with Bajeera, Hux and a squadron of stormtroopers on board.

As they descend into atmosphere, green hills, yellow grasslands and farming fields stretch across the horizon. At least wherever they can get a clear view, because most of the surface is covered by some kind of machinery: towers, cranes, metal constructions. It looks very busy, too; there are plenty of people and vehicles speeding around. Not quite the peaceful and dormant Outer Rim farm planet Kylo expected.

“We’ve introduced improvements,” Hux explains with visible pride. “Before, they used completely antiquated production methods, and now with all the infrastructure we’ve built the agricultural productivity has increased exponentially.”

“When was this ‘improvement’ made?”

“A year ago or so. On Leader Snoke’s order.”

“It looks ugly with all these machines,” Kylo comments.

As they approach the surface, they have to ask for permission to land and identify themselves. By the time they reach the First Order’s outpost in Dantoo Town, everyone is alerted to their arrival. The governor and several officers are waiting for Kylo in front of a high dark grey building that sticks out like a sore thumb amidst the otherwise small-scale structures and natural landscape. It’s not a very densely inhabited world; there used to be a Rebel base here at the time of the Empire, but the First Order dismantled it once they took over more than a year ago.

“Supreme Leader!” the governor smiles in a slightly wild way. “What a surprise! To what do I owe the honour?”

“When your Supreme Leader visits, governor, you stand at attention and don’t ask questions,” Kylo says coldly. Hux shifts at his side but remains silent.

Governor Pryce is a man of under sixty, somewhat overweight and looking a touch older than his age. He’s wearing a green silk foulard under the collar of his uniform, which for some reason irritates Kylo enormously. Pryce is a General of the Order, one of the old Empire guys. That means Hux and
Pryce most probably don’t get on; that also means the governor might remember Vader and, as a result, be rather wary of Kylo.

He bows in silence and remains at attention. Kylo looks at him for a long moment during which everyone gets really nervous, then gestures silently towards the entrance of the building and moves on, without waiting for them. Hux, Pryce, the Knights and all the officers, as well as a small group of Kylo’s troopers, enter after him.

In the huge lift nobody says a word. The governor looks sweaty; it is rather hot on Dantooine, so perhaps these few minutes outside the building, in the full sun, exhausted him. Or perhaps there is another reason. In any case, he touches his temple every now and then, as if he had a headache, and Hux frowns, glancing at Kylo.

The lift stops and Kylo gets out first, turning left and entering an open space that looks like an office. It is round shaped, with a big window resembling a viewport on a star destroyer. There’s a big, expensive-looking desk and a lot of other handsome furniture.

On entering the room, Kylo whirs around, facing Pryce and the others. It looks like he’s at home here and the owner of this office is merely his guest. The Supreme Leader paces about the room and peers outside through the windows, while his governor continues to sweat, standing still.

“What do you have to say about the recent trouble?” Kylo inquires finally, leaning against the window ledge.

“Everything is in my report, Supreme Leader,” Pryce says with a polite smile which, however, disappears in an instant as his hands go to his throat and start clawing at the green foulard. Hux jolts in shock; it's one thing to see the Supreme Leader Force-choke someone – it wouldn’t be the first time, not to mention Hux himself has been on the receiving end more than once – but it's something else to actually watch the fabric of the foulard tighten around the man’s neck as if it was alive.

“Everything?” Kylo asks drily. Pryce tries to scream but hardly any sound comes out of his mouth. Hux’s eyes shoot between Pryce and Kylo but he keeps silent. The Knights of Ren, all masked except Bajeera, remain completely still.

“Still speechless?” Kylo inquires in an eerily calm voice. “Don’t worry too much. I can see all I need in your mind.”

Suddenly Pryce flies in the air and smashes head-first against the wall. The impact sends him sprawling onto the floor. Then his body is lifted though no one touches him, flies again across the room and crashes against the opposite wall. After that, it looks like the governor has passed out.

“What are you doing, Ren?” Hux asks in a low voice. The Knights extend their hands simultaneously, and Pryce’s officers’ blasters fly from the owners’ belts.

“Supreme Leader!” shouts one of them, clearly panicking. “This is a misunderstanding. Please tell us what the problem is and I’m sure we can clarify…”

“Silence,” Kylo says. Then he moves again, his black cloak billowing about him, and exits the room.

“With me,” he says to Hux, and he also nods to Bajeera, who follows him without a word.

“Where in the galaxy are we going?” Hux asks angrily once they’re in the lift again. They descend into the underground and, once the door opens, find themselves in a long corridor. It is illuminated
by very dim light but once the three of them start walking, additional lights come on, probably responding automatically to movement.

On both sides of the corridor there are cells, protected by thick bars and full of people. And now four guards are running towards Kylo, with their blasters drawn.

“Identify yourselves!” one of them screams and barely manages to finish the sentence when a flick of Bajeera’s hand sends all four of them to the floor, unconscious.

“Maker,” Hux says, strolling next to her, while Kylo walks in front of them. “Are you planning to kill everyone here?”

“They’re not dead.”

“Again, where are we going? What are we looking for?”

“Not what, but who,” Kylo replies.

They keep walking; the corridor turns and turns, Kylo scrutinizes the faces in the cells but doesn’t seem to find who he’s looking for, and the prisoners step away from the bars when they see him.

Finally, he pauses in front of the last cell. The only lamp in this part of the corridor is located a few good metres away so that this corner remains almost completely dark.

There is one woman sitting in the cell. Also, a few cells around her are empty so she must have been isolated on purpose.

The woman is sitting on a cot and at the sound of the steps turns towards the door but doesn’t get up and doesn’t speak.

It’s Leia.

For a moment he really thinks it’s his mother, and he is confused. This is not at all what he expected, and he can’t sense her Force signature. But it’s rather dark here and the woman is Leia’s age, of similar build; she also has greyish hair, which she wears in a bun. When Kylo steps closer and peers through the bars, he realizes his mistake very quickly. It’s not his mother. The Resistance General is not sitting in this cell.

Kylo unlocks the door with the Force. The woman still doesn’t move. He steps in and Hux follows him, while Bajeera stays in the doorway.

“Kylo Ren,” the woman says when he sits on a chair opposite her bed.

“You know me?”

“The whole galaxy saw your face on the holonet after Crait. And they broadcast your other images with the peace announcement yesterday.”

“You have a holonet device here?”

“No. I was still free yesterday.”

Not waiting for his answer, she resumes calmly:

“I am flattered. I must be really dangerous if the First Order sends their Supreme Leader to deal with
me. Is it for interrogation? I do have things to say but none of them, I'm afraid, is as important as to warrant your personal interest.”

“I'm not here to interrogate you. I just want to know what's going on on Dantooine.”

“Why don’t you ask your governor? I’m sure you’re more interested in his version than mine.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Kylo says. “You have one chance to talk to me. Why don’t you take it?”

“If only you’d really listen.”

“I have been in power for a week only. What makes you think I won’t listen?”

The woman is watching him silently.

“There is a door hidden in the wall at the end of this corridor,” she says finally. “Pryce keeps a girl there. She’s Force-sensitive. She's wearing a Force-restraining collar.”

“I saw that in his mind. He’s thinking about her. I just didn’t know where she was exactly.”

“Did you see me in his mind too? Is this why you came?”

“Yes. But she was more prominent in his thoughts.”

The woman snorts.

“Well, yes. I’m just a political prisoner, while she is a Force user, so a bigger threat, and also happens to be a very pretty young woman who doesn’t want to sleep with him. And he has really insisted. So he locked her up out of spite. Are you going to release her?”

“Yes. But first I want to know what’s happening on this planet.”

The woman looks at him with her blue eyes – not like his mother’s eyes, and yet he can’t shake off the feeling they’re somehow similar.

“This is what’s happening. The same thing as on all your worlds, Supreme Leader. What, are you new to this job? Oh wait. You are.”

“What thing?”

“Let the girl out and I’ll tell you.”

Kylo sighs. Of all possible types of people, angry rebellious women his mother’s age are the category he least knows how to deal with.

“You do realise I can take this information from your mind, kill you and dump your body in this cell? Why don’t you just tell me what I want to know and make it easier for all of us?”

“It’s not a conversation for five minutes. Let the girl out.”

A minute later, Bajeera unlocks the hidden door with the Force and retrieves a skinny young woman of about 18 years of age from a tiny windowless cell. Soon the girl is sitting next to the old woman – Kria – on the cot in Kria’s cell.

The girl, whom Kria introduces as Arin, is not in a totally pitiful state. She can walk without any
help, for example, and seems calm, but this is just because she’s been locked in there for only three days. If they arrived two weeks later, she could be dead, or mad. She has stayed in complete darkness, without a bed and without a fresher, so by now both she and the cell have obviously acquired an unpleasant smell. She received food once a day, delivered directly to her cell via a trap hidden in one of the walls – to make it impossible for her to speak to another human being or even to a droid – but she got no water. The food was actually some kind of a thin soup, so this was all she drank and ate for three days.

She keeps silent but is slightly shaking, more from hunger, rage and humiliation, Kylo thinks, than real physical suffering. Bajeera gives her a canteen of water and speaks into the comlink, asking for food, blankets and a med droid to be sent down.

“I am fine,” Arin says defensively, and makes an effort to compose herself and appear fine. She is obviously embarrassed by her state: dirty clothes, bad smell, disheveled hair. She can’t even open her eyes fully yet, because the light – as dim as it is here – hurts them after three days spent in total darkness. Her Force signature is not as strong as Kylo’s or Rey’s, far from it, but it’s solid and bright.

Something in all this – her age, the fact that she’s Force-sensitive, the hunger, her stubbornness, or perhaps all this together – makes Kylo think of Rey and Jakku, and his heart aches. For Rey, this kind of life is over; there’s no bounty on her head anymore, she doesn’t need to hide, she won’t be imprisoned, she can go wherever she wants and hopefully she won’t go hungry ever again. But suddenly it turns out that ending the war against the Resistance, an achievement he’s been so proud of, may not have solved all the problems of the galaxy, and may not even have brought a happy end to many of the people whose life is similar to Rey’s, such as Arin.

It also hasn’t brought a happy end to Kria, who looks like his mother, seems to be the leader of a local rebellion against the First Order, and is sitting in his prison.

Kylo points to the Force-restraining collar Arin is wearing. It’s too tight for her; it has irritated the skin on her neck. This, too, Pryce has done out of spite. Kylo brushes against her mind and browses through the memories of her recent contacts with the governor. It’s creepy. She was at first arrested to be interrogated about her connection with the rebellion, but then the rebellion was forgotten as Pryce took a liking to her. He didn’t resort to any violence – and for this Kylo decides to spare his life – but he made it abundantly clear to her that the only way out of the cell was through his bed.

“I’ll remove this collar,” Kylo says, “but don’t be stupid and don’t try anything. I’d overpower you in a second, and it would end badly for all of you.”

She looks him defiantly in the eye, but nods in silence. He waves his hand and the collar falls down, its lock open. The girl takes a deep breath, as if her lungs have been constricted until now.

“Have you ever experienced this?” she asks Kylo, to his surprise, gesturing to the collar.

“No.”

“It’s terrible. It’s as if all my senses were numbed.”

“Yes. That’s what it feels like to be cut off from the Force.”

He has done that to countless Force-sensitives he hunted on Snoke’s orders across the galaxy. Arin somehow hears this thought – he has forgotten to put his mental walls up, which he normally does whenever he’s in the presence of a Force user, except, at times, Bajeera – and she narrows her eyes.

“Are you going to kill me, like you killed all those Jedis?”
“You’re not a Jedi,” Kylo says. “You’re a child. Without a lightsaber. Calm down now.”

He sits again on the chair next to Kria’s cot, while Hux and Bajeera lean against the wall. A moment later a droid arrives with food and water, and another med droid rolls in to tend to Arin.

Kria starts talking.

“How much did you know?”

Kylo asks this question to Hux as Pryce and his officers are taken into custody and board a shuttle that has just arrived from the Finalizer. Kylo and his companions are standing in front of the First Order’s building, the town inhabitants gathered around them. All the prisoners have been released. They’re out too now, and Kria is talking to them and their families. People keep glancing at Kylo; the initial nervousness gives way to curiosity. Curiosity always prevails over fear, Kylo thinks.

Hux shrugs.

“Not enough. I didn’t know any details of the rebellion. Not the leader’s name, not how many of them there were, not that Pryce put them all in prison, and certainly not about the girl. He never gave any names in his reports. He didn’t want to give the impression this was something organized and happening on a large scale. He used to dismiss it as clashes with anonymous troublemakers.”

“But did you know of the underlying problem?”

Hux falls silent.

“I’m not going to kill you,” Kylo says impatiently. Indeed, even Pryce has narrowly escaped with his life, at least for now, although he will be tried and imprisoned, and who knows, maybe executed in the end. “I want to know how far this problem extends.”

“I knew that Snoke went easy on the gangs and let them continue many of their operations,” Hux replies slowly. “Smuggling, spice selling, this kind of thing. He had a deal with them. But I had no idea it went as far as our own officers kidnapping and selling local people to the syndicates as slaves. It’s a disgrace. I would have never allowed that to continue.”

“You’re not stupid. You know that if you let the gangs operate, people will be exploited in one way or the other. This is precisely what happened. It’s their whole business model.”

“I didn’t know the scale of it. We needed the money and the gangs were more than willing to pay in exchange for our… understanding. Otherwise how do you think we’d keep up this whole enterprise, this enormous fleet? So we closed our eyes to some things. It was a necessary evil until we gathered enough own resources to become independent of their cash, and then we would crush them.”

“Until we robbed enough worlds of their resources, you mean. Like Dantooine.”

“Dantooine accepted our rule. We didn’t conquer them.”

“But we didn’t honour the agreement we had with them. We violated it. Did you know that?”

“Not really,” Hux says and Kylo suddenly understands that he’s much more angry than sorry. Angry at his own ignorance and at Snoke for having fooled him so thoroughly, while Hux considered himself all along as the most important person in the First Order, the closest to the centre of power.

The truth is, as Kria has explained to them at length, that the First Order has indeed increased the
agricultural productivity with the new technology. But the locals haven’t benefitted from it. In fact, the wages have decreased substantially and now all the profit from the trade of agricultural produce ends up in the Order’s pockets. Some of it in Pryce’s pockets. Dantooine, along with hundreds of other First Order worlds, especially those with mineral resources, is being ruthlessly exploited, to the detriment of its population, in order to maintain the Order’s might and cash flow.

Of course, Hux knew the Order always skimmed off a significant part of the profits. Even Kylo knew that. There had to be benefits for them, otherwise why bother. What Kylo didn’t know however was that the benefits were entirely on one side; the locals were not at all better off now than before the Order took over. In most cases, they were much worse, practically slaves. Not to mention those who were sold as actual slaves to criminal syndicates. On Dantooine, women were harassed by Pryce’s people who roamed around the towns and villages, often drunk or high on spice, sold to them at generous discounts by the flourishing criminal syndicates.

This last piece of information has truly infuriated Hux. Not that he has much of a chivalrous spirit, but to know that his soldiers have forgotten the military discipline so far as to get repeatedly drunk in public and, like some brutes, chase civilian women around, is unbearable to him. This is not what the First Order stands for. Fraternizing among the troops is forbidden, and here the troopers and the officers are not only fraternizing with subjugated populations of a remote, half-wild world, but they’re also using violence, thereby tarnishing the Order’s reputation.

Hux has dealt with this before Kylo even said a word. All Pryce’s officers, on top of being taken into custody, and all the troopers stationed on the planet, have just been sent to reconditioning. Hux confronted Pryce about it just after they finished talking to Kria, Arin, and the other prisoners. The new Grand Marshal took no small pleasure in Pryce’s humiliation, but on this occasion Kylo let him have it.

And indeed, the agreement with Dantooine has not been honoured. The construction of schools, hospitals and other infrastructure that was one of the conditions under which Dantooine agreed to submit to the First Order, is being endlessly postponed. Instead, there’s more and more investment in agricultural equipment, so as to use the world’s resources up even faster. After the first protest of the locals two months ago, martial law was introduced, free media were shut down, and up till Kylo’s arrival, terror has reigned on the planet, with endless arrests and persecutions. Local leaders have all been ousted, eliminated or imprisoned. Children keep disappearing mysteriously. It is a grim reality that Kylo has never wanted and has had no idea of. It becomes clear to him now why there are so many reports of unrest and clashes coming from different worlds. The First Order has brought terror and exploitation, just like the Resistance has always claimed.

Moral and human considerations aside, Kylo, from a purely pragmatic point of view, doesn’t believe for a second this kind of situation can last. If the First Order are the real villains of the galaxy, the war will never really end. They’ll always have to be on their guard, as new rebellions will inevitably spring up. The Resistance is just the first of many. Unless, that is, he changes things dramatically.

“So, who knew?” Kylo asks Hux. If it’s not just Dantooine, as many similar reports from other places seem to suggest, it’s not just Pryce who is rotten but the whole system. It must have been a conscious policy introduced by Snoke. So, someone in the High-Command must have known. Surely Snoke didn’t just talk and plot separately with each and every planetary governor.

“Not me,” Hux says, deeply irritated. “It must have been the Grand-Marshals. It seems I was just Snoke’s stupid slave. I knew only what he allowed me to know.”

“Just like me, then. But never mind that now. Get all the three Grand-Marshals onto the Finalizer the day after tomorrow. I will have a word with them.”
Hux smiles.

“A word?”

“Are you hoping I’ll kill them? So that you will be the only Grand-Marshal left?”

“Why, you don’t intend to kill them?”

“They’ll go to prison. Like Pryce.”

“What’s happened to you, Ren?” Hux asks, visibly put out. “Doesn’t your lightsaber work anymore?”

“Also,” Kylo continues, ignoring Hux’s comment, “we must change the stormtrooper programme. We’ve just taken our own officers into custody for selling people into slavery, while we take children away from parents without their consent to bring them up as soldiers.”

He expects mad rage from Hux – after all, the trooper programme is the apple in the Grand Marshal’s eye – but the red-head only sighs, resigned.

“Anyway, after you gave everyone in the Order a free choice to stay or leave, we can’t keep recruiting people by force, can we? It’s obvious that we must now change the programme. I’m just wondering how we are going to make sure we have enough funds and people, if you are becoming so noble?”

“We’ll have to think about it. It’s not just occasional instances of abuse and exploitation we’re looking at here. It has become the norm, and the level of it is unsustainable. We will soon be spending more money and time quashing rebellions than it’s all worth. A new Resistance will undoubtedly rise. And the old Resistance will never agree to sign the peace agreement if we don’t change these things.”

Hux laughs at that.

“The Resistance? And what did their Republic ever do for these people on Dantooine or anywhere else? The Republic didn’t eradicate slavery or clamp down on crime. The Republic only cared about the Core Worlds and their precious freedom. Freedom for everything to continue like it always had, amidst chaos and crime. We only filled the vacuum. We at least promised to do something to improve people’s lives, in exchange for some of the freedom.”

“But we didn’t fulfill that promise. We didn’t bring about any positive change, we didn’t provide the protection, we just took away whatever these people had. We used them.”

“I’ll have to cancel the order for a new dreadnought,” Hux says, ignoring these philosophical considerations and rocking slightly on his heels, his hands clasped at the back. “We’ll have no money for it if you want to start paying better salaries to the workers.”

“Why would we need a new dreadnought anyway? The war is over.”

“The point is, Ren, we’re not a charity organization. If we want to start really doing things we’d said we’d do, like building schools, giving jobs to people, freeing slaves and offering medical care, we need access to these worlds’ resources. Or we need another source of cash.”

“We will figure it out,” Kylo says. “We need to design a better system. You said you wanted an important role in whatever the new thing will be. Well, get down to it. Give me some suggestions. We have enough clever people in the Order to come up with ideas, don’t we?”
“I suppose,” Hux says slowly. He’s deep in thought and Kylo decides to leave him to it.

The dynamic between him and Hux has changed. He undoubtedly endeared himself to Hux with the recent promotion, and then gained some of his respect for masterminding the end of the war. But Hux’s current shock at the realization of how Snoke kept him in the dark, and his appetite for a new role after the war, are also helping reboot their relationship. Kylo finds nothing pleases the Grand Marshal more than being included in the discussion and asked for opinion. Never mind if they agree, as long as he has a say. He needs to feel involved. And is that so unreasonable? After all, it’s rather common sense that the two of them should work together. It’s either this, or Hux will stage a coup sooner or later. Better keep Hux close and use his competence – which he does have – than antagonize him any further and have him as one more thing on the long list of Kylo’s problems.

“I would like to talk to you about Arin, my lord,” Bajeera interrupts quietly, appearing at Kylo’s side.

“What about her? Is she feeling ok?”

“She’ll be fine. She just needs a good shower. And I was thinking that she could take it on board the Finalizer.”

“What do you mean?”

“I would like to suggest she comes with us.”

“What?” Kylo says, completely taken by surprise.

“What!” Hux exclaims, visibly upset by the perspective of yet another Force user on his ship. That will make eight of them, which is a bit much.

“I would like to teach her.”

Kylo is silent. He is watching his most loyal Knight carefully, but Bajeera doesn’t flinch.

For a Knight of Ren, who escaped Luke’s academy on the memorable, infamous night of terrible crimes and pledged her loyalty to the dark side and Kylo Ren, to admit suddenly she wants to teach, which means build rather than destroy, is, to say the least, surprising. None of the Knights have ever expressed a wish to pass on what they learnt from the Jedi master or from the Dark side. They have taken a conscious decision to stay away from other people. To keep their distance. Since they became the Knights of Ren, they have never admitted to creating any relationship with another sentient being, whether of a mentor-student kind, friendship, or love.

No, that’s not true. Bajeera told Kylo yesterday about a lover she had. When was that? Who was he? Are any of the Knights in such relationships now? Kylo has no idea, and it makes him rather sad to realize they never talk about these things. The Knights are the closest he has to friends and he knows nothing about their… personal lives. Even the thought of them having personal lives is strange. He has assumed so far they had none, like himself. As if they were a separate category of beings: just tools and vehicles of the Force.

“Do you plan to turn her, then?” Kylo asks.

“No, Master. I want to teach her the ways of the Force. She will choose. I hope she chooses both sides, as we should have.”

At first, Kylo is angry to hear this, but then he remembers Rey and his own dreams of balance. Perhaps such balance is possible within oneself, without a second person? Perhaps the simultaneous presence of light and dark within one mind doesn’t have to create a conflict and doesn’t have to hurt
so much?

For his part, he’s not there yet.

“Let this not become a precedent. I have no wish of setting up a Jedi academy on my ship. We’re not going to look for Force-sensitives around the galaxy now to start teaching them.”

“I understand, Master. But can Arin come exceptionally, then?”

“For a trial period,” he says firmly and Bajeera bows her head respectfully, accepting his decision, but her eyes are shining. She briefly glances at Hux, who hasn’t spoken for some time, turns around and leaves them almost noiselessly.

They spend a few more hours on the planet, sorting things out. Rohlen Ren, a Zabrak and one of Kylo’s strongest Knights, will stay on Dantooine as interim governor. Kylo leaves him two squadrons of stormtroopers and a recommendation to work with Kria and several other local leaders. Another star destroyer, the Arrow, will arrive tomorrow with reinforcements and additional civilian personnel, but Kylo insists on key posts of the planetary government to be staffed not just by First Order people, but also by locals. He’s going to monitor that closely, and it will be one of his main policies about to be introduced on all First Order’s worlds he’ll be visiting in the next weeks. He finally knows what he’s doing next, at least in the short term.

As the sun gets lower to the horizon, Kylo takes a walk through Dantoo Town with Bajeera and the rest of the Knights. He won’t be visiting people in their houses and listening to their concerns – that would be a bit much. But he wants to be seen. Let them see the new Supreme Leader has come in person and taken measures to repair their wrongs. Snoke and his policies were bad, but the First Order is not Snoke anymore. Let the media pick this message up. The timing is perfect, just after Kylo’s peace announcement.

Then, on the spur of the moment, they grab speeders and set off. They arrive at some kind of a green plateau with a view of the town but also of the surrounding countryside, and not all of it are the horrific agricultural machines. The rolling green hills and lavender grasslands are all around, and the sky is larger here. The late afternoon air is very pleasant, with a slight wind, and Kylo sits on the grass and admires the panorama.

He remains silent as the Knights talk among themselves, thinking of how quickly his reality has changed from that of a criminal employed by Snoke to being the leader of the most powerful organization in the galaxy. And even though it’s just the beginning and things might yet go downhill, for the first time in years he actually feels some satisfaction with what he has done.

He can’t atone for his crimes and he doesn’t intend to; he knows well what he’s done and will have to live with it, because he won’t submit to the judgment of any court set up by the Resistance. Not unless they stand on trial, too, and in an independent tribunal. A war is a war. Dameron and the likes of him have killed as many people as Kylo has so Kylo sees no reason why the Resistance should have any authority to pass sentence on him. And if not them, then who? There’s no overarching structure; no galactic Senate anymore, no judiciary. Plus, even if such an authority existed, Kylo finds the idea of answering to other people for killing his father ludicrous. There’s nobody in the whole galaxy who has been as affected – broken – by that act as Kylo himself. He’s paying for it every single day, and it’s his and only his burden that he’ll carry forever.

He won’t go on trial and won’t go to a Resistance prison, but he will do things differently from now on. He used to fly off the handle at literally anything, but his temper has got somewhat calmer in the last days, no doubt as a result of the illness. He’s afraid the weakness might come back, at the least
convenient time, so he is careful.

And the results aren’t that bad; previously, he’d have sliced Pryce and his officers in half before he even talked to Kria, just on the basis of what he saw in the rotten governor’s mind after a few minutes in his presence. Previously, he wouldn’t have talked to Kria and the other prisoners himself but would have ordered someone else to do so, while he would have spent that time destroying the governor’s residence with his lightsaber.

That is to say, if he even cared about any of this. As Snoke’s right-hand man, he accepted such injustices as a necessary evil, part of his master’s bigger plan for the galaxy. What would he have done with Arin in those times? He would have killed her. He was the Jedi killer. Or maybe he would have spared her? He hardly knows anymore. But he definitely wouldn’t have taken her with them, and Bajeera wouldn’t have dared to suggest it. Unless he thought the girl could be easily turned.

Also, he definitely wouldn’t have lingered on the planet, gazing at the green hills and enjoying – yes, enjoying – the warm air on his face.

Kylo thinks of Annelyse and wishes he could tell her about this pleasant moment. Medically speaking, he has followed her advice: he consciously avoided getting angry, fighting, exerting himself. Perhaps she would also be glad to hear he has spent some time in the fresh air. And it’s working, because he feels better and calmer, he can think more clearly, he was even able to have a rational and useful conversation with Hux, who seems to hate him less.

This morning, the message Kylo sent Annelyse last night still remained unanswered. He knows he’ll check his datapad as soon as they’re back on the Finalizer, and he dreads the moment. He doesn’t want to be disappointed again, but everything tells him he will be.

They dock on the Finalizer almost two hours later. It’s high time for dinner. The Knights are eating together, and Arin will join them for the first time. Kylo is naturally invited, but he excuses himself, as he often does. He goes to his quarters and as the door closes behind him, he throws his gloves and cape on the sofa and looks around – reluctantly – for his datapad…

… when all of a sudden there is a characteristic sound he has learnt to recognize, as if the air was being sucked out of the room, and Kylo’s head whips to his left. He already knows what – or rather who – he will find there. He half expects the connection to snap shut as it has on so many occasions in the past days but –

The bond opens to reveal Rey crouching on the ground a few metres away, with her back to Kylo.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, there will be Rey, and also Annelyse, in the next chapter. It's a lot. Kylo's in trouble. It will be intense and personal, and will remain so for many chapters to come, so stay with me!
“See, Ben, how different our intentions were. I hoped you’d turn and come back with me to the Resistance. You hoped I’d stay with you in the First Order and become your student. And don’t you see how completely unrealistic both of these plans were? Neither of us paused to consider what the other wanted. Neither of us really tried to understand the other. We only cared about our own separate agendas.”

He hasn’t tried to force it this time. The connection hummed into existence on its own. He is looking at Rey’s back; she’s crouching, busy tinkering with something he can’t see. Kylo shifts behind her, then clears his throat.

“Oh!” Rey shouts angrily and jumps to her feet. She whirls around to face him and he feels she is going to snap the connection shut –

“Please, don’t! Let us talk, Rey! Please.”

The magical word she had some difficulty ignoring in the throne room has an effect on her. She hesitates. Kylo notices the two parts of the broken lightsaber in her hands; she must have been trying – unsuccessfully – to repair it.

“We have nothing to talk about, Ben.”

“Oh the contrary. Don’t you think we owe at least this to each other?”

She shakes her head.

“I don’t owe you anything. Especially not since you tried to kill me and everyone I care about at Crait. You almost succeeded, too. We are down to thirty people now. Well done. Are you coming to finish the job?”

“No. Haven’t you seen the news?”

She is silent. Too resentful to admit he may have done something right?

“Poe thinks it’s a trap. Once we come to the peace talks, we will be imprisoned and killed.”

“And what do you think, Rey?” he asks. “Do you not believe me?”

“I don’t know what to believe.”

“I think my mother will believe me. She’ll agree to come to the peace talks.”

“Yeah. Maybe. You know you broke her heart, don’t you, Ben? You wanted to kill her on Crait with everyone else, and now you’re just expecting her to trust you again? What makes you even
think she wants to see you?’”

“Well,” Kylo starts uneasily, “I didn’t expect a ‘thank you’, but I did hope for less hostility after the announcement of the ceasefire. I can’t change the past anymore. But at least I’m trying to end this madness and limit the damage.”

“Limit the damage? Wake up. Even if the war ends right now, you can’t make amends anymore. Too many people have died.”

“What happened to ‘it’s not too late’?” he snaps, thinking back to the moment she said those words to him and offered her help.

“Crait happened. It is too late now.”

“Will you at least consider coming to the peace talks?”

“I will discuss this with Poe and your mother. But I won’t be coming personally.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t. We shouldn’t see each other.”

“We shouldn’t or you don’t want to?”

“I don’t want to. And I don’t want to start wanting it again.”

“Will you deny,” he says, “that we have had something special? A connection, a… feeling? Remember the visions we both saw when we touched hands. Let me show you mine.”

“No, I don’t want to see it. My vision didn’t come to pass and neither will yours.”

“I offered you the galaxy,” Kylo states. “Not to continue old mistakes but to build something new. Together. To find a middle ground between what you want and what I want. And you didn’t even stay to hear what it could be. So for you, there’s no compromise possible? It’s either me going back to the Resistance with you or it’s nothing.”

“I never wanted the bloody galaxy,” Rey explodes. “I don’t even know what my political views are! I only wanted Ben Solo to turn back to Light.”

“I’m so fed up with this bullshit!” Kylo shouts in his turn. “Turn to Light, turn to Darkness, all these fucking labels! There is one Force, contrary to what this old fool my uncle told you. I am both Ben Solo and Kylo Ren, whether you want it or not. You can’t cut me in half and still have me. Between light and darkness, I can’t get rid of one and keep the other. And it’s not just the Force that dictates what we do. We have our convictions, our personal stories.”

“All right, so I can’t accept your convictions. I didn’t want to be part of your empire and your murderous spree. You can’t seriously reproach me for turning you down when people were being picked off like flies in those transports, in front of me. They didn’t need to die. Let the past die doesn’t mean you have to kill everyone!”

Saving the Resistance fleet was her bottom line. The only thing she asked for, and it was idiotic of him not to comply with this one request. Once he refused, of course she wouldn’t even bother to consider accepting his offer. Was it really so important to kill his mother’s bunch of misfits fighting for a lost cause? What madness possessed him to follow them to Crait to finish them off? It was Rey he followed, of course. What madness, too, to scream that he’d destroy her! He could have let them
live and she would have accepted his hand. And then they’d have figured it out from there.

But wait a second –

“Yes,” he admits. “You’re right. But perhaps you could have given us a chance to discuss this. You didn’t need to run away so fast.”

“People were getting killed!”

“And? Did they live because you ran away?!”

She is silent at this but shakes her head wearily.

“I know it was wrong,” Kylo says. “And I know it’s not the only thing I’ve done wrong. Perhaps you’re right and there have been too many wrongs to salvage anything now. Maybe. But one thing I can’t get over is that you’d pretend to be reaching for my hand, only to reach for the sword. I trusted you and you betrayed me! It felt like my uncle standing over me with the lightsaber all over again!”

Rey is listening and watching him attentively. She frowns at his accusations, but doesn’t interrupt.

“After all you did for me, after you came on the Supremacy and risked your life, couldn’t you press your point about the fleet for a bit longer, before you grabbed a weapon? Couldn’t you try to argue with me? Couldn’t we, for once, have a conversation longer than five minutes before you decided to attack me and run away? I’d just killed my master in your defence. We’d just fought together side by side! And all you gave me was a few minutes, after which you turned tail and ran? Tell me, what would have happened if the lightsaber had come to your hand – would you have tried to murder me?

“No, I wouldn’t. And I didn’t want to. I only wanted to run, I didn’t think straight. I suppose I would still do the same thing now, but I do see how you could have been hurt by that. And it just shows how hopeless it all is. We won’t ever find a common ground.”

“Don’t you think we owe a bit more to the galaxy? To the Force? We got connected by a bond. It’s for a reason. We need to try to figure it out.”

“I’ve never even asked for the Force, Ben. I had a shitty life on Jakku but now it’s even worse. War, death, hatred. You and I, we’re not good for each other. It never ends well between us, and I don’t want any of this anymore!”

She throws the parts of her broken lightsaber on the ground and kicks them, tears in her eyes.

“I don’t want to be part of a big plan for the galaxy! I don’t want to watch people I care about get hurt and die!”

“I’m offering peace, Rey. So that nobody dies anymore. I’m doing good things now, things you’d approve of. Just now, on Dantooine, I’ve put a new governor in charge, improved the conditions for the locals… Won’t you just give it a chance, won’t you help me, now that we’re so close to the end of the war?”

He knows he’s begging again, just like in the throne room, and it’s so sad, because it’s not nice to have to beg for love, and also because he already feels her answer will be the same as last time.

“No, Ben. It’s good that you’re changing and perhaps with time you will make up for what you’ve done, so at least there will be some point to all this suffering, but for you and I there’s no return, not after Crait. Such pointless cruelty, such utter indifference to other people’s life and death… and your own mother, too! Whatever my feelings used to be, I can’t have anything to do with you anymore.
And I will definitely not rule the galaxy by your side.”

“Whatever your feelings used to be,” Kylo repeats bitterly, “they were not strong enough for you to even accept to talk to me in the last week. I had to sneak up on you in a moment of distraction. I understand you’re mad, but…”

“I’m not mad,” Rey interrupts. “I’m devastated. I want to be away from all this, and from you. It’s good that the war is over. I can perhaps have a normal life, somewhere. Keep in touch with the few friends I have made that are still alive. Not hide with them in a bunker and shiver with cold!”

“You’re on Hoth?”

She glares at him.

“And what are you going to do? Send your fleet to destroy us?”

“No. Haven’t you understood anything I’ve just said? You’re free. You can go wherever you want now. But I hoped you’d come to me, or that we could meet somewhere and talk.”

“I’ll never come to you again.”

She says that in resentment, defensively, and probably doesn’t really mean it. Not completely, at least. The wounded look in her eyes tells him as much. If he insisted, if he tugged at their bond every day as he has done so far, she would refuse him ten times, one hundred times, but in the end she would accept to talk to him again. Maybe. Then she might accept another time, after many new attempts. He could offer her help, for example in building a new lightsaber (though does she need one now that the war is over?), he could show her how to meditate. She would probably allow it from time to time. Her trust towards him could slowly grow. Maybe her resentment would abate. And then, gradually, perhaps they could rekindle their feelings for each other? It would take months, or more, but it is still possible. Not certain, but possible.

But he doesn’t want it to be like this. Not anymore. If they were both willing to work on it, he’d be ready to spend months, and more, rebuilding trust and mending their broken hearts. After all that happened, time is necessary. But not if he is the only one to reach out and she keeps pushing him away. Not if he has to hope for days and weeks, waiting for this one time when she graciously lets him spend a few minutes in her company. He has felt weak and vulnerable since he got ill, and he truly can’t find it in himself to chase after someone who repeatedly rejects him, even if that person has reasons to do so. It hurts too much. He has no strength for it now.

“Why did you even take me to Snoke, Ben?” Rey interrupts his train of thoughts and the silence between them. She’s frowning again. “What were you thinking? Were you testing me? Did you hope I’d get rid of him for you?”

“No!” Kylo says, horrified she could even think that. But what was he thinking, indeed? “I couldn’t have possibly hidden your arrival from him. He would have known, and he would have found you. I had no choice. I didn’t know what was going to happen…”

“You hoped he would convince me to join the First Order and become his apprentice, like you,” she smiles darkly, sullenly.

No. Definitely not.

“Perhaps I hoped he would allow you to stay as my apprentice.”

She laughs now but there’s no derision in it. She’s not mocking his stupid plan of keeping her to
himself, of becoming her teacher. Mockery isn’t like Rey. No, her laugh is bitter and sad, but not malicious.

“See, Ben, how different our intentions were. I hoped you’d turn and come back with me to the Resistance. You hoped I’d stay with you in the First Order and become your student. And don’t you see how completely unrealistic both of these plans were? Neither of us paused to consider what the other wanted. Neither of us really tried to understand the other. We only cared about our own separate agendas.”

“We know better now. It could be different,” he insists, but it’s mostly for the sake of being able to say he’s tried everything possible. He doesn’t really believe anymore that she could be convinced.

She shakes her head in silence.

“I’ve fallen ill,” Kylo says after a long moment, during which she doesn’t even look at him. It works; Rey’s eyes shoot to him again.

“I’ve lost appetite for fighting, Rey. I’ve had tough time too in the last weeks. Years, in fact. Now that Snoke is gone and I can breathe, I need to look after myself a bit. I hoped once the war was over, you and I could make peace, or at least agree we will give it a chance and work on it. But it doesn’t look like you want the same thing.”

He waits for her to ask about his health, to admit she wants peace between them too, to soften her stance, but she doesn’t do any of these things.

“I won’t be chasing after you if you don’t want me. It’s too painful.”

Rey glances at him and, for a second, she looks very scared. But even this is not a compliment to him; she is simply afraid to be alone. And Kylo needs more than that.

“So I guess it’s a goodbye?” she asks.

“It’s not my choice. But I can’t force you, and I won’t beg anymore.”

They look at each other and finally she starts fading. He knows she can feel the connection dissolve just like he does, so if she changes her mind, if she wants to add anything, if she wants to ask him to come back and talk again another day, she can still say it in this last moment.

But she doesn’t.

Kylo stands there after she’s gone, waiting for her to regret her rashness and re-establish the connection. But minutes pass and he’s alone. He can’t always wait for another miracle. She could contact him at any time, if she wanted to. Yet somehow he doesn’t expect she will.

He’s stunned. At first sight, it doesn’t seem like Rey. So unforgiving, so… hostile. This isn’t the same person who flew to the Supremacy to save him, who touched him across the galaxy, who told him he was not alone and it wasn’t too late. But Rey is also the person who bared her teeth at him in the snow on Starkiller, who shot him with a blaster during their first bond connection, and later, even after they grew closer, still left him lying unconscious on a damaged and burning ship. There is darkness in her. More importantly, she is impulsive. She makes hasty judgments, acts on the spur of the moment. She makes friends and enemies in an instant. He likes this spontaneity in her. But in this case it doesn’t help him.

She is very young. Kylo called Arin a child, and Arin is just one or two years younger than Rey. It’s the Force and a life of survival against all odds that make Rey seem older than she is. In reality, she’s
too young to have come out of the events of the last weeks unscathed. It was too much for her. He understands that. She discovered the Force only a few weeks ago, too – he can’t expect her to tie her whole life to it, like he has tied his. And even for him, it turned out to be too much. It made him physically ill.

He pushes away the thought that she might be right and it’s too late for redemption and forgiveness, that he has too much blood on his hands, because this thought hurts too much. If he accepts this as true, he can just run his lightsaber through his own heart and end it. He chooses to think that Rey is wrong. She must be.

Letting go of Rey is not easy, even though he has only known her for a few weeks. But what is really difficult is to let go of the dreams and plans he has made in relation to her. Of the vision of the two of them balancing the Force together. Of the hope that he won’t have to run the First Order and the galaxy alone. Dark and Light, perfectly complementary. It made so much sense. How can it not be happening?

The conversation has completely unsettled him. It’s late now, he feels exhausted after the day on Dantooine, fighting his corrupt officials, repairing all the wrongs of the galaxy, and now arguing with Rey. He goes to bed but, as it frequently happens, the sleep eludes him.

Lying in his black cold sheets, Kylo tosses and turns. Rey has washed her hands off of him. His mother hasn’t even bothered to get in touch after his announcement. And, as it turned out when he finally checked his datapad before going to bed, Annelyse hasn’t replied to his message. Nobody cares about him. Nobody will ever forgive him, no matter what he does from now on. Snoke is dead, Kylo is his own man, he has finally made some good choices, and yet it hurts as much as before, and nobody wants him, just like before. So let it all burn; why even bother to try?

He would get up, get his lightsaber and lay the room in smoking ruins, but he doesn’t have the strength to do it after this taxing day. So he stays in bed and broods.

Two days ago, he felt better than he had in a very long time because of a stranger’s touch, and that touch was only medical. Is he so desperate that as little as that was enough to make him happy? Yet, when Annelyse said goodbye to him, she wasn’t a stranger anymore, and what she had done for him wasn’t just a medical act. There was a hint of intimacy, a certain easy familiarity that usually comes with a much longer acquaintance. Something happened between them that was related to his health condition but not limited to it. She surely doesn’t stroke every patient’s hair so affectionately? She doesn’t cradle every patient in her arms during a panic attack? She was kind to him; she treated his scars, which he didn’t even ask for. She was kind. She asked about his past and didn’t turn away from him when he told her the truth, she was sitting next to him on his bed and didn’t run away. She saw more than a monster, or rather she didn’t pay attention to the monster – she looked beyond that. Unlike Rey just now, and this hurts, because Rey should know better than anyone that he isn’t only a monster.

And yet, after this promising beginning, now Annelyse, like Rey, isn’t answering him anymore. She hasn’t replied since last night. Perhaps she has confided in someone, and that person – a friend, her mother, her father? – advised her against replying to Kylo Ren and maintaining any kind of friendly relationship with him, because he was evil, insane and dangerous.

Kylo curls into himself under the duvet. His father’s death. Rey’s coldness. His own murderous madness. His injuries. Snoke’s lightning on his battered body, after which Kylo had to scrap himself off the floor. The confrontation with his uncle. Chewbacca’s shot. Bleeding into the snow with his face split open, left to die. His mother’s silence. Panic attacks. The burden of his guilt, the depth of his sadness, the pain of his loneliness.
The hyperdrive of the *Finalizer* hums quietly, blue streaks of light stretching outside the viewport. He could get up and go for a walk – he likes to walk on the ship at night, it’s quiet and empty, and it soothes him. But tonight he stays in bed because he’s afraid he might suffer one of his attacks again, now that he feels so rotten. It has come to this; his life is so miserable that he is afraid to get out of bed.

All of a sudden, his datapad lights up with a message, and when he takes it from his bedside shelf, he sees her name.

“Good morning Kylo, it’s almost midday here and I have just come back from a night shift at the hospital. I watched your announcement on the holonet yesterday at work, we all gathered in the hospital’s main conference room for that. Some people were cheering, some were crying. I wish you were there to see it. What an amazing day that was.”

Before he has a chance to respond – he takes his time, he is so surprised he savours every word she has written – he has another incoming message:

“Did it have anything to do with your illness?”

“I think so,” he replies.

“So the illness has done some good in the end.”

She is typing again.

“How are you feeling?”

“Still a bit out of sorts but it will pass. Trying to sleep.”

“A head massage would help, I’m sure.”

This is like honey on his aching heart and it seems so generous of her that Kylo dares to push his luck:

“Or an embrace? You seem to have found plenty of ways to make me relax.”

It may be a bold line but it’s true. On the first day, he literally passed out when she started massaging his scalp, and the next morning he couldn’t settle and get over his panic attack until she put her arms around him.

“I’m glad if I helped you feel better.”

He is still wondering what the best answer to this would be and whether she actually meant her help was strictly professional, when she adds:

“I liked the time I spent with you. You are nothing like I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

“Someone dangerous. Angry and explosive. Someone who would be cold and barely polite in the best case, but might as well slice me in two with his lightsaber before asking any questions.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. It was stupid.”
It wasn’t, actually. If only she knew. Though he hasn’t ever harmed a doctor looking after him.

“So you’ve changed your mind?”

“Yes. I was very far off. Even the best-case scenario didn’t come anywhere near a peace announcement made just after I left your ship.”

She types again.

“You should sleep now, Kylo. I see from the time code on your messages that it’s late wherever you are.”

She calls him by his name. That must be a good sign. She wouldn’t use his name spontaneously, not even after he invited her to do so, if she didn’t feel at ease with him.

“I’m near Dantooine. I had business to settle here.”

“I hope you have listened to my recommendations and haven’t done too much.”

Well… yes, he did follow her recommendations. He didn’t kill anyone and kept his calm. In relative terms, at least. Throwing Pryce against the wall a few times doesn’t really count.

“I was careful. Thank you for asking.”

“Goodnight then. It was nice talking to you. Until next time?”

These are the most amazing words he’s ever heard, or, rather, read. She liked talking to him. She wants a next time. He is allowed to contact her again.

“Goodnight. Write again, whenever you want,” he types and for a moment he feels a little pathetic, too eager. She will surely notice his desperation. But this is Snoke’s influence all over again: making Kylo ashamed for enjoying anything, making him feel guilty about it as if it was a weakness to be eradicated.

So now, just for a few minutes, before he falls asleep, Kylo allows himself to feel good.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your kudos and subscriptions, I hope you like the story so far, and please don’t hesitate to leave me a comment to tell me what you think. If you like it here, I think you would also enjoy my other story, Star Wars: Enough to Hope, which also features Kylo Ren and an OFC, updated weekly!
The family ties

Chapter Summary

“I’m done caring about people I have to chase after,” Kylo cuts her off sharply. “Maybe I’d like to have someone who would be willing to come after me, too. I don’t feel like always crawling in the dirt and apologising for how unworthy I have been. I won’t be begging anyone to love me.” Leia watches him with great interest. “Maybe you are right, Ben.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kylo spends the early hours of the next morning in his training room. Since the Knights arrived on the Finalizer, he’s trained with them every morning but today he feels like being alone and chooses to meditate instead of going through his usual combat programme. However, he has promised Bajeera he’ll pass by to see Arin’s first training session this afternoon. He doubts it will be anything combat-related; probably Bajeera will start with control exercises and some theory on the Force and the history of the Jedi and the Sith.

His meditation is interrupted by the sound of the door opening. Kylo snarls; he cannot bear to be disturbed during his training, not unless there’s a war-related emergency. Now that peace is in the making, he can’t think of anything that could justify ruining his morning.

Hux marches into the room.

“Supreme Leader,” he says, visibly alarmed, before Kylo has the time to tell him off. “You must immediately come to the bridge. We have received a holoconference request.”

“From whom?”

“From the Resistance.”

Apparently General Organa asked for the conversation to be private. So Kylo takes the call in a small conference room adjacent to the bridge area, alone. He enters the room and waits.

Then the comm system lights up and his mother’s hologram appears.

No matter how much he has tried to prepare himself for this moment – which he always knew would arrive – he finds himself unable to control his reaction. He gasps and knows instantly the emotion must be visible on his face.

Leia smiles sadly.

“Have I aged that much?”

Yes, she has.
Kylo’s silent, waiting for her to say something about him – anything – as the last time she saw him he was a child, and now he is a man. She must have seen him on the holonet in the last days, since he stopped wearing his mask. She should be feeling emotional, just like he does, now that she’s looking at his face. Right? Why isn’t she saying anything then?

Or maybe she doesn’t like the way he looks. Even this, she doesn’t like about him.

Never mind all that. She hasn’t ever found him adequate. He doesn’t need his mother, whom we hasn’t seen for years and who is formally still his enemy, to pay him compliments about his looks.

“Mother,” he says stiffly. Despite everything, he’s decided against addressing her as “General Organa”. It would be pretentious and ridiculous.

“Ben, I admit I am surprised by your offer of peace talks. I didn’t expect things would evolve that way after Crait. Why? Why now?”

Straight to the point, no small talk, no sentimental chit chat, even though their last conversation was years ago. A politician in her never rests. And why is everyone asking him about his reasons for wanting to end the war, as if it wasn’t obvious?

“Aren’t you fed up with war?”

“Of course I am. But I won’t make peace at any cost.”

“Did you think I was offering peace talks just to propose an agreement that I know in advance you won’t accept?”

“So what are you proposing?”

“This is why it’s called peace talks, mother. I’m not coming with a ready proposal. We will talk. And try to find a way.”

Leia is quiet. She stares at him, wide-eyed.

“Rey told me you were ill…”

“I was. I am. It’s nothing. It’s not the main reason, anyway.”

“So what is?”

“Haven’t you noticed the biggest change in the galaxy? Snoke is dead. I am free. I can start doing things differently.”

“Rey told me that too. This is what she thought the reason was.”

“Good.”

So Rey must have told Leia about the Force bond. Otherwise Rey wouldn’t have been able to explain how she communicated with Kylo.

“I thought for a moment…” Leia starts but falls silent again.

“What?”

“After I heard you killed Snoke in her defence, I thought there might be something between you and Rey.”
So Rey told her that, too. This way, the mention of the change of leadership within the Order, which Kylo inserted in his announcement to suggest Snoke’s death had been an internal job, didn’t come as a surprise to Leia. She already knew.

“I thought so too.”

“Really?” Leia asks, narrowing her eyes. “So when you asked her to join you, you meant it? You really meant to rule together, to find a middle ground?”

Kylo’s taken aback. He truly didn’t expect Rey to be so transparent with his mother, and he doesn’t like it. Telling Leia about the Force bond and about Snoke’s death is one thing, but his unfortunate proposal and Rey’s flat rejection of him should have stayed between the two of them. It was private. Not to be discussed with the Resistance, and definitely not with his mother.

So the Resistance also knows that he behaved as he did on Crait because he had been turned down and his pride was hurt. He hates it that they know. It’s mortifying to think how they must have all mocked him. Not Leia, perhaps, but the others. The traitor and Dameron, for example.

Still, he would make himself even more ridiculous by trying to deny it now.

“Of course I meant it. What else did you think I could have meant?”

“I don’t know. I was afraid you needed her help to get rid of Snoke and his guards, and then you wanted to trick her into something she wouldn’t sign up for.”

Kylo shakes his head in dismay. His mother has always had it all wrong about him, always. For a moment he considers just giving her a few options of dates and places for the peace talks and ending this conversation now before she hurts him even more, though previously he didn’t even think she could still hurt him. But he’s so angry now he can’t stop talking.

“I asked her to join me in the heat of the moment. It was stupid. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s often best to follow your heart.”

“Well, I’ve had a change of heart. It doesn’t matter anyway because she turned me down then and doesn’t want to speak to me anymore now, so it’s crystal clear. And it’s better like this.”

“Perhaps once she sees that you’re doing good things, she will change her mind?” Leia suggests in a very down-to-earth manner. What makes her think he wants relationship advice from her? “She seems very hurt for the time being. That means she’s not indifferent.”

“I’m done caring about people I have to chase after,” Kylo cuts her off sharply. “Maybe I’d like to have someone who would be willing to come after me, too. I don’t feel like always crawling in the dirt and apologising for how unworthy I have been. I won’t be begging anyone to love me.”

Leia watches him with great interest.

“Maybe you are right, Ben.”

He’s silent, but in a very sullen way, so there’s a lot of tension in the room.

“It’s not just about Rey, is it?” Leia says, slightly less composed now.

“What do you think, mother?” Kylo asks drily. “Don’t you have anything to reproach yourself for?”

“Don’t you?”
“Oh, hell, I do. I burnt Luke’s academy and killed everyone. I murdered people who didn’t deserve to die. I murdered my father who was a bad father but not bad enough to die for it. I lusted for blood and vengeance, and didn’t give a damn about anyone. I would have killed all your people on Crait if I had had my way. I am not denying any of it. What about you? Nothing to feel guilty about?”

“What about me?” Leia raises her voice now. She is clearly disturbed by his mention of his father.

“Were you a good mother to me? You never had time. And you never made my father make time for me. You sent me off to your brother, who tried to murder me in my sleep! You never tried to protect me from Snoke who was in my head since I was a child, and yet you knew the Force, it’s not like you had no idea! Your brother could have guessed, too, if any of you ever gave a damn about me! And maybe if you all had ever shown the slightest interest in me, I wouldn’t have spent years cowering before Snoke like a pathetic fool, ready to do anything for a few pitiful words of praise that I had never got from my family!”

He’s only warming up, and Leia looks absolutely grief-stricken. She doesn’t say a word.

“And what about your methods and your own warmongering? You have always lived by the sword. Your stupid Rebellions, always the same: resist, stir trouble, not listen to anyone’s ideas apart from your own antiquated Republic bullshit, be the brave heroine of the galaxy, up in arms against bad guys, on the battlefield and in the Senate… and the truth is, you’ve never achieved anything. Your ridiculous Republic has failed miserably, twice! And yet you feel so superior to me, even now when I’m really trying to build something you never have, something the galaxy actually needs! How many people has your precious Resistance killed? Aren’t the numbers of our victims similar? So why is it that you are the good guys and we’re the bad guys, why is it always black and white with you, light and darkness, why do you always act as if you had the high moral ground, and treat me as if I was the biggest piece of shit in the galaxy…”

Leia’s hologram smashes her fist into something invisible in front of her, probably a table.

“You have the nerve to say that!” she shouts. “You hail from the regime responsible for Hosnia, and you talk about comparing the numbers of victims!”

“I refuse to be held responsible for Hosnia! I opposed that attack! If I had been the Supreme Leader then, I would have never authorized it!”

“And how about we talk about your father?!”

“I don’t want to talk about my father!” Kylo yells. “Snoke manipulated me into doing it! I never wanted to, I’d give anything to change it but I can’t!”

His voice breaks, and Leia is crying. But he’s not done, he’s far from being done. There is bile in his throat and he feels like vomiting all his resentment onto her.

“He asked me to come home. He said ‘we miss you’. But it was too late! For years I wanted him to say something like that, and he never did before that day, not once in his life!”

He inhales sharply and falls silent. There’s no point. It was obvious this conversation would go like this, and yet he hoped it wouldn’t. No use. There’s just further hurt awaiting him down this road. Let the past die. Let her just sign the bloody peace agreement and get the hell out of his life for ever.

“It’s never your fault. Nothing is. It’s all mine, it seems,” Leia spits at him through her tears. “You made your choices, Ben. I didn’t make them for you, Han didn’t, Luke didn’t, not even Snoke.”

“I’ll send you several suggestions of dates and places for the peace talks,” he says after a long
moment of heavy silence, glaring at her. “On neutral territory, naturally.”

And just like that, she recovers from her little crying fit. Was it even real? Always the negotiator,
never the mother he used to need. Well, at least now he doesn’t need her any more.

“I’ll be coming with several people, including Commander Dameron,” Leia says in a small voice.
Kylo bites his lip. Of course she will bring Dameron. Golden boy Poe Dameron, who is all that Han
Solo used to be, and all Han Solo would have wanted his own son to become: charming, witty,
cheerful, smooth. All that Kylo isn’t. Now it looks like Dameron is also all Leia Organa wants in a
son because she’s grooming him to be her successor. To take over as the leader of her terrorist
movement. A noble and brave young man, who is impulsive and passionate about his beliefs – like
Kylo – but also level-headed when he needs to be, much more so than Kylo.

Anyway, soon Leia – and then Dameron – will be leaders of nothing at all, because there will be no
more Resistance, thanks to the peace agreement that Kylo has prepared. Dameron will be a man
without a purpose. And it’s Kylo who will triumph as a leader and politician. But it won’t be to
impress his mother. He gave up on that a long time ago. It’s to show her how wrong she was about
him. It’s to make her feel the pain he is feeling every day.

They say a formal and cold goodbye and he leaves the conference room.

Hux is waiting outside, which in Kylo’s current mood greatly irritates him. He doesn’t say a word,
bypasses Hux and strides down the corridor, towards his quarters.

Hux follows.

“So, has she accepted?” he asks tactfully.

“She has. Give me some suggestions of dates and places, on neutral ground. I want to send her a
proposal as soon as possible and have it done and over with. She’ll come with a delegation of her
idiots, so think who should go from our side so that it’s useful but not too antagonizing.”

Hux doesn’t prod any further but continues to walk by Kylo’s side.

To change the subject, Kylo feels like confronting Hux about something he saw this morning on the
way to his training room, but he hesitates. It might not be wise to reveal that card now and ask the
question to Hux directly. He decides to talk about it to Bajeera first. But he senses that Hux’s
conciliatory manner has something to do with it.

“When and where are we seeing the Grand Marshals tomorrow?” Kylo decides on a different topic.
On Dantooine, he had asked Hux to organize the meeting in order to clarify how much the other
Grand Marshals knew about Snoke’s abominable treatment of First Order colonies and conquered
worlds.

“I was just going to tell you,” Hux replies. “It doesn’t seem possible to gather them all on such a
short notice. Grand Marshal Riinah has his daughter’s wedding tomorrow night on Corellia. He
requested for the meeting to be postponed to the morning of the next day. The two others are far
from the Core and are just now travelling back, so a short delay will also suit them. It’s just one day
later than you ordered. Would you agree to that?”

Kylo extends his Force awareness and brushes against Hux’s mind but detects no falsehood. This,
however, doesn’t mean anything; the Grand Marshals might be plotting unbeknownst to Hux. Is it
really because of the wedding, or do they need an additional day to coordinate their defence against
Kylo? There’s no telling.
“So are we meeting them in the Core?”

“Yes, I propose we stay in Coruscant orbit. We’ll get there tomorrow, early afternoon. Then the meeting can take place in the morning of the following day. And then we will proceed to our next destination, as per your orders.”

After Dantooine, he told Hux to set course for Scarif, another First Order world from which he has received many reports of unrest among the local population. This time the reports came from intelligence officers, whom Hux had started dispatching around the galaxy after Crait, and not from the First Order governor. The silence of the governor might mean he’s even more abusive and scheming than Pryce. So they will head to Scarif to see for themselves, but indeed it would be unreasonable to make all the Grand Marshals come to meet Kylo in that remote location, rather than meet at the Core first and proceed to Scarif later.

Most probably he will discover the First Order abuses its power on many worlds. No matter; he will go from one place to another and set things right. It might not be as easy as on Dantooine, because by now the corrupt officials will have been alerted and will try to hide things, knowing Kylo might pay them a visit. For the Supreme Leader that can read minds, though, that is not an insurmountable obstacle. Plus, perhaps at least some of them, hearing of Pryce’s fate, might mend their ways before Kylo even gets to them.

Kylo also hopes the news of these operations will spread, increase his popularity and encourage new worlds to join the First Order willingly. Hux seems very sceptical about this theory. He has always believed in conquering and ruling by fear rather than in voluntary measures or a galactic alliance of equals under the First Order’s leadership. But he doesn’t argue too much. He’s still too happy about his new rank. Also, as Kylo realised after Dantooine, Hux might not mind if the First Order have the reputation for being cruel, but he won’t put up with lousy, undisciplined, and weak. And above all, he resents things happening out of his control. So he is now very eager to hear what the Grand Marshals have to say and to watch Kylo bash them. Hux is also anxious to see what they will find on Scarif. Should the situation be the same as on Dantooine, Kylo feels he might not even need to whip his lightsaber out. Hux will do the punishing for him.

But coming back to more personal considerations, this small delay of one day in meeting the Grand Marshals means the Finalizer will be close to Coruscant tomorrow, with nothing to do for the day. Kylo almost stops in his tracks, realizing the possibilities.

“Fine. Tell them I agree. Did you feel any resistance from their side to the idea of a meeting? Any nervousness, any strange questions?”

“On the contrary. It was a bit weird because none of them seemed surprised.”

“Yes, that’s weird. Looks like it won’t be a pleasant meeting.”

“I took the liberty to speak separately to the commanding officers of the ships the three Grand Marshals are on at the moment,” Hux says. “Just to make sure where the commanders’ loyalties lie, in case of a discord between the Grand Marshals and us.”

“And?” Kylo asks, taking a mental note of the fact that Hux has just said “us”, clearly suggesting he and Kylo are on the same team.

“It went well. But there’s no knowing if they’re not playing a double game.”

“Are you implying someone might be preparing a coup?” Kylo says, coming to a halt and turning to his side to face Hux.
Hux shrugs his shoulders.

“No questions asked after what you did on Dantooine? No questions asked about the meeting’s subject? Either they’re completely innocent and the mystery goes deeper, or they’re plotting. In any case, I’m sure they’re communicating with one another. The commander of the Vanguard, where Grand-Marshal Riinah was in the last weeks before going back to Corellia for the wedding, says Riinah has been in lots of holoconferences since Crait. And it wasn’t with you or me.”

Kylo congratulates himself on the promotion he gave Hux. That is to say, unless Hux plays a double – triple? – game too and will join the coup, or is the one orchestrating it. He’d have to search Hux’s mind very thoroughly to answer that question and that would not be a wise thing to do just now, given Hux’s current good disposition towards Kylo. Time will tell. Also, Kylo must talk to Bajeera about what he saw this morning, to get a better idea of what Hux’ intentions might be.

But that will be in a few hours. He’s just talked to his mother, which turned into another disaster after yesterday’s conversation with Rey, all his Grand Marshals might well be conspiring to depose him, and he’s had it for one day, even though it’s barely morning. His head is spinning and there are dark spots in his vision, like a few days ago just before he fainted. He dismisses Hux, drags himself to his quarters, feeling exhausted, and once he enters, he waits for the door to shut before his legs give in under him. He slowly slides to the floor, his back against the door. Tremendous relief washes over him and he closes his eyes.

Still sitting on the floor by the door, he wonders how he could turn this day around. The only thing that comes to his mind is writing to Annelyse. He reaches for his datapad and starts typing.

Then he deletes what he has written and stares at the screen.

He doesn’t really know what to do. Are they close enough for him to just say hello, how are you? Shouldn’t he have a reason to contact her? Maybe, in any case, he should give her a break? They were in touch yesterday. Perhaps it’s too much to expect daily conversations, and she might be busy anyway.

But he’d like to see her. And tomorrow he’ll be in Coruscant orbit.

And just like that, he decides to talk to her instead of writing. If she isn’t interested, it will be clearer that way. He has already spent too long thinking about her, and most probably he’s the only one of the two to do so. Best to know it now.

Annelyse’s hologram materializes in front of him. She’s sitting at a desk.

“Good evening. Are you working?” Kylo asks. “I hope I’m not disturbing.”

“You aren’t. It’s good to see you.”

“Good to see you, too.”

He knows these are polite things you’re supposed to say but it feels nice. It’s been so long since anyone told him, even just out of politeness, that it was good to see him.

“I’m back to Coruscant tomorrow and I was wondering if you’d like to go to dinner,” Kylo suggests. He actually hears himself say it because the words leave his mouth before he has the time to really think about it.

“Oh,” Annelyse seems mildly surprised. “There’s another official dinner so soon? They must have
been truly impressed by the peace announcement. Thank you for the invitation, I’m very honoured, but are you sure it’s appropriate for me to be there? I’m really not part of that circle. It will be strange if I come along and mingle with politicians.”

She thinks he’s inviting her as another guest to some kind of state dinner?


She’s looking at him, wide-eyed. He smiles inwardly because it’s the first time he has managed to throw her off her balance.

“You mean like a date?”

A date is a very strange word. So strange he winces and almost regrets he has suggested it. He’s never been on a date. Not once in his life.

“A dinner. No need to label it.”

And now she looks mortified because it turns out he meant only a friendly dinner, perhaps a thank-you dinner for her medical care, and she’s jumped to conclusions. He can’t hear her thoughts via holocomm, of course, but it’s evident from her face.

“Actually, I did mean a date. But if this bothers you, we can just have dinner without calling it anything. No expectations.”

After a moment’s silence, he adds uncomfortably:

“Only if you want to. Don’t hesitate to say no just because I am who I am. I’d really hate it if you agreed only to be polite.”

“I understand,” Annelyse says. “Sorry, it’s just… you’ve really taken me by surprise. I didn’t expect it. But yes, I’d like that.”

“Oh!” he says, after a few seconds, during which she looks at him expectantly. “You would? So we shall see each other tomorrow night?”

“Yes,” she smiles. “That’s nice. I didn’t think I’d see you again so soon. Looking forward to it. Where do you want to go?”

He has absolutely no idea. His knowledge of nice places to go on a date on Coruscant or anywhere else in the galaxy is non-existent. But he’s inviting her, so he needs to plan it.

“It’s a surprise.”

“You know what? I have an idea,” she says excitedly. “Would you like to visit my hospital lab before we go to dinner? Perhaps I could show you some of my research?”

Before he has a chance to reply, she adds with hesitation:

“Actually, maybe it’s not such a good idea. It’s a strange thing to do on a date, isn’t it?”

No. It’s a great thing to do on a date. The idea of sitting in a restaurant, looking into each other’s eyes for two hours, can be daunting. Especially if you’re Kylo Ren, social skills aren’t your strength, and you’ve never once been on a date in your life. What if he can’t find enough interesting things to say to her? Somehow visiting a lab or even strolling around a park seems easier. It puts less pressure on him. If they do this first, maybe they’ll warm to each other sufficiently and then the restaurant part
won’t be so official anymore.

He’s really not good at this. He’s not a natural. You don’t go easily from mortal combat and taking over an empire to romantic dinners in public places. Is it a bad idea altogether?

Because, sooner or later, she will see through him. It’s a very attractive illusion, to pretend he can start anew and be someone else, with a person who hasn’t known him before, who doesn’t know his story well and hasn’t witnessed any of what he’s done. But is it even possible? How long will he be able to uphold this fantasy, before she discovers what’s behind the polite façade?

You are a son of darkness, you are weak, you have too much of your father’s heart in you, you are a child in a mask. A failure, a failure, a failure. You have been a disappointment to everyone, you will be a disappointment to her. You can endlessly keep trying to find new people who will like you, each time hoping they won’t realize what a monster you are, but eventually everyone does, and then they dump you, and you need to find another person again.

He’s listening to his old master’s treacherous whisper as if he was still in his head.

“Kylo?” Annelyse inquires.

“I’m sorry,” he says quickly. “I got distracted. Yes, I think it’s a great idea. I told you already I’d like very much to see your research.”

“I finish at 18 o’clock standard time tomorrow. Will you come to the hospital?”

“Yes. I’ll be waiting for you.”

Annelyse smiles.

“See you soon, Supreme Leader.”

He has a date.

One week ago he was in murderous rage on Crait. Mad with disappointment because Rey had rejected and betrayed him. Tomorrow he’s going on a date with another woman.

Seen like this, it seems wrong. Not serious. Even absurd. But then again, it makes him feel so good to think of it, and Annelyse seemed to look forward to it too, so how can it be wrong? It’s complicated.

He’s trying to process this as he walks later through the Finalizer’s corridors to see Arin’s training session. When he enters the training room, Bajeera and Arin are sitting cross-legged on the floor, facing each other, and a glass full of water is hovering in the air between them. This doesn’t seem to pose a problem to Arin, but then Bajeera signals to her it’s time to change and the glass tilts slightly to one side, the water starting to trickle down to the ground. It’s an uneven stream and Arin seems to be struggling. Suddenly the glass tilts too far downwards and empties in one go.

Control. It’s not difficult to lift rocks or even keep them in the air; what’s difficult is to reposition them without smashing everything and making a mess. The smaller or more delicate the object, the more control it will require to handle it with the Force. It’s not about power, but precision.

“Almost,” Bajeera says and smiles. They both look up now and acknowledge Kylo respectfully.

Kylo takes a wooden stick, a sort of half-staff, from the weapon rack on the wall, and hurls it at Arin.
“Ai!” she shouts and, at the last moment, bats the projectile away with her forearm. Being seated makes it more difficult; if she was on her feet, she’d just move out of the way.


He doesn’t bother to physically take another stick from the rack, he just lifts and throws it at her with the Force, and it hits her on her forehead. She winces with pain and jumps to her feet.

Another, and another. Now she tries to block them with the Force, extending her hand, but it doesn’t work, so she has to duck to avoid being hit.

“Again,” says Kylo.

No success. When he’s out of sticks, Kylo lifts all those lying around on the floor with the Force and lets them hover in the air for a few seconds. The girl’s head whips around, as she’s trying to assess how many weapons are aimed at her. Before she has a good look, Kylo hurls them at her, a few at a time, and maintains the others in the air, poised for the strike. Arin gets hit multiple times, all over her body; she turns round and round, extends her arms, but she gets distracted by successive blows and doesn’t manage to block a single one.

Until she does.

She freezes one of the sticks in the air two metres away from her face. She continues getting hit by the others but doesn’t budge. Then she reaches out with her other hand and stops another one.

Kylo waves his hand and the rest of them drop to the floor.

“Well done for the first time,” he says. “I’ll leave the theory part to you, Bajeera.”

Arin is panting, standing in the middle of the room, her hands still outstretched. Then she waves them and when the two sticks fall on the floor, she finally drops her arms and lets out a very long breath. She rubs her head and sides in a few places where she got hit, but she grins, happy and proud.

“Thank you, master,” she says to Kylo and bows.

Something painful stirs in his heart at this and he doesn’t understand why. His Knights also bow to him and call him master. He also trains with them. But this is somehow different. He’s never been a teacher of an untrained Force-sensitive before. This is what he wanted to be to Rey.

“Please visit our training sessions sometime again, master,” Bajeera asks. “To assess Arin’s progress.”

He can only nod, a strange knot in his throat, and he’s about to leave the room, when she adds:

“Actually, I think we’ve finished here. Arin, you can change and go back to your quarters. We’ll have another small session tonight, for meditation. Kylo, may I walk back with you?”

Bajeera seems excited and cheerful when the two of them walk down the corridor.

“Arin knows some things already. But what’s best in her is this enthusiasm, this hunger for learning. You can hit her with wooden sticks on the head and she’ll still thank you. I bet she’ll be throwing sticks and trying to stop them in mid-air for the rest of the day.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that. And I’m glad you’re happy.”
“So, I hear you’ve talked to your mother?”

“Yes. And to Rey, too. Neither went well.”

They enter a small leisure bay where he knows the Knights like to meet, and they sit on two grey leather sofas in the corner, opposite each other. Kylo quickly summarizes the two conversations he’s had, with Rey the day before and with his mother this morning.

“Well,” Bajeera says slowly after he finishes his account. “I suppose the good thing is, you finally talked to Rey. You’ve had your closure. This is what you wanted.”

“At least it’s clear.”

“And your mother agrees to come to the peace talks. That’s another good thing.”

“That’s right. But other than that, no reason to celebrate, as you can see.”

“You need to take it one step at a time. With your mother, I’m sure you’ll have many opportunities to have a longer, calmer conversation on the margins of the peace talks. You’ll meet in person. It will be different. You needed to shout some things to each other, there’s a lot of pain and anger on both sides. But once all this is out, things will start to improve between you. I’m sure of it. Just don’t be too proud to admit you want it.”

He is silent, deep in thought, and she reaches out and pats his hand carefully.

“Things will get better, Kylo. The good work in the galaxy will absorb you completely for the time being. And then, one day perhaps you’ll meet someone… who will be more willing to accept you than Rey was.”

“Actually,” Kylo says slowly, “I’m having dinner with someone tomorrow night.”

Bajeera shoots him a glance, incredulous.

“Who?”

“The doctor who came here from Coruscant a few days ago.”

Bajeera bursts out laughing.

“Kylo Ren! You have a date?! I see you have pulled yourself together rather quickly! And here I am trying to give you a pep talk. You don’t even need my advice!”

“You think it’s too early? Am I throwing myself at a first woman who comes my way because I want to forget Rey?”

Bajeera shakes her head and sighs.

“You humans are like this. Always looking for love far away while it might be very close. Always chasing after what’s difficult to get and dismissing what’s right under your nose. You don’t need to fight for everything in your life with claws and teeth, you know? Sometimes life gives you a gift. Just enjoy it.”

Kylo smiles.

“I guess you’re speaking from experience?”
She shoots an unsuspecting look at him.

“What do you mean?”

“You really don’t know what I mean?” Kylo asks slowly, leaning towards her from his sofa. The tall Togruta stiffens up and stares at him in silence that suddenly becomes uncomfortable.

“I saw you this morning.” Kylo says.

Bajeera remains silent and because of her red skin he can’t really tell whether she pales, but certainly her stillness – and the fact that her mental walls are up now, as he notices when he brushes against her mind – tell him he’s not wrong.

“I saw you, Bajeera.”

“What did you see?” she asks defensively.

“I was on my way to the training room. You were on my level, though your quarters are one level down, going out of the door that is not yours. You were far away, I saw you from behind a corner, so it took me some time to figure out whose door it was. And once I did, I was mad. I thought you were plotting behind my back with him… but a second later I knew it couldn’t be. Not you. Then I understood.”

“I would never betray you,” Bajeera says quietly, her eyes locked with his, and she lowers her mental walls, sending him every assurance of her honesty. Which he doesn’t even need.

“I thought humans were not your type, Bajeera,” Kylo smirks. After a few minutes of initial shock this morning, he actually found it incredibly amusing. It must be very recent anyway; they’ve known each other for ten days!

“He is a funny human,” Bajeera says, avoiding his eyes. “I… quite like the way he looks.”

“He used to be my mortal enemy. He’d have gladly slit my throat until a few days ago. I have the impression it’s different now but I’m not sure yet. What if he’s using you in some kind of game against me?”

“I have looked into his mind,” Bajeera says firmly. “He’s not plotting against you.”

“You have looked into his mind for my sake?” Kylo asks, completely taken by surprise.

“Of course. I would have never got involved with him if he was your enemy. That would be treason.”

Kylo is at a loss for words. She seems to feel it because she adds:

“And maybe the fact that he’s not your enemy anymore has something to do with me? Perhaps he has warmed to you once he realized Force-sensitives are not all mad?”

Kylo almost laughs at that. He’s enjoying this conversation; for the first time ever, he has discovered a weak point in Bajeera.

“Stars, it’s been only twice, and you have caught me already!” she says miserably. “I’m really not good at this!”

“How did you…” Kylo starts but decides against it. He still can’t wrap his head around it, it seems such an unlikely match. How did they get together? How did it all start?
“He’s really interesting to talk to,” Bajeera says. “He knows so much. And he has this dry sarcastic manner which I find really funny.”

After a moment, she adds:

“He’s a great lover, too. Who would think that?”

“Stop,” Kylo orders. “I have zero interest in learning anything of Hux’s sexual life. Do not ever mention that again.”

Bajeera laughs now and it’s a happy laugh. Her eyes are shining.

It’s the strangest turn of events. Not in a thousand years would Kylo imagine that. In fact, if he hadn’t seen her with his own eyes this morning, as she was going out of Hux’s quarters, disheveled, in yesterday’s clothes, and clearly looking around to make sure nobody spotted her, he wouldn’t believe it.

First of all, he would actually never suspect Hux of entering into any relationship, serious or not, with an alien woman. He assumed Hux secretly harboured contempt, or even disgust, for aliens as inferior races. Neither would Kylo believe Hux could be attracted to a Force-sensitive; he thought Hux hated them all. And to such a strong woman. A warrior. Isn’t Bajeera even slightly taller than Hux?

For some reason, Kylo thinks, he’d have expected Hux to be interested in submissive, meek, small and sweet-looking human females. He’d even have ventured a guess that Hux would be the type to seek the company of luxury prostitutes. Turns out Kylo isn’t a good judge of character.

In the years he’s known Hux, never once has he seen him with a woman in a personal, not work-related context. Or has Hux previously been in relationships with female officers of the First Order, without Kylo’s knowledge? Never once has Kylo heard any gossip about Hux’s private life. Not that anyone would be likely to gossip to Kylo. Has Hux ever taken any leave, gone on holiday? Kylo doesn’t know.

And wait, what about Hux’s pet rule of no fraternization among the troops?

“Don’t tell him yet that I know. I want to torment him a little about it. Maybe I’ll pretend I’m angry, remind him of the rules, and scare the shit out of him.”

“All right,” Bajeera says and smiles mischievously.

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted to write a scene or scenes between Leia and Kylo. I think this would definitely have been in the cards for episode 9 if it hadn’t been for Carrie's passing. These two simply need to talk. So I really liked writing this chapter... and Leia might be back some time later in the book. Now, coming back to the romantic plot, the date is coming in the next chapter. Tell me what you think please - all comments will be very appreciated!

Also, as usual, please do check out my main story, Star Wars: Enough to Hope. It's only two chapters away from completion and updated regularly!
Chapter Summary

He’s walking in the street, holding a woman’s hand, less than two weeks after Crait. This change might be happening too fast, and it might not work because of this. He pretends very hard to be an agreeable man, who has dinners in restaurants and strolls around with a woman on his arm. But is he that man? He represses the darkness within; he has just created a new mask, a public mask, as mysterious as the helmet he wore before. When is he himself? Who is he really?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He is waiting opposite the hospital’s main entrance, on the other side of the street. There are fewer people here, so there’s a chance he won’t be immediately recognized. He stands out anyway, a tall, broad figure, dressed in his signature black, though this time he’s wearing a normal shirt and trousers. Elegant and casual.

He has agonised over his attire for the whole day. He called his tailors and told them off for the absence of normal clothes in his wardrobe. They tactfully refrained from reminding him he had always refused normal clothes, and they made him this outfit in just a few hours. He likes it. He can even keep his hands in his pockets if he wants to, and it makes him feel less awkward.

A few minutes after 18 o’clock, Annelyse appears in the hospital’s main entrance door. She notices him and crosses the street; he follows her with his eyes all the way and shifts in nervous anticipation.

“Hello, Kylo,” she says, coming close, and she actually looks quite excited to see him. She puts her hand casually on his arm and touches her cheek to his in a greeting kiss. He isn’t a savage; he went to enough social functions with his Senator mother in his early teenage years to know how to behave, but it’s been so long since he greeted anyone in this way that it only adds to his confusion.

“You’re really here!” she says. “You’ve come.”

“Of course. Did you doubt me?”

“No, I didn’t doubt you. It’s just that the whole situation seems a bit unreal, so I half-expected it not to happen.”

He has the same impression, albeit for very different reasons. She must have dated only normal people until now, so he is out of the ordinary for her, but he hasn’t done normal things for ever, so it’s this perfectly normal date that seems unreal. They come from two very different worlds. Kylo is not sure if this is good or bad.

“I told two friends at work I was seeing the First Order’s Supreme Leader,” Annelyse confesses and laughs quietly. “Obviously, neither believed me, and when I finally managed to convince them it was true, they were in a state of shock.”

Kylo snorts.
“Is my reputation so bad nobody believes I’d come and have dinner in town like a normal person?”

“Well, when did you actually do it for the last time?”

Indeed.

Annelyse is looking him up and down, which makes him terribly self-conscious.

“I know I saw you in casual clothes when you were my patient, but it was a special situation,” she says. “I always see you on the holonet in your royal attire… so this is very different!”

Does that mean she likes it or the opposite? She didn’t expect him to show up in his tunic, cloak, gloves and all the rest, did she?

“But you still look rather royal, I must say,” she adds, smiling.

So she does like it. He’s taken by surprise by this compliment and only a few seconds later does he realize he should have used this opportunity to tell her she looks lovely.

Because she does. She’s wearing a light green dress, tied at her waist with a belt made of the same fabric. The dress is knee-length, tight at the top and slightly flaring at the bottom, with very short sleeves covering just the top of her arms, and a V-neck. Annelyse is also wearing a small green pendant on a silver chain. It’s all tasteful, and it matches her eyes beautifully. Kylo might not be in the habit of varying his style very much but he does have a distinct style of his own, his clothes are carefully chosen and of the best quality. Having grown up as a prince and a senator’s child, he also knows a good style in others when he sees it. Simple and discreet elegance like Annelyse’s is what he’s always appreciated.

But it’s too late now to reciprocate the compliment. It would look forced.

“So, Supreme Leader,” Annelyse resumes good-humouredly, “do you still feel like seeing my lab?”

“Absolutely.”

She beams at him and leads him back into the hospital building.

“I love walking along these corridors,” Annelyse says. “Some friends don’t understand. They don’t like being around ill people. But I find pleasure in the slow pace of life that accompanies disease. There’s sweetness, delicacy, fragility in it. And still, there is so much life, because these people are so desperate for it. Nobody lives as much in the present as seriously ill people. They concentrate all their forces on resisting death. You meet people here whose eyes are more intense than you ever see anywhere out of these walls.”

“Perhaps it’s similar on the battlefield,” Kylo offers. “It’s also a place of desperate fight for life and intensity of emotion.”

“Yes, it might well be,” she admits, unphased by his comparison. “But here, it makes me feel safe. I wouldn’t feel that way on the battlefield.”

Perhaps this is why he has used that analogy. For him, a battlefield is a familiar place, almost a comfort zone. Like the hospital is for her. On the battlefield, people die around him, just like they die around her in hospital, but he doesn’t expect to die, and neither does she here.

They walk across the whole ward before getting to sealed doors which she opens, pressing her palm
to a panel on the wall. The corridor ahead of them is long, white and empty.

“This is soothing,” Kylo says. “This silence and stillness. I understand why you like it here.”

“You do?” Annelyse brightens up. “Many people think it’s lonely. Well, there are other researchers
here, but essentially, I work alone, and everyone else does too. I enjoy this alone time. I need it every
day.”

“So what’s your typical day like?”

“I spend every morning in consultations at the hospital, and then every afternoon working on my
research. For me, this is perfect. I start the day from interaction with people, and then I continue with
my own project. When I get tired of the hustle and bustle of the hospital wards, it’s just this time of
the day when I can dive into the silence of my lab and replenish my energy.”

“So you replenish your energy sitting alone over a microscope. I understand that. It’s like reading.”

“Yes, I suppose. Though today I haven’t been able to concentrate very much in the lab.”

If she didn’t glance at him with a mischievous smile while saying this, he wouldn’t even understand
that she meant she couldn’t focus because she was looking forward to seeing him.

He’s really, really not good at this.

She leads him into an enormous lab full of medical appliances and technology he’s never seen.
Everything is white, there are a lot of glass surfaces. She explains the function of each machine and
device at length. It’s very interesting, the conversation flows, Annelyse’s eyes are shining. He needs
to concentrate to understand all she’s saying because it’s not exactly simple, and he asks questions to
make sure he’s got it. But she’s loving it, he can tell. She loves it that he shows interest.

Annelyse sits by the giant apparatus in the middle of the room, composed of vertical white tubes,
very wide in diameter. The tubes are fixed to the ceiling at the top. There are multiple arms with
lenses protruding from the side of the tubes and a seat beside each lens. Annelyse beckons, inviting
him to sit on her left and look into the lens there, while she’s looking into another one.

“This is human DNA,” she says. “It’s faulty. There is a mutation in one gene and because of it, the
patient suffers from heart disease.”

Kylo is watching the double helix through the lens. He’s seen images of it, but it’s the first time he’s
looking at the real thing.

“We can cut this faulty gene out. Then the cell, in most cases, will repair itself. If you do it at a very
early stage – in a one-cell embryo – the whole DNA of the organism will be repaired and the person
will not even develop the disease. But of course, it’s not so simple to detect it at the embryo stage.”

She changes the sample.

“In this one, the DNA has been repaired. You see, this gene here on the right,” she tugs at his sleeve,
to make him look into the microscope again because he was looking at her, listening to the
explanation, “has been edited.”

She keeps looking into the lens but her hand slides from his sleeve into his hand and she enlaces her
fingers with his.

“If only we could find a way for this editing to happen automatically,” she says, “rather than initiate
it on a case by case basis when the anomaly is detected. If only we could create a substance—a new protein—that could recognise the anomaly, any anomaly, and automatically activate the cell’s natural repairing function. That would be a breakthrough. It would be a much faster, cheaper, more effective way of healing.”

Kylo is listening, because it is very interesting and her passion for the subject is contagious and inspiring, but at the same time she’s holding his hand and his heart is beating fast in his chest.

“And have you made any progress in creating it?”

“Some. But there’s a long way to go. And then, it’s just the human genome here. There are many other kinds of DNA, of many other sentient beings in the galaxy. This will take much longer than I will live.”

“You’re looking for a universal medicine,” he says. “To heal every disease.”

“Every disease caused by a genetic mutation. And for a start, every congenital disease. So that the correction can happen at the embryo stage.”

“You want to heal everyone?”

She pushes the machine’s arm with the lens away and looks at him, their hands still joint.

“That would give everyone an equal start,” she says.

“Which, one could argue, is unnatural. It’s also a first step on the way to immortality. Is this what you want?”

She smiles.

“You told me you wanted to learn to heal with the Force. This sounds even more unnatural, doesn’t it? And is immortality your objective? Maybe we don’t need to think that far. Or use the word ‘unnatural’. Is bacta natural, anyway?”

He gazes at her, moved by her hope and enthusiasm, by her mention of the Force and of his intention to learn to heal. The subject of this conversation is so positive, so different from war-related topics he’s dealing with all day long.

“Maybe I could try to rival your magic by my science?” she adds, smiling.

“Speaking of healing,” he remembers suddenly, “I must thank you again. My face has healed very well as a result of your treatment.”

She lets go of his hand now, stands up and comes to his seat, her eyes focused on his scar. Kylo leans forwards so that she can examine it.

“It’s barely a thin line now,” Annelyse confirms, her fingers trailing from his eyebrow down across his cheek. “If you want it to disappear completely, you could have a surgery, but I wouldn’t recommend it. It’s always delicate and risky, this kind of surgery on the face. I’d leave it like this. But of course it depends on how you feel with it.”

“Aren’t you going to see to my other scars?” Kylo teases. He likes her in her doctor mode; she becomes serious so quickly.

“Maybe later,” she replies with a mischievous glint in her eyes, sliding her hands down his chest.
And she freezes like that.

“Did say it out loud, didn’t I?” she says slowly.

Kylo kisses her.

A second earlier he had no idea he would do it. Not here. Not at this moment. But suddenly it is all too much, this conversation, her liveliness, her reference to the Force, and now this astonishingly bold allusion to how the evening might unfold, and he just has to take his chance and press his lips to hers. He then stops to watch her reaction, decides it is favourable and kisses her again, and this time she opens her mouth to him and touches his lips with the tip of her tongue.

It is a sweet kiss. Not shy, but sweet. Her hands go to his hair and he cups her face, their bodies flush, their tongues exploring each other’s mouth, but it’s slow and tender, as if they were both surprised that it is happening. Kylo closes his eyes and lets her trail light kisses from one corner of his mouth to the other, then to his jaw. He then kisses down her neck and back up to her mouth. They both hum with pleasure and after another long kiss she sighs contentedly, leaning into him.

He holds her close, trying to calm the throbbing in his body, take things slowly, enjoy the sweetness of the moment. He feels this is what she wants, and it’s what he wants, too, but there is this impatient, possessive instinct in him that tells him to press further, to push the boundaries, to satisfy the longing of his body. She has woken this longing with her words and now it sings in him, but he knows better than to follow it. It is the time to wait, a delicious moment of anticipation, and everything is yet to happen.

“I haven’t been on a date for some time,” Annelyse whispers, looking as smitten as he is, “but last time I checked, the rule was to kiss at the end, rather than at the beginning.”

“I know that,” Kylo says, trying to fall into the same light and playful tone, “but you’ve just said that later on you are going to undress me so I thought I’d better hurry up with the kiss.”

She laughs. She actually laughs, her eyes sparkling, and presses her hands against his chest. He has somehow managed to put her in such a good mood.

Should he go for another kiss or is it too much at this stage?

He goes for another kiss and she responds eagerly, standing on her tiptoes to put her arms around his neck, and he immediately cradles her in his arms. She moans lightly into his mouth when they kiss and it is one of the most arousing and, at the same time, the sweetest things he has ever experienced. An indubitable proof of her desire for him.

“Well, ok then, let’s break the rule,” she murmurs. “But just because you’re the Supreme Leader.”

Kylo freezes for a second, then realizes this is a joke, too. She’s not really saying she’s kissing him just because he’s the Supreme Leader. But she notices his hesitation and somehow, with a sixth sense, she guesses the reason.

“I’m sorry, it was a silly thing to say” she admits. “I’m really no good at flirting, am I?”

“You are good at flirting. It’s me who’s hopeless.”

She strokes his chest affectionately.

“You are really afraid of this. It’s not the first time.”
“Afraid of what?”

“That I would do something just because of who you are. Staying in your room on your ship, going to dinner with you, and now kissing you. Why? Is it so difficult to believe that someone likes you and would like to spend time with you?”

“Maybe. Because not many people do.”

“I find you very likeable. To talk to, not just to kiss. But to kiss as well. Very kissable and attractive, actually. Anyway,” she laughs, “You surely noticed I wasn’t faking it, didn’t you?”

Kylo finds no answer to this, except that he has never found himself attractive. But he won’t tell her that for fear she might agree with him.

“Maybe you should make more effort to get closer to people?” she offers.

“It’s not so easy. I spend all day with people who work for me. You don’t work for me. If you did, I wouldn’t invite you to stay in my room in the evening, or let you hold me when I feel bad. It’s not a done thing. I don’t do that. I would be perceived as weak.”

Annelyse looks at him seriously, though her touch brings much-needed softness and gentleness into this dialogue. It reminds him she isn’t attacking him. She said she liked him.

“It’s rather sad you feel that being nice to people is a weakness, and that you need to terrify them in order to come across as a strong leader. People don’t stop respecting a leader because he’s human. No wonder you’re so lonely.”

“Who says I’m lonely?” Kylo snaps, shaken. At times, this conversation makes him feel wonderful, and then, a moment later, very uncomfortable.

“I know you are. I knew it when you asked me to stay in your room, and there was nobody else on the whole ship you’d rather call than a stranger you’d just met.”

He looks away, pained. Just in the space of a few hours, the first evening she met him, she already saw through him.

“I don’t need your pity.”

“I don’t pity you,” Annelyse replies, taking his hand and enfolding her fingers with his. “It’s not a shame to feel lonely. I am a bit lonely, too.”

“You are?” he asks, astonished, glancing at her. She must have friends, family, and colleagues at work, peers, who she can eat meals with and talk. He’s done a bit of that with Bajeera and the other Knights in the last days, but it’s so recent the deep well of his loneliness hasn’t even started to fill. And now, Bajeera has Hux…

“Everyone wants to have someone special who is more than a friend. Someone you can talk to about your research, and then kiss and go to dinner with,” she says and smiles hopefully.

It’s a longing he’s only admitted to very recently, and only to himself, nobody else. But once he has, this longing cannot be ignored any more. Not after thirty lonely years, the last six, which he spent as Snoke’s apprentice, being the loneliest of all.

He’s staring at the floor; it takes him a few moments to compose himself and look at her again, but when he does, he finds her green eyes watching him patiently.
“You’re a good kisser, by the way,” she smiles. “Has nobody told you?”

“You’re just saying this to make me feel better.”

“Yes. But it doesn’t mean it’s not true. How about you kiss me again?”

There’s nothing Kylo wants more than to kiss her again, so he doesn’t hesitate, just leans down and dives into her mouth. Annelyse slides her fingers into his hair, sending shivers down his spine.

“I know this disarms you,” she murmurs. “You like to have your hair touched. I promise not to tell your enemies. They could use it against you.”

She stops for a moment – to his great disappointment – and glances at him furtively.

“That was a joke too!” she says, looking guilty.

He laughs. She is funny, even if she’s serious. Also, she is right: he really can’t resist it when she puts her hands into his hair.

“Lovely hair by the way,” Annelyse adds. Kylo is out of his depth; lost in her kisses and compliments, lost in this conversation, lost in her, too flabbergasted to even reply. He isn’t a smooth talker, doesn’t know how to make light and playful conversation, he simply can’t think of what to say fast enough. He is afraid she’ll find him boring by the end of the evening.

She drops her arms and looks at him seriously again.

“I’m sorry if I’m being a bit… weird,” she says. “I mean this serious conversation. I promise to be lighter from now on. I’m a bit nervous.”

“I’m nervous too,” he admits, relieved. “And I know I’m behaving awkwardly.”

“No, not awkwardly. I think you are sweet.”

What? He is the scariest man in the galaxy, a cold and merciless murderer. “Sweet” doesn’t come anywhere near the area within which he operates. But he finds no good answer to that, either.

“Much as I like the idea of making out with you in my lab for the rest of the evening, perhaps we should go to the dinner now?” she suggests, half-nerd, half-shy, half-trying to hide a bright smile.

They’re holding hands as they walk back to the exit. Last time he walked holding hands with a girl was when he was in Luke’s Temple, some eight years ago. And he had to hide because it wasn’t allowed.

In fact, to think of it, now he should be hiding, too.

When they find themselves in the busy street again, he gently removes his hand from hers. She glances at him, surprised and slightly mortified, but doesn’t say a word.

“I think it’s better if we don’t do it publicly for now,” he says in the gentlest way possible but it comes out wrong anyway.

“Well, if you’re ashamed to be seen holding my hand, then better let’s not.”

She has no idea but he knows what will happen. It’s his first walk in Coruscant since the whole galaxy got to know his face. At times he regrets he isn’t hiding behind his mask anymore, because at least now he could be anonymous.
“I’m not ashamed. I just thought you might be uncomfortable. Because people will stare at us, and if I hold your hand, tomorrow your face will be in all the media, together with the most fantastic stories about us. I’m not sure you’d like that.”

“Oh. I didn’t think of it.”

They are now walking down a beautiful pedestrian boulevard with small cafes and restaurants, and trees planted on both sides. It’s a warm summer evening, the sun is still high, and the boulevard is full of people, humans and aliens, all respectable-looking, rich citizens.

And yes, they are all staring at Kylo.

Very few don’t react in any – usually startled – way. There are lots of gasps, people moving to the side, much as on his own ship, and widened eyes when recognition strikes. Great astonishment and curiosity, too. Some furrowing of the brow, as if they were thinking: “Surely that can’t be him, strolling around casually, dressed normally, with a woman by his side?” Kylo finds it amusing only for a moment, then somewhat tiring, but mostly sad. He’ll never be anonymous again, not until the end of his life. And it isn’t exactly the positive kind of celebrity he is enjoying, either, even though he is quite sure he wouldn’t enjoy any kind. He can see he mostly elicits fear and confusion.

“All right, I see,” Annelyse says after a few minutes. She couldn’t miss the dire spectacle.

“If you’re uncomfortable with that, we can take a speeder and fly directly to the restaurant. We don’t need to walk.”

“But it’s a beautiful evening. I want to walk with you.”

“Me too. But you won’t be anonymous anymore, either. Perhaps we should have had that dinner on my ship tonight.”

“You can’t always hide on your ship.”

“It’s more for you than for me that I’m worried.”

“It’s like this only at the beginning. Because you never appear informally in public. If you do it more often, if you set up your capital on one world and live there, people will stop behaving like this.”

“I’m not sure of that.”

He is uneasy. He doesn’t want to scare her but it crosses his mind now that someone might try to harm her in order to get to him, just because they have once been seen together. He has exposed her, and effectively put her in danger. What will happen to her when he gets back to his ship and leaves Coruscant’s orbit tomorrow after the meeting with his Grand Marshals? He won’t be able to protect her from far away. He’ll need to send people to watch over her, at least for some time, to make sure nobody is after her. He is sure she’ll hate that, and he is ashamed he hasn’t thought of it before.

And tomorrow Annelyse’s face will be on the media anyway. Rey will see it. She’ll think he’s being childish, trying to make her jealous. And she will be wrong.

There are musicians on the boulevard, playing and singing, and in the end the peaceful atmosphere seeps into Kylo. He decides not to pay attention to curious looks. But his hand is close to the hilt of his saber, clipped discreetly to his belt. He has many enemies, he never lets his guard down, especially not in the middle of a crowd.

Annelyse is so unaware of all this. It is so far from her reality.
The restaurant is located in a beautiful lush garden. Colourful lampions hang from the trees above the tables. The place is already quite full but the tables are not crowded together so Kylo is sure they’ll be comfortable here and even if people stare again, at least nobody will be able to eavesdrop on their conversation.

“I’ve never been to this place,” Annelyse says when they stop in front of the entrance. “I’ve passed it often and always wished to come in one day.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I wanted to come with someone special.”

And he wants to stay there for a moment, in silence, just soaking these words.

When they enter, she whirls around to face him, looking anxious.

“I need to tell you something important,” she starts. He’s taken aback. Has she changed her mind? Is it too much to sit with him in this public place, has she grown tired of looks and gasps?

“I think we’ve been followed,” she says quickly and squeezes his hand, as if to reassure him, which is, frankly, sweet and amusing. “There were at least two men that have been walking sometimes behind, sometimes ahead of us, stopping when we stopped, and now I saw them again in the street. I think they might be on to something.”

She looks like she’ll call for help in a moment. She’ll call the police for his protection. That might be the nicest thing anyone has ever wanted to do for him.

“There are four, not two,” Kylo says.

“You’ve noticed them too?”

“They are my praetorians. My security detail.”

“Oh!” she exclaims, surprised.

“They’re not hiding, that’s why you noticed them, but I told them to dress normally so as not to attract even more attention to us.”

“Oh, good!” she exhales, visibly relieved. “I was getting really scared they might want to attack you.”

Kylo smiles.

“Well, what if they had guns? If they surprised you…”

“It’s difficult to surprise me in that way.”

“You can’t be faster than a blaster shot. If they shoot at you suddenly…”

“Actually, I can. This is how the Force works. It warns me. I feel a disturbance before it happens. I must be very distracted or deeply asleep to be taken by surprise. But I’m a very light sleeper. And yes, you are a great distraction, but still, no need to worry.”

“And then what? It warns you and you have time to run?”

Kylo laughs out loud now, but stops abruptly, realising it might look like he’s showing off.
“No, I don’t run. I can stop blaster shots in the air. I just freeze them. I can also send them back at those who shoot.”

She stares at him in awe.

“I am a difficult man to kill,” Kylo says. “So don’t worry. I need to take these guys with me because the Supreme Leader cannot just go on his own wherever he wants to. It’s a question of protocol as much as of security. But I assure you you’re safe. With or without them.”

“That’s a really sexy thing to say to a girl on a date,” she laughs, then turns to the maître d’, who has already recognised Kylo and is waiting for them, looking slightly pale but eager to serve.

Kylo wanted to book the table himself but when he commed the restaurant from his private channel, they laughed at him. This was because he said who he was – there was no point in surprising them and coming incognito as that would have probably sparked hysteria – and of course they didn’t believe him. They thought it was a prank. So he asked his adjutant to make a holocomm call from an official First Order channel. The owner of the restaurant almost had a heart attack when he realised his error. He apologised for minutes on end, clearly on the brink of tears, until Kylo himself stepped into the holo and said it was all right. He can only imagine how they must have worked to prepare the place so as to make sure he would find no fault with it.

Which wasn’t necessary because it is a beautiful place to start with. When they walk through the restaurant garden, led by the maître d’ – Annelyse first, Kylo after her – conversations die down and people discreetly glance at them. They must have been warned in advance Kylo Ren would be the restaurant’s guest tonight because nobody looks too surprised to see him. Kylo is actually relieved they haven’t left once they learnt he would be coming. It turns out, again, that curiosity is stronger than fear.

Once they are seated and the maître d’ departs, bowing, Annelyse smiles to Kylo.

“So I suppose I can’t take your hand here either, right?” she asks.

“You can. That depends on you. I was only worried what the public consequences for you might be. But after all this staring on the boulevard, frankly, whether you’re holding my hand or not, I think your face will be all over the holonet tomorrow anyway. Maybe it is already.”

She’s watching him, a small smile playing on her lips.

“That doesn’t put you off?” he asks.

“Normally, if you had told me that yesterday, it would have. Celebrity is not my thing.”

“Nor is it mine.”

“Hence the mask?”

“Partly, yes.”

“Well, so, yesterday I’d probably be terrified. Today I’m just amused. I’ve never done anything truly extraordinary. So this is it.”

“You do extraordinary things every day in your work.”

“Oh, I meant in another way. Crazy extraordinary. Things a normal person doesn’t do in the real world.”
“So that’s what I am? An escape from reality?”

“Not in any demeaning sense, but in a way, aren’t you? How realistic is it for an average woman to go on a date with you?”

“I need to tell you something,” Kylo says. This is just going to get even more crazy extraordinary for her. “I didn’t think of it before – though I should have – but now it strikes me that you will need a security detail of your own. I have enemies. People saw you with me, and even if we were never to meet again, for some time you would remain vulnerable. I will send you two guards who will be watching over you discreetly from tomorrow on. I’m sorry I didn’t think about it earlier. Not sure you’d accept the date if you knew.”

Annelyse is silent, watching him with the same small smile.

“That doesn’t upset you?” he asks uncertainly.

“I guess it’s part of the package.”

“The inevitable consequence of going on a date with me, you mean?”

“Yes. So you see, there are consequences for me of you being the Supreme Leader, and we should stop pretending it doesn’t matter. You keep asking me whether I do something because you are who you are, and the true answer is, partly yes, because your function is inseparable from you. If you weren’t the Supreme Leader, you’d be a very different man, and we don’t know if we would then even like each other. We would meet in totally different circumstances or maybe not at all.”

“Very logical.”

“I am very logical.”

“Should I take your hand, then?”

“Yes!”

He does it and lays their hands on the table, clasped together.

“See?” Annelyse comments. “Nothing happened. You needn’t be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid.”

“Yes, you are,” she says. “And so am I.”

The food is delicious, the wine is light and fruity. It has a summer feeling. Annelyse remarks on that and Kylo realises these words don’t even carry any meaning for him anymore. There has been no winter or summer for him for many years, no winter or summer on the starship in the eternal darkness of space. Even if it’s just for one evening, he’ll enjoy it. He tells her that.

“But living on a starship must have good sides. You travel around the galaxy all the time. You see so many places.”

He decides to keep to himself the information that he has seen most of them with a view to conquering, burning or bombarding, rather than visiting.

“What about you? Have you travelled much?” he asks.
“No. Not much. I’ve been to a few places only, as a matter of fact. Chandrila, Corellia.”

“No? I heard it was very special.”

“Do you like living on Coruscant?”

“I suppose so. I wouldn’t have the same professional opportunities anywhere else. But there are so many problems on this world. As soon as you look under the shiny – or upper – surface, there’s no end to it. And I’m working in a shiny hospital for rich people. Sometimes I feel guilty about it.”

“Your research can change everyone’s life. Not just that of rich people.”

“Yes. But before it gets to such a stage that it can become a generalised treatment, accessible to everyone, I might not be around anymore. But well. We’re all cogs in a bigger machine. Apart from you,” she laughs.

“It would actually be quite liberating not to dream of achieving anything big, such as a radical change in the galaxy, all on my own,” he confesses. “Only to do my part. Or even, not obsessing about a higher purpose at all. Just to enjoy my life.”

“And what would you do then? Who would you be?”

“Maybe a pilot. I’m a very good pilot.”

“Really? I fly so rarely on interplanetary routes. It’s a pity because I like flying.”

“I could take you flying. In my ship. I could teach you, too.”

“You would do that?” she asks, brightening up. “And where would we go?”

“Anywhere. We could even go to Naboo. I’m sure you’d love it.”

“Like a holiday?”

“Yes. That would be my first holiday since I was a teenager.”

She watches him, frowning.

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be, being the Supreme Leader, is it?” she remarks. “You can’t even go on holiday? What’s the point?”

“Oh, I have been the Supreme Leader for less than two weeks. And the war has only just ended.”

“So maybe there’s a way to reconcile having a bigger purpose and enjoying life?” she suggests and though he knows it’s not that simple and might never come to pass, he indulges for a moment in this fantasy: a woman he likes sitting next to him in the cockpit of his command shuttle, flying away for a few days – or weeks – somewhere they can be alone, where he won’t be recognised at every step, where life could be slow and happen in the present, just like Annelyse described it earlier, speaking of the hospital. If he could have these things just once –

The subject of past relationships had to come up at one point. She asks him first. Not about his last relationship, or his first, or the longest. About the most memorable.
“There has been one woman. Recently. A Force-user too. We had a connection. But she was on the opposite side of the war and she didn’t want to stay with me. She actually ran away and refused further contact. So I don’t suppose it really counts.”

Annelyse nods. Somehow she knows not to ask more questions at this point.

“What about you?” he asks. The air is delicious around them, the soft music pleasant in the background. The garden smells of a thousand flowers and all this is so far from everything his life has been for the past few weeks – the past few years – that, again, he can barely believe it’s real.

“Nothing very serious for the past two years. Some serious and less serious things before.”

“Difficult to believe a woman like you hasn’t met anyone interesting in two years.”

“I don’t like wasting my time with just anyone. I could also ask you why you haven’t been with anyone in a long time.”

“That’s easy. I’ve known mostly violence and war for many years. Besides, Force users often avoid relationships. It’s in Jedi teaching. But mostly, I had no time and I was in no mood for attachments. Until I met the woman I told you about, but it didn’t work.”

“And now?” she asks with a serious face expression and trying not to sound too interested in the answer.

But she is interested. Interested and scared. So he has to be careful. Because this isn’t a girl you take out for dinner, sleep with, say goodbye and remain friends with benefits who meet up from time to time. Which is anyway something he has never contemplated, has never done in his life, and wouldn’t know how to suggest even if he wanted to. It occurs to him that, as the Supreme Leader, he could probably easily have a large number of such women friends at his disposal. The thought itself is so absurd he snorts inwardly.

Not that he knows how to do a regular relationship, either. Perhaps this is why his romantic and sexual experiences are limited to two short-lived and not particularly successful attempts at a relationship with female padawans in Luke’s temple and, after that, a pitiful and very short series of encounters in underworld cantinas, in between murderous missions. Some women more desperate than he sought his company for a few hours, and he went with them, not because he was really interested in any of them, but rather out of curiosity. To have at least some experiences.

He really felt like it for the first time with Rey. Not necessarily to jump immediately into bed. But to jump into something, together. Now, less than two weeks later, and after their recent conversation which he won’t discuss with Annelyse, it seems like he is light years away from that moment in the throne room when he offered Rey his heart and the galaxy, and for a few seconds he actually believed she might accept both.

After dinner, they are walking along the beautiful boulevards of upper Coruscant, in pleasant companionship. Kylo feels very good; no symptoms of his ailment tonight. Annelyse took his hand again when they left the restaurant and she hasn’t let go of it ever since.

He’s walking in the street, holding a woman’s hand, less than two weeks after Crait. This change might be happening too fast, and it might not work because of this. He pretends very hard to be an agreeable man, who has dinners in restaurants and strolls around with a woman on his arm. But is he that man? He represses the darkness within; he has just created a new mask, a public mask, as mysterious as the helmet he wore before. When is he himself? Who is he really?
He fears he really is that man from Crait, and not the man he’s trying to be tonight. The man from Crait is desperate, enraged, impulsive, aggressive, destructive and self-destructive. This must be who he really is, because now, when he’s behaving like a normal person, he feels strange. Pleasant, much happier, yes, but strange. As if he stepped into someone else’s shoes. Into someone else’s life. Maybe it’s because the change is so recent, while his previous way of life – the war, the destruction – used to be his reality for so long. But maybe he’ll just never be really normal, and never have anything normal in his life, like restaurants and walks and holding someone’s hand. And perhaps because of that, too, Rey was the only one for him: as damaged as he was.

He doesn’t want to be so damaged anymore.

Annelyse stops in front of an elegant apartment building seven or eight-level high, with long balconies all along the façade. These must be big apartments.

“This is where I live,” she explains.

Kylo blinks; he didn’t expect it would end so soon. He somehow assumed they would be walking for much longer, or at least that the evening wasn’t over yet.

Maybe he can at least kiss her again. But he lingers; as soon as they kiss, it’s probably time to go. It’s late, but he doesn’t really want to leave. Doesn’t feel like taking the shuttle, going back to the Finalizer into his black bedsheets. After this colourful, full of light evening he doesn’t want to face the grim sterile corridors of his ship. He’s actually considering going to a luxury hotel in the city and spending the night there.

“What if I asked you to come in?” Annelyse inquires softly.

It takes him a moment – just a moment, not too long – to realise the full meaning of this. He may not have any experience with dates but he’s thirty, after all; he knows what that question means. And yes, he wants that, but is it a good idea?

Seeing him hesitate, she smiles.

“It’s fine. Maybe it’s too soon anyway. Don’t worry, you don’t need to say yes just because you’re a man and a man needs to say yes,” she laughs.

“No, I’d like to come in,” Kylo says in a heartbeat. “I’m just… are you sure?”

“No. But I think I will regret it later if I don’t invite you to stay. When I open the door and find myself alone in my apartment, and think back to the whole evening, I think I’ll wish you were still with me.”

“It’s not just because you don’t want to be alone, is it?” he asks, ashamed to always ask the same question. To always fear so much he’s not really wanted, or not for the right reasons.

“I’ve already told you that. I told you I’m not wasting my time with just anyone.”

“I don’t want to get close if it ends soon afterwards. I’ve had this bad experience recently. I know it’s always a risk, but I just can’t take any more of that for the time being.”

“So you’re saying you’re not interested in casual sex but you’re also not ready to risk a relationship because you’ve been hurt too much, too recently. Right?”

Sort of, but he doesn’t like the sound of it. Because this means he’ll be alone tonight (and perhaps forever), and he really doesn’t want that. It’s true he’s probably not ready; it’s true it’s too soon. Too
soon to allow himself to enjoy anything after Snoke, too soon for light happiness after Crait, too soon for Annelyse after Rey, even if what he had with Rey wasn’t really a relationship. But he has met Annelyse now. He won’t be able to have their first meeting again in half a year, when he could be more ready. It’s either now or not at all.

He pushes the entrance door and gestures, suggesting she go first. She smiles and enters the lobby. Kylo follows.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed that! I like this idea of Kylo among real people, in a mundane environment, so different from his everyday reality of war and the Force and life on a starship. It's as if it was an Alternative Universe, and yet it's the universe of Star Was, it's just that we have never seen him in such situations and surroundings. And of course I hope you liked all the fluff :-)

My other story, Star Wars: Enough to Hope, is almost complete now - just one chapter to go! Check it out please - I'm sure you'll like it if you like this one.
The night on Coruscant

Chapter Summary

He is lying there in silence, stroking her hair gently, and he purrs as she slides her small hands all over him and gives him light kisses on his chest, his sides, his abdomen. She’s tender, careful and very affectionate, and he has never been touched and kissed like this before.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the lift Annelyse presses the button to the last floor, turns around and reaches for him. Kylo leans in for a kiss which turns out to be very tender, not a passionate-lift-kiss he expected. She takes her time, explores his mouth slowly, slides her both hands into his hair and hums contentedly into his mouth. It’s soothing and exciting, inviting and relaxing. He can’t have enough of it. His hands wander over her back and her arms.

They exit the lift, still kissing. He presses her against the apartment’s door while she’s searching for her chip card in her bag. Once they’re inside the apartment and the doors shut behind them, he pushes her against the wall and kisses her again, this time more insistently. His hands go down to her hips and his grip grows stronger, then they find her breasts, and she catches her breath and puts her hand on his chest.

Kylo stops and brushes against her mind to gauge her mood. Her thoughts are chaotic. She thinks the man she’s looking at, who now leans towards her with his palm on the wall beside her head, his face hovering a few centimetres from hers, is somewhat different from the man she had dinner with. And she finds it a bit disconcerting, but also incredibly exciting.

“Are you going to hurt me?” she whispers.

“Do you want me to?”

“No…”

“I can do things to you that you want but will not ask for.”

“How are you going to know about them, then?”

“I’ll look into your mind.”

“It’s not fair.”

“No,” he agrees. “But it’s for your own pleasure.”

“Not all images that go through our minds are of the things we really want to experience.”

“That’s discussable. But even if that’s true, I think I can make the difference.”

“How will I know what you want, though?”
“I want everything you want to give me,” Kylo says.

She gasps now, feeling his pressure on her mind. He’s holding her close, touching his forehead to hers. He starts nibbling at her lips and strokes her neck with his thumb. She tries to hide some of her thoughts from him and he goes after those in particular.

“Stop,” she says and grabs his arm. He doesn’t move away, his forehead still against hers, his hand caressing her neck, but he snaps the connection.

“What if I don’t want you to know in advance?” she whispers, her fingers snaking up to his wrist. “What if I want you to discover? Are you not curious enough to explore?”

He smiles and projects into her mind the images of the two of them naked, their bodies heated and entangled. Some of those he took from her fantasies, not necessarily related to him; sometimes the man in them didn’t have a face yet. Now, as he projects them back, that man has his face and his body. Other images are new. Sometimes she’s tied up or immobilised. Or he’s behind her, her head is yanked back and he wraps her hair around his hand, several times, until it hurts. There are scenes with mirrors on the walls or on the ceiling. But there’s more to it than just the images of how they are positioned or what they’re doing. It’s the mood. It’s not playful or gentle, though it’s by no means brutal or menacing. He’s giving her a distinct taste of something…

“Is this darkness?”

“Yes. Darkness is passion and possession. But it’s not just that. It's worse. So don’t trust it too much.”

“So you could hurt me.”

“I could. But I won’t. You don’t want that.”

He grazes her neck with his teeth and she closes her eyes. He needs to steady her by the wall because she’s trembling.

“I don’t have my leather gloves with me though,” he mutters into her neck. “You should have told me earlier…”

He did see that in her mind. It surprised and amused him, but the more he thinks of it now, the more it excites him. When she returned from the Finalizer after treating him, she sought images and holovids of him on the holonet, and there was one picture of him in his full regalia, including the gloves. She had a fleeting thought then… and she was surprised because she had never thought she was into those things. But with him, she could be.

“What else did you see?” Annelyse whispers, her eyes closed, abandoning herself to his kisses and his hands traveling all over her body.

“I saw how you looked at me when I was lying unconscious and almost naked in the med bay. That was inappropriate, doctor.”

She gasps and looks away, mortified. Embarrassment looks good on her. He finds it very erotic to confront her with her own fantasies and thoughts she’s slightly ashamed of. He can also feel her arousal at having been found out, and at his intrusion into her mind that has laid those fantasies bare to him.

She looks at him with unmistakeable desire, takes his hand and moves away from the wall, as if she wanted to walk towards the interior of the apartment. To the bedroom, probably. But –
“Before we go any further,” Kylo says.

“Yes?” she seems surprised. A moment ago, he advanced and pressed, and she had to stop him. Now, he stalls. But Kylo Ren is unpredictable and unstable, and she’ll need to learn that.

“It’s not so simple,” he warns. “Being involved with me. I’m not a kind man.”

“You have been kind to me.”

“I can be. But I’m not nice. Most of what you’ve heard about me is true. And it’s not because…” he stops, for he wanted to say “it’s not because Snoke is finally dead”, but she has no idea what this changes and what Snoke did to him, and he doesn’t feel like telling the whole story now, “it’s not because certain circumstances in my life have recently changed that I’ve suddenly become sweet.”

This is what she called him earlier tonight. It was nice to hear. But it’s not true.

“So what are you like?”

“I lash out. I don’t take criticism well. Any criticism, from anyone. I am not patient. And when I want something, I can rarely resist the urge to bend everything – and everyone – to my will.”

Annelyse is watching him in silence.

“In brief,” Kylo says, “I’m not what you expect.”

“And how do you know what I expect?” she asks calmly. “How do you know what I want?”

“I don’t. But in the long term, it’s difficult to be even with someone nice and normal. Not to mention with me. If we were book characters, we wouldn’t be from the same story. I don’t want you to grow disappointed.”

“So this is what it is about, yet again. Disappointment. You’re half pushing me away already because you’re afraid to get hurt. You reject me before I have a chance to reject you.”

Kylo feels tender and exposed, angry and afraid, wild and sad, all at the same time. His fear of rejection is so strong that she has apparently been able to smell it; yes, he is so afraid that he prefers to do and say everything now, to make sure to discourage her, to make sure she will reject him, just to be done with it. It’s safer like this. Perhaps this is why he has pried into her mind. He knows it wasn’t kind. He shouldn’t have done that without her permission, shouldn’t have searched her fantasies and exposed them to embarrass her.

She grabs him by his shirt and pulls him in for a kiss.

“Maybe you should have explained all that to me earlier,” she whispers into his mouth. “Because now, I admit I have trouble listening.”

It feels feral and Kylo’s heart beats wildly. He grabs her arm, tears her away from the wall and walks her backwards down the corridor. She turns into one of the rooms which appears to be the bedroom; Kylo pushes her onto the bed and climbs on top of her.

“Slowly,” Annelyse whispers and puts her hand to his chest. She has done this before. Kylo loves this gesture. It’s supposed to slow him down so he could take it as a rejection but at the same time, she chooses to touch him, and her palm on his heart feels so gentle and so welcoming that he melts. The hungry animal in him wants to be accepted and rewarded.
“I will, I will go slowly,” he murmurs. “I want to go slowly too.”

She smiles and starts to untie the belt of her dress.

“Very pretty dress,” Kylo mutters, stroking her hand while she’s fumbling with her clothes, “on a very pretty girl.”

She opens the dress, revealing the underwear in natural body colour. It’s made of thin, elegant fabric, no lace. Kylo doesn’t like lace. He finds its frilliness ridiculous.

Propping himself up on his elbow next to her, he moves one hand slowly over her body, and she stills under his touch. Her skin feels warm and delicate. He covers her breast with his hand and brushes her nipple, through the bra, with his thumb. She puts her arms under her head and sprawls on the bed, in a relaxed position. Kylo takes this as an invitation. This slow unthreatening pace must be making her comfortable. She needs that at the beginning. He understands now. He resolves to watch her and listen in order to learn what she likes: what kind of touch and where, what pressure, what pace.

He moves his hand along her side and explores the lovely indent of her waistline and the curve of her hip. The softness of her stomach and the slight bulge of her mound, as she shudders lightly when he passes his hand over it. The warmth of the inside of her thighs. He brushes her core through her underwear. The smoothness of her legs. She has closed her eyes now and Kylo leans over her to add his mouth to his hand.

Her skin is even nicer under his lips. He nuzzles her neck, slides the dress off her arms and fumbles behind her back to unclasp and remove her bra, then takes away her clothes and lays them on the chair next to the bed. She’s only wearing her panties now and he’s still fully dressed, so he takes off his shirt and trousers and leans over her again, this time skin to skin. Their bodies touch but he hovers slightly, so as not to crush her with his weight. He moves slowly from one side to the other to create friction between his chest and her breasts. She moans quietly and he covers her breast with his mouth.

He caresses the nipple and the delicate flesh around it with his tongue, while fondling her other breast, and she arches against him. He moves up, kisses her on the lips and strokes both her breasts at the same time. She’s becoming limp under his touch; he loves it. He wants to make her lose herself, to see her eyes glazed over, for him.

He kisses down her torso and her stomach, the delicious curve of her waist and hips, then he pulls her underwear off in one move, and she gasps, because she visibly expected him to play with it for longer. His mouth is on her mound and she opens her legs, inviting him to go down on her. So he does. He doesn’t hesitate. He hasn’t ever done it. Well yes, he has, with the first girl in Luke’s temple, but that was so long ago it could well be someone else’s life. And he just did a little bit of it then, they were both embarrassed, they were each other’s first partners, and he didn’t really know what he was doing.

Not that he has more experience in it now but he has more confidence. Because she is moaning as he licks her, and he is willing to experiment and take his time. So he licks and sucks – lightly, guessing that more subtle stimulation might please her more, delicate as she is – and he tries inserting his tongue into her entrance. The taste is a bit strange, slightly sweet, but he quickly gets used to it. He likes the smell; this is how passion smells to him. It’s extremely sensual to do this while watching her reactions. Kylo feels painfully hard but he wants to go slowly. He tries to caress her with his breath, blowing on her lightly, and this seems to work too. But what she likes best is when he licks her along the whole length of her folds, and also when he circles and sucks the sensitive spot just above her
entrance. He slides one finger inside of her and she almost screams. He curls his finger and starts pushing in and out fast, while giving her slow, lazy licks at the same time.

It definitely works because she’s writhing underneath him and closes her fists in his hair. He wraps both arms around her thighs to keep her in place.

“Stop,” he says. “Look at me.”

She adjusts the pillow under her head to be able to see him better. He raises his head from between her legs and his eyes lock with hers, as he continues licking her. She’s watching him, mesmerised. It’s so sensual, it’s shameless. She looks slightly embarrassed and it really turns Kylo on.

He slowly crawls up and settles on top of her. Annelyse pushes his underwear down and he kicks it off; now that they’re both naked, she wants to wrap her legs around him but he takes them at the knee and lifts, to open her up more. He pushes in slowly, then withdraws and pushes in again, each time deeper, until he’s buried in her completely. He gives a few slow strokes to let her adjust and then starts moving in earnest. The pace he chooses isn’t very fast but he hits deep every time.

He can feel her everywhere. As he slides in and out, he has the impression his whole body is caressed. It has never felt like this, not in any of his previous experiences. It’s also never been so carefree and so affectionate. And he’s never wanted it quite so much.

He has never experienced so much pure pleasure coursing through his whole body. It’s intoxicating, he could get addicted to this: her walls clenching around him, her breasts and warm skin underneath him, the weight of her legs in his arms, her warm breath on his face, her mouth on his.

He grabs her by the thighs, settles her legs on his shoulders and presses down on her, and her eyes widen.

“Too deep?” he whispers.

“N…no…” she moans. “It’s good…”

He thrusts and she cries out. So he stops.

“Again,” she pants. “Don’t stop. Do it again.”

So he starts moving again and he goes very deep with every stroke. She clutches his waist with her both hands; otherwise she’s helpless, her legs around his shoulders, her whole body open and immobilised under him. She’s so wet he can feel his thighs and stomach getting slick.

“Stronger, Kylo,” she begs and he complies, slamming into her. He breathes deeply, trying to control himself, but he can see she’s close, too. She cries out every time he thrusts in and digs her fingers into his hips. Then she raises her torso towards him and bites his earlobe, in a sloppy attempt at a kiss. He feels her come as her muscles clamp around him, one wave after another, and he loses control. He groans and presses into her wildly, clutching her thighs to keep her legs high on his shoulders. She’s pulsing so strongly he doesn’t even need to move as he comes, and it’s almost blinding; his body jerks uncontrollably. He feels this orgasm in every single nerve ending of his body.

Only when they both finally still, he realizes he might have hurt her, and loosens his grip. She lets her legs slide off his shoulders but she presses them around his hips as he tries to pull out.

“Stay,” she says quietly and lifts her head from the pillow for a kiss.
He’s kissing her for long minutes, enjoying the little flexes of her muscles around him, her murmurs, her hands in his hair. The afterglow is no less good than the sex itself and Kylo is flooded by waves of emotions he can’t even name.

When he finally slips out, they can both hear it and it’s a bit embarrassing because it becomes clear quickly that they’re lying in a puddle.

“I think we’ll need to change the sheets tomorrow,” he murmurs with a smile.

“And also, I feel completely dehydrated,” Annelyse whispers and they laugh, like a pair of teenagers, he thinks, excited at having discovered sex.

She stretches her legs and moans with pain.

“I think you’ve dislocated my hips,” she complains but looks delighted. Kylo places his hands on her hips and massages them.

“Better?”

When she nods with a smile, he settles behind her back on the bed, pulls her to him and buries his face in her neck. She exhales a long, happy breath.

For a moment, they’re both silent. Kylo has the impression all this is not quite real, but he tries not to dwell too much on it. He focuses on the dark room, the pleasant temperature and the soothing silence, and on the woman lying next to him, with whom he has just had the first truly amazing sexual experience of his life.

Is it a consolation that he seeks at this difficult time, or perhaps a substitute for Rey, or is it a beginning of something real? The first two seem to be the logical answers in the circumstances, but it’s the last option that rings true to him. Because lying in bed next to Annelyse, spent after their passion, he doesn’t feel sad, melancholy, anxious, ready to leave, or disgusted with himself, as he probably would if this was just a substitute, or something to make him feel better for a fleeting moment. He feels lighter than he ever has, as far as he can remember. He’s always prepared for pain, so whenever pain strikes he’s never surprised. And pain does strike often. But this time, there’s no trace of it.

This time, he is at ease. The woman lying next to him doesn’t make him feel even more lonely than before sex, as those few women met in cantinas in the past did. And yet, those women, in a way, belonged to his universe, to the world of darkness, crime and violence, stealth and buried passions. Annelyse doesn’t belong there. She is so far removed from the toxic world he’d lived in and the toxic life he’d led that the terrible things she heard about him were like fairy tales to her. She couldn’t really believe them. She couldn’t relate. Even after hearing the confirmation of some of his odious deeds from his own mouth she didn’t flinch. Is it because she understands and forgives, or because it’s so abstract to her rational mind and her safe, grounded in certainties life that she can’t make herself care enough to be afraid?

Perhaps his only hope for the future is with a person who isn’t in any way part of the world he used to live in. Not related to the war, galactic politics, First Order, Resistance. Someone who will see him in an entirely new light. For whom he can be someone new.

But how is he supposed to hide his true self from her? He can’t. The war with the Resistance isn’t even over yet. And the Resistance is not at the end of the list of his enemies. There will always be corrupt governors to remove by force, criminal gangs to confront, internal dissent to kill in the bud. The Supreme Leader’s job will never be a peaceful one. Where is her place in all this? What is he
supposed to do with this woman lying next to him?

He isn’t ready to say goodbye to her and keep this as a nice memory. He wants more of her. And he wants to make her want more of him. But what is the chance of any future? They are characters from different stories. He said that himself.

And just like that, the pain and anxiety, his oldest and most faithful friends, are back.

“What are you thinking about?” Annelyse asks, as if she felt the change of rhythm in his breath on her neck.

“I’m thinking how unreal this is. And how wonderful.”

“I’m thinking the same. But also, ‘are you crazy, Annelyse?’”

“Why? Do you regret?”

“How could I regret? You made it extremely difficult for me to regret. But when I think who you are, and who I am, and that I was called to you for my medical advice but instead made a move on my VIP patient, I start to panic a bit.”

“Wait a second,” Kylo says, amused. “You made a move on me? I was under the impression it was the other way round.”

“Really? I totally feel like I am the guilty party.”

“Kiss me again,” he demands and she turns towards him. Her arms go to his neck, her lips are on his, her whole body pressed against him. It is sweet, it’s flattering, it’s unreal. He feels like wallowing in this dream for ever.

“I want to memorise you,” he says. “In case you disappear.”

“Will I?”

“I don’t want you to. I want to find a way to continue this.”

“There are many ways.”

“Why don’t I give you a job on my ship?”

“Didn’t you say yourself that we couldn’t be close if I worked for you? Besides, you don’t have a job for me. My job is highly specialized. You need trauma doctors on a warship, and now you don’t even need that as the war is over.”

“That’s right,” he admits, mortified.

“But that’s not the only way, is it?”

“No. I could come see you on Coruscant?”

“Yes. I’d like that. But you’ll be leaving soon, won’t you? How often do you come here?”

“Well, the idea is to stop flying around once the war is over, and establish my residence on a planet. Coruscant seems to be the most logical choice. So I’ll be near.”

“When do you think that might happen?”
“Soon. Really soon.”

“But accepting a job on your ship wouldn’t be a good idea even if you had one for me. We barely know each other. It doesn’t happen like this in real life, you know. People don’t jump into commitments on the basis of one week’s acquaintance. Even if it feels very special.”

“And it does?”

“It does, actually. It does to me. What about you?”

“We wouldn’t be where we are if it didn’t.”

“But still. You understand what I mean.”

“You mean normal people get to know each other, date for some time, go slowly. It’s just that I have no idea of all that. I’ve never done it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve never had a relationship. I’ve never even been on a date.”

She frowns.

“I don’t understand. I don’t think it was your first time in bed with a woman…”

“No, it wasn’t. But as if. To be honest, that was one of the last things I thought of in my whole life.”

“With your looks, your situation, your skills, your position? You could have plenty of women.”

“I’ve never wanted plenty.”

She smiles and kisses him again. He sinks into her arms, her warmth, her soothing embrace.

“You have an amazing body,” she murmurs. “Sculpted like a work of art.”

“You like my body?” he asks, pleased. He does know his body doesn’t look bad – he has sculpted it himself, though for war rather than pleasure – but it is nice to get a compliment. He hasn’t got a compliment since… well, since the last compliment she gave him. In fact, tonight he got so many compliments from her that his head is spinning.

She nods with a smile, brushing his skin with her fingers.

“Very much,” she whispers.

Their desire is satisfied for now, he is pleasantly tired, but her touch is electrifying. She takes the time to explore him, like he explored her before, and he discovers that his whole torso, from his chest to his stomach and hips area, even his nipples, is sensitive to pleasure. He is lying there in silence, stroking her hair gently, and he purrs as she slides her small hands all over him and gives him light kisses on his chest, his sides, his abdomen. She’s tender, careful and very affectionate, and he has never been touched and kissed like this before.

Kylo wakes up in the middle of the night, with Annelyse’s head on his chest and her arm thrown across his body. At first, instinctively, he freezes, unused to such intimate proximity. Waking up with someone sprawled all over him is completely new, and Kylo’s first reflex is to move away.
But his own arms are tightly wrapped around her, his legs tangled with hers, and he finds the intense heat radiating off of her very pleasant. Her hair smells nice and her head’s weight on his chest fills him with such peace that he relaxes and lies awake in the dark for a long time, enjoying the closeness of their bodies.

He fell asleep earlier so soundly and deeply that now, after only a few hours, he feels rested. He rarely gets such a good night’s rest, being a very anxious sleeper. So he gently moves Annelyse’s body to the side, numbing her first with the Force so that she doesn’t wake up, and gets out of the bed.

He finds his boxers on the floor, puts them on and takes a blanket from the chair next to the bed. It’s summer and the apartment is warm, but after Annelyse’s embrace he finds the air chilly.

He walks to the living room he hasn’t even seen yet. From this upper level of the city, the night panorama of Coruscant is splendid. It’s beautiful in space, of course, where he can gaze at a starry sky all day long; but it’s a view devoid of life, while here the city is pulsing with it, and it’s something Kylo hasn’t watched for quite some time. He stands by the window for a long time, extending his Force awareness to all the living beings around. He can see lights in many windows of the resident buildings, despite the late hour, and imagines what the normal life of these people is like. He feels he’s one of them tonight, rather than a military leader who practically owns the galaxy. At this time of night, in this place, standing barefoot on the floor of his lover’s apartment, wrapped in her blanket and without his lightsaber, which stayed in the bedroom together with the rest of his clothes, Kylo knows very well the galaxy doesn’t belong to anyone. He refuses to usurp the title he doesn’t deserve. He wants to remember later on this feeling of humility and smallness, of being just one of many, when he will be discussing the terms of the peace agreement with the Resistance, designing his new government and the new role for the First Order in the galaxy after the war.

He settles on the sofa facing the window and covers himself with the blanket. Tomorrow he’ll face his Grand Marshals for what promises to be a tense meeting. He needs to cultivate his new image of a peaceful leader so he can’t just kill them off in case of dissent. Then he’ll go to Scarif and countless other worlds where he needs to clean up what years of mismanagement and cruelty under Snoke have done. He’ll need to transform the whole First Order into something else than a purely military organization. He’ll have to face his mother and her cronies for the peace talks, which won’t be easy, and agree to some kind of a compromise.

Kylo is tired. By all means, he wants to continue his mission; he is persuaded of his higher purpose, of his duty to build a better galaxy. As for his capacity, he’s less convinced but so far, so good. However, he’s tired because he has never had any life besides that mission. He’s never had any life of his own, anything private, personal, enjoyable, happy. And now that he finally does, it’s just this one evening and one night. Then he needs to depart again.

It doesn’t seem much.

It doesn’t seem fair.

But it’s still the middle of the night and he won’t think of it all until tomorrow morning. He will stretch this moment for as long as possible.

“I woke up and you weren’t there,” Annelyse says quietly, her silhouette appearing next to the sofa he’s lying on. “I thought for a moment that you left.”

Kylo opens his arms to her. She slips under the blanket and lies down in the same position as earlier, when he woke up: her head on his chest, her arm around his body.
"I’d never leave without a word," he says, kissing the top of her head. “I’m sorry it looked that way."

“Don’t worry about it. It was a silly fear.”

“I couldn’t sleep so I came here. To watch the city lights and think.”

“Pleasant thoughts?”

“Yes and no. All kinds of thoughts.”

She doesn’t insist, as if she knew that he will tell her everything in good time. Their silence is relaxing, pleasant and companionable. She understands his quiet nature. In this respect, they’re similar. She breathes deeply, serenely, against his chest as she kisses his collarbone.

“I didn’t ask you at all about your past or your family,” Kylo says. “Do your parents live here on Coruscant?”

“They used to. They died in an accident a few years ago. They were visiting friends in the Outer Rim and got caught in a street clash between local gangs. Their speeder crashed.”

“I’m so sorry,” Kylo says, feeling guilty about not asking her earlier and being egocentric as usual, always focused on his own difficulties. “That must have been very difficult.”

“It was. But at least I have no regrets. I enjoyed my time with them while it lasted. We were close.”

“I want to do away with the anarchy and lawlessness in the galaxy that make such things possible,” Kylo resumes, painfully envious of her happy family memories. “Crime flourishes on so many worlds. I want more order and better security for everyone.”

“This is fine. But it will be difficult to balance order against freedom.”

Kylo’s natural penchant has always been for more order and control, even if it comes at the expense of freedom. But he’s not so sure anymore. He needs to try and find a middle way.

“So in the end you are into politics,” he states.

Annelyse laughs.

“Not enough to be of any help to you, I’m afraid.”

“Well, it’s nice to have someone to discuss ideas with.”

She lifts her head and gives him a kiss.

“I feel at ease with you,” she says. “I’m not a very sociable or funny person. Often I don’t know what to say to people. Whenever I have a date, I’m always stressed. But with you, it's different.”

He is so stunned at this, and so pleased, that for a moment he doesn’t find any words, but she doesn’t seem to mind. She’s smiling at him and combs her fingers absent-mindedly through his hair.

“I feel peaceful with you,” he reciprocates finally. He longs to explain how unusual it is for him to feel like that with anyone, let alone say it, but again the words don’t come, as is often the case when he’s moved. However, she looks happy with his reply and lays her head on his chest again.

“If you can’t sleep, we could watch some holonet,” she offers.
I suppose we’d just see ourselves there, from all possible angles and with all possible commentaries. Let’s go back to bed.”

He gets up slowly and stands up next to the sofa, then bends down to scoop her up in his arms.

“I’ve never been carried like this,” she says excitedly.

“Do you like it?”

“How could I not like it?”

“Then I will do it more often.”

Kylo walks back to the bedroom and lays her down on the bed. Annelyse crawls under the covers and he gets in after her. She reaches for him immediately and presses her lips to his. He can feel her need and he gives in to her hands roaming all over his body. She caresses his torso as she did earlier but her hands move lower quickly; she wraps her hand around his girth and gives him a few strokes. It’s completely dark in the bedroom now so it's just the touch and the sound. Kylo reaches between her legs and she’s slick already.

They lie on their sides, facing but not seeing each other, and caress each other in the darkness for some time. Then she puts her leg over his hip and slides onto him. They move together and her lips don’t leave his. Kylo is drowning in her heat and tightness. They’re sweating; she will really need to change these sheets tomorrow, but there is comfort in being so intimate and messy together. It is surprising how soon they have become close – not just tonight and in bed, but from the very beginning. It is unheard of for him to be at ease with someone so quickly. The heat is building in his abdomen, for the second time tonight; such deep intense pleasure is also very rare for him. He is getting very close, his body shivering so strongly that his face contorts in the dark. He speeds up and she’s moaning against him, her mouth at his neck, as he comes crashing against her. It’s too early for love but it certainly feels like the beginning of it when he squeezes her small frame in his arms and tries to catch his breath.

She covers his face with kisses and he knows he doesn’t deserve so much affection but he’ll take it anyway when offered. Every time she kisses him like this, it feels like an injection of light straight into his heart.

Then he moves away and pushes her onto her back. He spreads her legs, traps one of them under his knee and starts rubbing her sensitive spot in circles. She’s soaked, both with her own wetness and his come, which he finds extremely exciting, and she doesn’t last long. She cries out under his fingers and clutches his neck with her both arms as he strokes her through the last of it. When it’s finished, she doesn’t let go, so he lays his head in the angle of her neck and lets her run her fingers through his hair.

He hasn’t felt that happy for a very long time. He strokes her breast and side tenderly as they lie together in silence, tired after lovemaking, and the dawn is still far away.

“You said that if we were book characters, we wouldn’t be from the same story,” Annelyse says quietly.

“Yes. So I was wondering if it could work between us.”

“And what do you think? Can it?”

“Perhaps we’ll just need to try harder than other people to make it work?”
Annelyse hums her confirmation.

“Maybe that’s not so bad,” she says. “Maybe that’s even better.”

She kisses the top of his head and her hand slowly stills in his hair. A few moments only pass and Kylo can hear her even, deep breathing above him as she drifts off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the romance! Next chapter will be tough… but I will say no more for now.

My main story, Star Wars: Enough to Hope, is almost complete now – I’ll be posting the last chapter this weekend. Have a look!

And if you can, please take a moment to tell me how you liked everything.
Chapter Summary

He knows he will lose her. He regrets it already. But there is nothing else to do, or he’ll lose everything. He thought of his destiny and of the galaxy all his life, and it’s a reflex to push personal considerations away and focus on what needs to be done. Later, when he has time to think about it, losing Annelyse will hurt a lot. But he knew the pain would come. He knew he wouldn’t be allowed to keep her. He just didn’t know it would end so quickly.

Chapter Notes

A long and very intense chapter today - enjoy!

My main story, Star Wars: Enough to Hope, is complete now, so check it out. But it’s not over - it will have a sequel, which I’m writing now, and will start posting in a few weeks.

He wakes up to the smell of pancakes.

It takes him a second to realise where he is. He looks around and spots his clothes on the back of a chair. His lightsaber is lying on the chest of drawers next to Annelyse’s jewelry box. He almost laughs at that.

He loves pancakes but he hasn’t eaten them for years. It seemed too frivolous. It didn’t fit the lifestyle he had led.

Kylo gets out of bed and into the refresher. He wants to make himself presentable; a quarter of an hour later, he enters the kitchen, the top two buttons of his shirt open, his hair damp and tousled. He left it like this on purpose. He thought she might like it this way. And it works because she does look at him as if she wanted to have him right there on the kitchen table. Not that he would mind. She can take whatever she wants.

Annelyse smiles brightly.

“I made breakfast,” she says. “I can only cook a few things… but pancakes are one of them.”

There’s a heap of pancakes on a plate and all kinds of fruit spreads, a jug of caf and another of hot milk. Kylo cannot believe this. Apart from his mother, nobody has ever made breakfast for him, unless they were part of his staff.

“Do you think those poor guys are still outside?” Annelyse asks, when he sits down at the high table. “I mean your praetorians. Did they spend the whole night out there?”

“I suppose,” Kylo says, shrugging and folding his first pancake into a roll. He likes them rolled.
“Maybe we should invite them for breakfast? What do you think?”


She laughs and comes over to his side of the table to hug him. He puts his arm around her, still eating.

“You’re the grumpy-in-the-morning type, aren’t you?” she teases.

No, he’s rather the overwhelmed-by-so-much-happiness type, but it’s not like him to say something like that, so he just pulls her into a close embrace and kisses her neck.

As they eat breakfast together in her bright, spacious kitchen, Kylo cannot get rid of the nagging feeling that something terrible will happen. He hasn’t experienced that much positivity and light since childhood, and it doesn’t seem well deserved. The pancakes are the cherry on the cake that reinforces the impression of the unreal he already had last night. This is simply too good to be true. It will end in some kind of a disaster that will make him regret he has ever started it. And no matter how he tries to convince himself that he’s just unused to it, that other people have such happy little moments all the time, the bad feeling doesn’t go away.

“But shouldn’t you be at the hospital?” he remembers suddenly.

“It’s the weekend. I’m not working today and tomorrow.”

That’s right. Are there any weekends on the Finalizer? Not for him, in any case. Too bad he didn’t think of it and didn’t plan better, because he needs to go back to his ship soon. He has the meeting with the Grand Marshals at noon. And then they’ll need to make tracks for Scarif.

“I wish I could stay and spend the day with you,” he says. “But I have an idea. I have a business meeting at noon on the Finalizer; you could come with me, wait until I’m done, and then we could have lunch together on the ship, spend a few hours there. I could show you around. Then I’ll need to depart at the end of the afternoon. A shuttle would take you back home. Would that be nice?”

She smiles and nods.

In his command shuttle, he changes into his usual clothes, including the gloves and the cloak. Annelyse stares at him a little when he comes out of the refresher like this, as if she saw a different man, then she smiles. Kylo smiles too. This particular aspect of being the Supreme Leader – the effect his outfit produces on people – is not that bad.

She admires the shuttle, too. She hasn’t seen one like this before – the first time she came on the Finalizer, it was by ordinary transport. Kylo’s Upsilon-class is quite a few notches higher. Kylo watches Annelyse gradually realize who is the man that she went on a date and spent the night with. There must be some thrill to it, even for a woman as difficult to impress with superficial things as Annelyse, so he doesn’t worry too much and allows himself to feel rather smug.

She looks out of the viewport with curiosity, observing Coruscant from space and the Finalizer as they approach it. He definitely needs to take her flying. Perhaps even today? Perhaps after their lunch, at the end of the afternoon, he can take her home himself, in his Silencer?

When they dock in the Finalizer’s hangar bay and the shuttle’s door hisses open, Kylo is a bit startled to see Hux waiting beside the hatch.

“I’ve commed you a few times just now,” he starts hurriedly. Kylo hasn’t noticed; he knows he
shouldn’t stay off grid just now, but just in the last minutes he was distracted by Annelyse.

“Riinah, Bheer and Merla have arrived,” Hux continues, “And I don’t like the way it looks.”

Annelyse steps out of the shuttle behind Kylo and Hux gapes at her.

“Doctor!” he says, frowning. “What’s going on? Has the Supreme Leader felt bad again?”

“On the contrary, I hope,” Annelyse replies with a smile and puts her hand into Kylo’s.

Hux looks so utterly shocked that Kylo snorts and raises his eyebrows. He sent Hux a short message this morning to let him know he’d be coming back just before the meeting, but naturally he didn’t say why and where he stayed on Coruscant last night.

“You were saying, Hux?” Kylo asks but Hux just stares, his mouth open. So Kylo starts walking. They meet Bajeera at the top of the stairs leading out of the hangar bay. She is smiling knowingly, bows to Kylo and turns to Annelyse, who greets her – perhaps they already met, during Annelyse’s last visit on the Finalizer? Annelyse falls in step with Bajeera, so that the two women walk just behind Kylo and Hux.

“They arrived half an hour ago, with lots of officers. They’re now on the bridge and there are some tense arguments between them and our crew.”

“About what?”

“Everything. Dantooine. Crait. The peace offer. But I have a feeling they’re preparing something bigger.”

“A coup?”

“Hard to say,” Hux replies soberly.

“You think our crew is in on it?”

“I hope I can trust our officers. But there are some with Riinah who, I previously thought, were also loyal to us. I’m not so sure anymore. The atmosphere is strange. You shouldn’t have brought her in here,” he squints backwards towards Annelyse. “It’s not safe here right now.”

Kylo curses.

“I can’t just send her back now, can I?”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Hux says. “Until we know what’s going on… her arrival has been noticed so if someone really wants to get to you, something might happen to her on the way back or even later, on Coruscant. Keep her here for now.”

“I can put her in my quarters. But I suppose it’s safer if she stays close to me.”

“Yes. And Bajeera can keep an eye on her. I suggest we all go to the bridge and confront them right now. Maybe it’s nothing. Maybe they’re just pissed off about their friend Pryce on Dantooine.”

They walk in silence for a moment.

“So, it’s not the Jedi girl anymore?” Hux asks carefully, but Kylo hisses at that.

“Don’t talk about her.”
“Anyway, I don’t really understand what the doctor is doing here? This is not… this is not what we do,” Hux blurts out almost angrily. He wouldn’t have dared to question or reproach Kylo like that on a personal matter a few weeks ago. And Kylo would have also taken such a comment from Hux very differently back then. Now, however, he doesn’t interpret it as lack of respect. On the contrary, there must be a certain camaraderie in the making between them, for Hux to address him so directly.

“We don’t do what?”

“We don’t have… girlfriends. It’s not like this for us.”

It’s funny how Hux puts himself and Kylo in the same category. Well, indeed. Two lonely, angry, frustrated young men on a warship, and the war is almost over. But Hux isn’t playing fair because Kylo knows his little secret.

“I take it you communicated that to Bajeera?” Kylo asks calmly. “That we don’t have girlfriends?”

To Hux’s immense credit, he doesn’t trip over himself and doesn’t lose his composure for a second. He doesn’t even look at Kylo. He just walks in silence for another moment.

“She told you?” he manages finally.

“No. I saw her sneaking out of your quarters in the early morning.”

Hux is silent again.

“And how many times did I hear from you that the First Order has a strict policy of no romantic relationships between its officials?”

“Well, you always tell me the Knights are not members of the First Order and as such they’re not under my command,” Hux retorts, cool as a cucumber. “So technically, I haven’t broken any rule.”

“Anyway, maybe it’s just a few heated secret encounters,” Kylo provokes. He is enjoying it exactly as much as he thought he would. “Not any serious relationship. So indeed you haven’t broken any of your own rules.”

At this, Hux glances backwards furtively, as if he was checking whether Bajeera had heard, then glances back at Kylo.

“Not serious?” he repeats. “You think it’s possible just to mess around with this woman? Have you seen her? I wouldn’t dare.”

Kylo chuckles. He can’t help it.

Just before they enter the bridge area, he stops and turns around to Annelyse, who looks at him with a smile.

“Please don’t leave Bajeera’s side,” he says, beckoning his Knight. “Apparently there is a small problem. I prefer you to stay here with us for the time being.”

Annelyse frowns but doesn’t say anything, and he’s grateful for that.

“Ren,” Hux says in a low voice, glancing towards the bridge, “You have to go in prepared for anything.”

“I always am.”
“I have a bad feeling about this. You will need to improvise.”

“Bajeera, where are the other Knights?” Kylo asks.

“All on the bridge, master. We’re ready for whatever comes.”

“Kylo?” Annelyse says uncertainly.

“It’s going to be fine,” Kylo replies. “Nothing will happen to you. I promise.”

The bridge is busy. There are thirty or so of the Finalizer’s officers, plus an equally large group of those that have arrived with the Grand Marshals, on top of the usual bridge staff, and it’s not like all these people are waiting for Kylo in peace and quiet. Heated discussions are under way. And in the middle of it all, by the large viewport, the three Grand-Marshals are waiting. They’re the quietest of all, exchanging small remarks only among them.

They’re the Order’s most senior officers, all in their fifties, and they all remember the Empire. All human, looking rather similar, although they hail from different places in the galaxy. Riinah is from Corellia, and the two others from outside the Core: Bheer is from Dathomir, and Merla, the youngest and the most temperamental, from Sullust. Kylo hasn’t had much to do with them so far; he held one holoconference with them and a few other top brass after he took power, during which they agreed to meet very soon, but probably the Grand Marshals didn’t expect that meeting to happen just a few days later. Kylo can only imagine how shocked they must have been when, a few days ago, Admiral Ghelns read the statement announcing the peace talks with the Resistance.

In hindsight, Kylo realizes he should have involved them, and discussed the matter with them before he wrote that statement. But it’s not like the three Grand Marshals were around very much during Snoke’s time, either. This is why Kylo was always under the impression that Hux was the only member of the High-Command who really counted. In reality, the three Grand Marshals must have been gallivanting around the galaxy, watching over Snoke’s criminal empire, so that it continued flourishing, while Snoke kept Hux busy with the army, and Kylo – with pointless Force-related missions, such as finding the map to Skywalker. So Kylo feels that whatever the Grand Marshals have cooked for him today, it is the result of his surprise discovery on Dantooine rather than his peace offer to the Resistance.

The little crowd of officers splits before Kylo and, as if on command, silence falls. When he takes a few steps forward, with Hux at his side, he can feel the wall of people close behind his back. Bajeera is there, with Annelyse, and his other Knights as well; he spotted them when entering. But the others surround him too now and he scans the gathering quickly, assessing the danger. In case they all turn against him, including the Finalizer’s crew, will he and the Knights manage to slaughter everyone and protect Annelyse?

Easily. He can Force-choke many people without even engaging in combat. He can also trigger Force blasts. He can even use battle meditation. It’s a Light-side skill but Kylo has mastered it, and used it to his advantage already during his stint as Snoke’s apprentice. And in combat, eight Force users – Rohlen Ren is on Dantooine, but Arin is here, so they’re eight with Kylo – can do a lot of harm. It would be a piece of cake. Unless stormtroopers take part in the fighting, but it’s highly unlikely that the Grand Marshals would have secretly managed to sway all the Finalizer’s troopers to their side by some propaganda. Unless, of course, Hux is in on it. But Kylo doesn’t feel any negative emotion from Hux, and Bajeera did say she had looked into Hux’s mind.

So it’s probably not a full-blown assassination attempt because the Grand Marshals aren’t stupid. They must know they can’t overpower Kylo, not without hundreds of troops at their disposal. No, if
they wanted to kill him, they’d likely use a trap, for example plant a bomb in his shuttle, or try poisoning him. They wouldn’t go for an open confrontation. Why take so much risk, with such a low chance of success?

They must be planning something else, because now that Kylo has looked at them he’s sure they’re planning something. Have they convinced the commanders of other ships to attack the Finalizer? Will several star destroyers drop out of hyperspace in a moment and start firing? But that would mean the Grand Marshals are willing to sacrifice themselves, which is unlikely. If it’s a space battle they wanted, they could attack without coming on board Kylo’s ship.

So it’s not that, either. What is it then?

“What is this mess?” Kylo asks amidst stony silence, his voice deliberately low and not too loud, so that they have to make an effort to hear him. “Why aren’t you in the meeting room?”

Riinah – the one who had asked for the meeting to be postponed because of his daughter’s wedding – steps forward. Kylo can see Hux put a hand on his blaster. But Riinah looks like he’s about to make a speech rather than fire, and it occurs to Kylo that they must have something on him with which they hope to bend him to their will without the use of physical force.

He guesses what it is before Riinah says it.

“Kylo Ren, you have committed treason,” Riinah’s cold words resonate in the silent room as everyone holds their breath. “We have obtained the recordings from the Supremacy’s throne room, and we saw how you slaughtered the Supreme Leader in order to protect the Resistance’s Jedi fighter, then teamed up with her to kill his guards. You as good as confirmed your shameful collusion with the Resistance when you promised them amnesty and freedom, instead of avenging the deaths of thousands of our people who had perished in the Resistance’s attacks. Your mother and the Jedi with whom you have a personal relationship are among the Resistance, and your personal interest has clouded your judgment, to the detriment of the First Order. We demand that you step down immediately and submit to the Order’s justice.”

That much was obvious, though Kylo curses himself for not having thought of destroying the recordings. Of course, they want to take over the First Order and the excuse they found is a good one, though it is unlikely that love for Snoke ran very deep in the Order, so not many people will want to risk their lives to punish one Force user for the murder of another one.

What is not obvious is how they intend to force him to comply.

“You’re pathetic, Riinah,” Kylo barks. “I didn’t kill Snoke to protect the Resistance. Snoke was a mass murderer and you wouldn’t give a fuck about his death, except that he kept all of you close and warm, just like this rotten governor of Dantooine. And now that I have found out, you’re shitting your pants for fear that your comfortable life is coming to an end. You’re right – it is. The war is over, as are the profits you take from it, and Leia Organa or the Jedi have nothing to do with it. You are hereby demoted, and I will personally investigate your involvement in the dirty affairs of the Order.”

“We have located the Resistance,” Riinah replies calmly. There is a hum of voices around; everyone is surprised. “They are on Yavin IV. We have them pinned down. We will not stand by and watch you come to an agreement with those who have murdered so many of the First Order people. You step down right now or my flagship, the Vanguard, positioned in Yavin IV’s orbit, will destroy the whole of the Resistance in the next five minutes.”
The bridge is a chaos; everyone is shouting now, difficult to say whether for or against the attack. Hux draws his blaster.

“Traitors,” he says. “You’ll die for it.”

“Put this blaster down, Grand-Marshal Hux,” Riinah says contemptuously. “If the commanding officer of the Vanguard doesn’t receive a signal from me in the next five minutes, and if I don’t maintain contact with him after that, he will strike. Killing us will not help you. Ren surrenders now or his mother and the Jedi die.”

Kylo laughs.

Nobody has ever heard him laugh on this ship and it’s so unnerving that everyone hushes. People shift nervously and tension spikes, as if something terrible were to happen. Even Riinah and the two other Grand Marshals exchange looks.

“Did you really think this was going to work?” Kylo asks, slowly walking towards the viewport by which the three of them are standing. “Did you think Snoke’s former apprentice, a Dark user of the Force, the man who killed his own father, will cower in fear and hand the galaxy over to you to save his mom and his sweetheart?”

“The First Order is rising against you today,” Grand-Marshal Merla shouts, stepping forward and confronting Kylo. He’s almost as tall and strongly built as Kylo is, even if he’s twenty years older. “It’s not because nobody can take you out in combat that you will get away with your crimes for ever. You can’t kill us all and stay safe now that everyone knows about your treason!”

“We’ll see,” Kylo says and ignites his saber.

The three Grand Marshals draw their blasters and spread out, but before they have a chance to fire, they’re frozen in place as the black figure darts towards them. A flurry of black robes and three flashes of red, a few seconds of agonised screaming, and the three headless bodies topple to the floor.

There isn’t a drop of blood. And now that they’re dead, there isn’t another sound in the room.

“Surround the traitors,” Kylo says, turning back to the people behind him. With the Knights igniting their sabers, it doesn’t last long before all the officers accompanying the Grand Marshals are disarmed and surrender. Kylo’s brutality makes everyone gape; nobody feels like tasting the same medicine. There isn’t any bloodshed. Amidst all this, Hux walks hastily towards Kylo.

“It’s not too late. We comm the Vanguard,” Hux says, beckoning the comms officer impatiently and glancing briefly at the three bodies strewing the floor. “I talked to their captain a few days ago. He seemed reasonable then.”

Everything happens so quickly there is no time to reflect. Pure instinct kicks in. Kylo is dazed; he thought he had such automatic reflexes only in combat. He never considered himself to be a strong strategist like Hux. But in fact, this is like combat – it’s short-term, it’s a fight for survival.

So when a few seconds later captain Om’stan’s pale and thin face appears on the screen, the Vanguard’s bridge and crew behind him, Kylo speaks without hesitation.

“Captain, Grand-Marshall Riinah has been executed for treason. Abort immediately the operation he ordered you to carry out.”

The captain is more or less Hux’s age, so just a few years older than Kylo. He stares back at Kylo with a hostile face expression.
“So you killed him, Supreme Leader,” he spits at Kylo, whose hologram must be now towering above everyone on the Vanguard’s bridge. “But you can’t kill us all! The Grand Marshal showed us the recording from the throne room. You are working with the Resistance! That’s why you decided to end the war! You want to destroy the Order, not reform it!”

“Grand Marshal Riinah was part of a criminal system under which the galaxy suffered long enough. I ended the war to end this. I know you’ve been manipulated by Riinah so I will ask one last time as your Supreme Leader: abort the operation right now. We have publicly committed to a ceasefire and peace talks. If we attack the Resistance now, the whole galaxy will turn on the First Order.”

“No,” Om’stan says fiercely, “No, not on the First Order. On you. This is how we take you down.”

Before he ends the sentence, he is shoved onto his stomach and slides a few metres along the floor, until he smashes into a metal bench with a row of computers on it. The technicians manning the workstation jump off their chairs and disperse in panic.

This is a trick Snoke performed on Hux many a time, and Kylo won’t deny that he sometimes enjoyed watching it back then. He has never tried doing the same thing remotely, via holocomm, but apparently it’s not that much more difficult. Kylo is furious; this idiot needs to be put back in line. Nobody would have ever dared to speak to Snoke like that. Snoke was feared and respected, and Kylo will show them that they should be as afraid of him as they were of Snoke.

“They’re in Yavin IV’s orbit,” Hux says in a low voice, typing something on his datapad. “One of our dreadnoughts, the Pride, is not far from there. I’m just telling them to jump to lightspeed, get to the Vanguard’s location and open fire once they have a visual.”

“No time,” Kylo says. The dreadnought will not arrive before the five minutes Riinah mentioned are over, and the Resistance will be dead by then. Why is the Resistance there, anyway? A few days ago, when Kylo spoke to Rey, they were on Hoth. Did she really distrust him so much, even after he offered them peace, that she advised the Resistance to move because he guessed correctly their location?

Well, as it turns out, she was right – his offer, or the First Order’s offer, was not to be trusted.

“In case I haven’t been clear, captain,” Kylo says icily as the Vanguard’s commanding officer picks himself up from the floor, holding his bloodied nose, “You will abort the operation or you will die.”

“Not before I destroy the Resistance,” the man says and turns to his crew. “Start the sequence.”

Kylo closes his eyes.

There are so many choices to make, so many parameters to weigh, and he has no time for any of it.

From the moment Riinah started speaking, Kylo has been slamming against the bond with Rey, trying to open the connection and warn her. Without success. Either she stubbornly refused to open it, or she couldn’t answer at that moment. So he searched for her Force signature – now that he knows where she is in the galaxy, he can locate it more easily – and looked for that of his mother close by. It was there, much less prominent than Rey’s, but clear. He had never done that before but now he has reached out to his mother through the Force. He flooded her with intense emotion: rage, fear, a sense of urgency. He did it in a few waves, making sure it looked deliberate and not like an accidental wave of strong emotion coming from him when his guard was down. He wants it to feel like a warning. He also hopes the Resistance’s technology is advanced enough to allow them to spot the Vanguard in the moon’s orbit, even if the ship must be cloaked. Maybe all that will be enough to give them a chance to flee before the Vanguard fires.
He feels something in return, too. He thinks he can feel his mother’s emotion flowing into him, he can feel her examine him. He reaches out to her again. And for now, that must suffice. Because at present he has to concentrate on something else. The Force is strong with him now, its crest rising, his awareness extended to the furthest corners of the galaxy.

Destroying the Resistance would mean much more than his mother’s and Rey’s death, which is already much too painful to deal with. But if he wanted to abort the strike only for that reason, if he wanted peace only to protect them, Riinah would be right: Kylo would be a traitor, colluding with the Resistance. And Kylo doesn’t want the Resistance to prevail, he just wants to end the war so that he can focus on carrying out the reforms the galaxy needs. And he will do it as the Supreme Leader of the First Order, not as a Senator or the Chancellor of a new galactic Republican Senate. Why don’t his people understand it?

They think he killed Snoke together with the Resistance’s Jedi, perhaps doing her bidding, and in any case to save her, then made an agreement with her and his mother to end the war as soon as he took over the Order. They think he colluded with the Resistance to make peace so as to save them, then to slowly dismantle the Order and bring the Republic back. How can they think so, even after seeing the recording, when the literally first thing Kylo did as the Supreme Leader was to go to Crait and almost annihilate the Resistance? How was that collusion with the enemy?!

Anyway, if the Grand Marshals had voiced their concerns over his relationship with the Resistance earlier, he would have perhaps sat and discussed things with them. Well, at least he wouldn’t have killed them. But no, they only started worrying when he wanted to talk about Dantooine and the governance of the First Order’s worlds. They started worrying because they had their paws in the till, they were in on it, with Snoke, with Dantooine’s governor, and probably many others. It only started mattering to them that Kylo killed Snoke when he made it clear he would shake things up.

This is probably not Om’stan’s case. Chances are he is a true believer in the First Order’s cause. But Kylo won’t be undermined and if the man doesn’t give him the benefit of the doubt, he will die.

It’s not just a show of power. If a First Order ship destroys the Resistance a few days after the ceasefire was publicly announced, everyone will think Kylo was only trying to flush the Resistance out of their hiding to attack them. It will spark a generalised outrage against the Order in the galaxy. At worst, it will be a beginning of a new and worse war. At best, no world will ever join the Order out of its own will, and Kylo was counting on this to build a new galaxy together, without conquest and domination. No, if the Vanguard destroys the Resistance, Kylo will never dig himself out of this hole. He will become public enemy number one again, especially in the Core Worlds, a former Republic stronghold. And explaining that a part of the Order went rogue and acted against him will only make it worse, proving he’s incapable of leadership and disrespected even among his own ranks.

In short, if the Resistance dies on his watch after he promised them safety, it might well mean the death of him as a leader. Even within the Order, his position will become very precarious, opening him up to criticism and, ultimately, to another coup. His opponents will get bolder; it’s all about power, in the end. It doesn’t matter who wants what for the galaxy. It doesn’t matter who agrees or disagrees with his vision. What matters is that as soon as the leader turns out to be weak, the power is up for grabs and someone will try to grab it. Merla was right: Kylo won’t ever be safe again. And once Kylo is down, the First Order will fall into chaos, with different factions fighting for power. With all the military might at their disposal, they will tear the galaxy apart.

So the Resistance needs to be saved. Hux seems to understand it too – Hux has always understood the importance of image and public relations– because otherwise he wouldn’t suggest firing on the Vanguard, their own star destroyer, to save a bunch of Resistance fighters he hates with all his heart.
Kylo concentrates and reaches into the Force.

He would much prefer Annelyse not to see this. Bajeera should have taken her out of here, except that he had explicitly ordered that Annelyse should stay close to him. As a result, she saw him behead three people. In the end, it is as he predicted: sooner or later, she had to see who he really was.

He knows he will lose her. He regrets it already. But there is nothing else to do, or he’ll lose everything. He thought of his destiny and of the galaxy all his life, and it’s a reflex to push personal considerations away and focus on what needs to be done. Later, when he has time to think about it, losing Annelyse will hurt a lot. But he knew the pain would come. He knew he wouldn’t be allowed to keep her. He just didn’t know it would end so quickly.

He lets the terrible anguish swallow him. He allows himself to fully experience the rage at his Grand Marshals’ betrayal, at captain Om’stan’s blind fanaticism, at Rey refusing to open the bond when it could save her life. He calls the anger and the pain, and the fury of it spreads throughout his body and mind, until his chest heaves with it. The darkness within him roars. He extends his awareness again and feels all the living beings on the Vanguard, hanging in the skies above Yavin IV. He visualises the metal structures of the ship enclosing them. He feels the void of the space outside the ship and the surface of Yavin IV below it. He unfolds the invisible threads that connect him to all of this. The Vanguard’s bridge and its crew are still on the screen when Kylo opens his eyes; Om’stan’s attempt to interrupt the connection has been easily overridden by the Finalizer’s systems.

“What are you doing, Ren?” Hux asks curtly.

Kylo extends his hand, closes his fist and turns it to the left.

The visual of the Vanguard’s bridge starts to shake violently. The officers and technicians slide all over the floor as if they were being thrown around. Minor explosions can be heard and lights go on and off. There is also a long, terrible squeaky sound. It all lasts for fifteen seconds or so. Then everything disappears.

“What have you done?” Hux whispers.

“What is your dreadnought?” Kylo manages. His knees are shaking so he stands with his legs wide apart to hide it, and props himself up on a pulpit in front of him. Weakness washes over him and he hopes he won’t faint.

“It should be dropping out of hyperspace in the next minutes.”

“Ask them to look for the star destroyer,” Kylo says.

“What do you mean, look for it?”

“Just ask them.”

Kylo turns to the comms officer who is sitting hunched over behind her workstation and literally sinks into herself when the Supreme Leader’s eyes fall upon her.

“You,” Kylo says. “Establish a holocomm call with all the First Order vessels and bases throughout the galaxy. I will address them. It must be broadcast via every holocomm station.”

The woman nods and hastily presses some buttons.

“Ren, what are you doing?” Hux repeats.
“Connection established, Supreme Leader,” the comms officer says.

A few days ago, Kylo had one of his admirals read his statement to the whole galaxy, because Kylo doesn’t like the limelight. He knows now it was a mistake to delegate a task as important and as symbolic as that. He won’t make that mistake again.

“Leader Snoke died by my hand,” Kylo says. There are no greetings, no polite formulas, no explanations as to why this speech and why now. He knows his large holo is now looming over his terrified troops; it’s the Snoke effect. He imagines their fear and surprise, and feeds on it.

“He did not lead the Order in accordance with our ideals and goals. There will be no more brutality, corruption and destruction. I said I would build a new order in the galaxy, and this is what I have set out to do. I am counting on your cooperation. But if you loved the former Supreme Leader and his methods so much that you can’t get over his passing, you should have left when I gave you a chance to. Otherwise this is what will happen to you.”

Kylo picks up Riinah’s head from the floor, lifts it by the hair and shakes it in front of him. There are gasps of horror and disgust from the officers behind him. Darkness is singing and he channels his rage into the force with which he delivers his address.

“Under Leader Snoke, the Order murdered forty billion people in the Hosnian system. We let criminal gangs and practices flourish in the galaxy so that we could reap profits and maintain our domination. We failed to keep the Order’s promises even to the worlds and systems that had willingly submitted to us. These are the worlds where you used to live, where your families and friends perhaps live still. This ends today. It was supposed to end the day I announced the end of the war, but it turns out not everyone listened. Now you will pay attention as I speak to you.”

He pauses. People on the Finalizer’s bridge are all silent and listening to him as if they were transfixed. He imagines all his troops across the galaxy listening in the same way, and it gives him the confidence to go on.

“There will be no more war. We will have peace with the Resistance so that we can finally start building a better galaxy without being distracted by pointless fighting and slaughter. To those of you who are afraid I am a secret agent of the Republic, I assure you there will be no chaos, inefficiency, corruption and ineffectiveness of the Republic in the galaxy on my watch. But equally, there will be no more slavery, terror and widespread crime which everyone apart from us associates with the First Order. There is no return to any of the old ways. Those of you who don’t want to let the past die, I will take care of you one by one, like I did with those traitors Riinah, Bheer and Merla, who had a bad idea to try to undermine and threaten me today,” Kylo roars.

He has everyone’s full attention. He can see it in Hux’s and Bajeera’s wide eyes.

“End of message,” he hisses.

The connection ends – the comms officer’s face looks green – but nobody on the bridge says anything. Nobody moves.

“The dreadnought?” Kylo reminds.

“Right!” Hux says. “They should be there now.”

The screen lights up again. Kylo wants to be done with it. He thinks he will scream. He has nausea and he needs to drink some water. He is afraid to look behind him lest she should be there, staring at him with disgust.
An elderly Keshiri man, tall and powerfully built, is saluting him on the screen. His purple skin and red eyes are oddly a relief from the earlier parade of human males who seem to dominate entirely the First Order’s higher ranks.

“Supreme Leader!” the Keshiri says in a clear and eager, though wary voice. “How can I be of use?”

“Have you listened to my message, Commander Agheri?” Kylo asks.

“We have, my lord.”

“Have you located the _Vanguard_?”

Agheri is silent for a second too long.

“We have found some debris floating in space,” he says uncertainly. “But there is no star destroyer. We thought it must have got damaged in some kind of a fight, and it jumped to lightspeed to escape. However, the locator says otherwise. It says the ship is on the moon’s surface.”

“What?” Hux asks, frowning.

“We are trying to obtain a visual,” the commander continues. “But sir, there is something more important I need to tell you.”

No, Kylo thinks. No, no, no.

“Whatever happened to them, we think they had managed to carry out the strike. We have identified a large crater on the surface of Yavin IV, exactly where the former Rebellion base was. We think the crater is fresh and it must be the result of an orbital strike.”

The Resistance must have been in that base. Kylo didn’t feel his mother’s and Rey’s passing in the Force. He thinks he would have. But he concentrated such tremendous power on the _Vanguard_, and he felt so many lives snuffed out, that he might have missed even strong ripples in the Force Rey’s and Leia’s deaths would have created.

All this for nothing?

“We have a visual on the _Vanguard_, sir!” Agheri shouts. “It appears that… that is has crashed on the surface!”

“I pulled it from orbit,” Kylo says. “Show me.”

And here it is, its image captured from above, by the star fighters the dreadnought has deployed to the moon’s surface. In the middle of the dense jungle, it’s a picture of utter destruction: countless pieces of the enormous ship spread all over, for kilometres on end, amidst smoke and fire.


Kylo watches his handiwork and feels empty. All these dead. His own people. All this destruction. This is what he’s capable of. And all this for nothing because they had killed the Resistance anyway.

“Commander,” Kylo says.

“Sir?”

“You will send this footage to all the First Order vessels and bases. You will say that you found this on Yavin IV and that this is what is left of the _Vanguard_ after I punished them for treason. Is this...
Agheri nods, but looks so shocked and chagrined as he gazes at something – most likely the holo of the smoking remains of the star destroyer – that he cannot speak.

“Commander,” Kylo says.

“I will pass the message, sir,” Agheri replies quickly. “But, Supreme Leader… Shouldn’t we… look for survivors?”

Again, this is a split-second decision, and there will be no going back. Kylo finds this is quickly becoming the most characteristic feature of being the Supreme Leader. You don’t hesitate. You must always be sure. You only have one chance to do things right.

“Yes,” he says. “Do that. You will provide them with medical assistance. But they will be retained as prisoners. Once they recover, you will have them transported to the same detention facility where we sent the prisoners from Dantooine.”

“Understood, sir.”

The connection ends and Kylo whirs around, striding towards the exit. He needs to get to his quarters. He leaves bewildered Hux behind; the officers step to the sides, everyone’s eyes locked on him, and the silence so complete that Kylo’s ears are ringing.

Bajeera appears by his side and walks with him. Annelyse must be close by; it is probably the last time he has a chance to look at her but he can’t bring himself to do it. He will shatter to pieces when he sees the expression in her eyes, he won’t be able to control himself anymore. He really doesn’t need that. She’ll go back to Coruscant and will hate him and forget him, and he won’t have to face her again.

“You pulled a star destroyer from orbit with the Force and crashed it on a moon… remotely? Across the galaxy?” Bajeera asks slowly. “That’s … impossible.”

“Get her on the shuttle back to Coruscant,” Kylo barks. “Send people for protection with her. I want her to have security detail, at least for some time.”

“What, you won’t even talk to her?”

“Do as I say.”

The nausea is unbearable. He is afraid he will throw up in front of everyone. He leaves the bridge and everyone on it behind, and marches along the corridors, the stormtroopers clinging to the walls in panic, after they watched his sinister message. He wants to shout that only traitors need to fear for their lives but he is too tired. So he keeps walking, until he is by his door. He storms into his quarters and slides down onto the floor. How many times has he done that in the last days?

A wave of nausea makes him jump to his feet and run to the refresher. He falls on his knees and vomits into the toilet bowl for so long he thinks he will pass out.

The fever is back. He can feel it.

He has just killed thousands of his own people and decapitated publicly his three highest-ranking officers. For nothing. One of his ships violated the truce with the Resistance, and the news of this crime will spread across the galaxy like fire.
The fire that will burn him and the First Order down.

His mother is dead and Rey is dead, and the woman who liked him and whom he liked, with whom he spent the best evening and night of his life, despises or fears him now, and won’t ever see him again.

He has truly nothing left.

There go all the pancakes. He has nothing left to throw up with, either. His body is like a furnace, burning with fever and shivering at the same time. He has no strength to get up. Pulling that star destroyer down was the biggest Force feat of his life. He wouldn’t have even thought it was possible. Snoke must have been harnessing his power, because Kylo had never felt capable of that when Snoke was alive.

But it left him terribly weak. So weak that now the adrenaline has worn off, Kylo thinks the effort might actually kill him. And maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, given the circumstances. He crawls on the floor in an effort to get to his bedroom and to bed but he can’t manage it. The Supreme Leader, who has just roared and stunned everyone in a show of his tremendous power, crawling on all fours in his refresher, unable to stand up, his mouth sour with vomit.

He lies down on the cold floor, closes his eyes, and prays that death comes.
After dark

Chapter Summary

He props his head on his hands and starts crying. He killed his father, his uncle, his mother, and Rey, the first woman he really cared about. The last two didn’t die by his hand but it’s his organization that killed them, so it’s the same. He has killed everyone he has ever cared about.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone, you may have noticed that the chapter count has gone up by one - I decided to split today's chapter into two instalments. Enjoy!

When he reopens his eyes wearily and sits up, his comlink’s chronometer tells him he has slept for two hours. On the floor. In the refresher. It has restored him a little, even though he still feels groggy. But when he remembers everything, his heart sinks.

It seems like a bad dream now, and yet it’s anything but. Thousands of people died today by his hand, for nothing. He’s failed his own people, he’s failed the Resistance, he’s failed his mother, he’s failed Rey, he’s failed Annelyse. He’s failed absolutely everyone. It is literally impossible to me more of a failure than that.

He feels so lonely and scared he could scream. Being fried by Snoke’s lightning was nothing compared to this. Back then, he wasn’t in charge. Didn’t need to take any major decisions. He could just be Snoke’s tool and Snoke’s victim, which provided him with a convenient excuse. But now, whatever happens is his responsibility, and it turns out he is sorely unprepared for the role he stole from his old master. Basically, as soon as he took over, everything has fallen apart.

Annelyse must be long back on Coruscant now.

Kylo feels the usual self-loathing but above all, sadness. There were simply no winning cards in that confrontation. What he did has failed spectacularly but he doesn’t regret it. He literally can’t see what else he could have done. Also, he might have been brutal but it wasn’t a tantrum. He was calm and focused, just like on Dantooine. Hux noticed that too, and gazed at Kylo in fearful awe. A madman with Kylo’s powers is scary enough as he leaves a trail of random destruction in his path; but a calculated, self-contained man with the same powers is truly terrifying.

He had to take split-second decisions but when he thinks of it now, he would have taken the same decisions again. There will be time for discussion about the new order for the galaxy. There will be time for everyone to voice their ideas and opinions. He knows he can’t build the new galaxy on his own, he doesn’t have enough knowledge or skills for that. But it starts with his people recognizing him as a leader, trusting him and accepting his most important decision – that of ending the war. Whoever can’t accept that, has no place in Kylo’s Order. The peace is fragile and Kylo is not yet strong enough. He cannot afford to be undermined now. Kylo Ren will be changing things and he wants on board only those people who really want to be part of it. Peace and transformation are his
bottom lines. And he gave everyone a chance to leave if they didn’t like that vision.

In his head, he’s arguing with Annelyse about it. A better man would have hesitated, spared the Grand Marshals’ lives, the imaginary Annelyse accuses. But I did tell you I wasn’t nice, Kylo replies. He’s not a monster but he’s a warrior, deep down, and the tough rules of war make sense to him. Sometimes you need to kill in order to preserve peace. You might need to end some lives in order to save more. You might need to kill for a greater good. The Resistance, who killed thousands when bombing the Starkiller base and First Order ships, not to mention the attack on the Supremacy, would surely not disagree with that.

But Annelyse cannot be expected to understand it. She is a doctor, not a killer. What she saw was not a mutiny that needed to be contained for the sake of the First Order’s stability and peace in the galaxy. No, she saw a madman brutally slaughter three older men in front of their subordinates.

He only hopes she never contacts him again. Because if she does, it will be to say something so harsh the pain might be too much to take. He prefers merciful silence. He knows he has disappointed her like everyone else in his life, he just doesn’t want to hear it from her. He really, really doesn’t. He considers throwing out his datapad and getting one with a new contact code so that even if she writes, he will never see the message.

He will mourn the end of this story. He will miss her and everything that has happened between them, as brief as it was. He will miss the blissful feeling of her warm body wrapped around him and the peace he felt when they fell asleep together. The thrill of her kisses, the intensity of the pleasure they shared, and the pleasant ache in his heart when he cradled her in his arms. The serenity this morning at breakfast, as they watched the sunny day start over Coruscant. Walking in the street and holding her hand.

He misses her hands in his hair. He really liked that.

Being the Supreme Leader is taking decisions that are good for the galaxy and not necessarily for him. He did the same in the throne room when Rey wanted him to leave the Supremacy with her and go to the Resistance. Granted, he hated the thought of going to the Resistance anyway. He doubted they’d even let him live. But above all, he felt he needed to stay in the Order and try to make a difference. Unfortunately, in the end he didn’t manage to make any difference, he only made it worse, and he lost both Rey and Annelyse. In a way, these two situations and these two losses are similar. Both times, he chose the good of the galaxy (and his ambition, too) over the woman he wanted.

But he did the right thing. Both times. He chose what he thought was right, and not what Rey or Annelyse would have wanted him to do. If he had left the Supremacy back then, or had given in to Riinah’s demands and stepped down two hours ago, the war would just continue. There are more cruel and ruthless people in the Order who wouldn’t hesitate to build another Starkiller and blow up a few more worlds. He can’t just hide somewhere on a lush green planet or stroll along Coruscant boulevards, and live his own romantic bliss while all this is happening. Many people would suffer if he left, while his own personal suffering is just one person’s pain. How many times has he taken one life or even a hundred for a greater cause? He can’t make an exception for himself. He owes it to all those he has killed.

Kylo is sitting cross-legged on the floor, stares at Coruscant through the refresher’s small viewport and tries to figure out where to look for Annelyse’s apartment.

His mother and Rey… no. No. The pain flares up; he can’t start crying now or he will never stop.

He props his head on his hands and starts crying. He killed his father, his uncle, his mother, and Rey,
the first woman he really cared about. The last two didn’t die by his hand but it’s his organization that killed them, so it’s the same. He has killed everyone he has ever cared about.

“I’m sorry, mother,” he whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

“Ren?”

Kylo raises his head, only to see Hux’s black boots. He must have completely spaced out; he didn’t even hear Hux enter. How did he enter, anyway? Did Bajeera open the door for him with the Force? Nobody knows the code to Kylo’s quarters.

“Kylo!” Bajeera shouts, appearing at the entrance to the refresher, her eyes darting between him and Hux.

“Get up, Ren,” Hux says. “We have news that you want to hear.”

Kylo looks up and something in his face must startle Hux because he crouches by Kylo’s side.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with me?” Kylo repeats. “Have you missed the events of today?”

“That’s why I’m asking you to get up. You want to listen to this. Can you get up?”

“Give me a minute,” Kylo says and when they leave, he stumbles to his feet.

He washes his face and brushes his teeth about five times before he feels like a human being again. He drinks the tap water greedily, for several minutes, because he is severely dehydrated after all that vomiting. He’s still slightly shaking but once he has drunk water, his headache calms down a bit. Then he goes to his bedroom, takes all his heavy royal garb off and dons a simple shirt and trousers.

In the living room, he sits down on the sofa, opposite Hux and Bajeera, and leans against the cushions. He has no strength to ask any questions. And questions must be asked: is there no sign of a new mutiny? Has the news of the attack on Yavin IV hit the headlines yet? Has Agheri found any survivors in the Vanguard’s smoking carcass?

He doesn’t need to ask whether his mother’s and Rey’s bodies were found. There will be no bodies left after an orbital strike. And maybe it’s better because he couldn’t bear to look at them.

“Kylo,” Bajeera says, taking his hand, which startles him so much he wrenches it out of her grasp. What now? How can it get even worse?

“Stop with this. What do you want to tell me?”

“This is not bad news,” Hux says carefully. “On the contrary.”


“What?”

“Your mother is alive. Armitage and I spoke to her a moment ago.”

“How? It’s impossible.”

His mind is on fire. Suddenly his heart beats so fast and his chest tightens so much he needs to take a
few deep breaths; it feels again as if he was having a heart attack.

“It’s the truth, Ren. Your mother contacted us. I took the call; she wanted to speak to you, she asked what happened, and I told her there was a revolt and one of our ships attacked the Resistance against your explicit orders. She didn’t believe me…”

“She thought I ordered the attack?”

“No. She was afraid you had been overthrown, and that I was lying to her.”

“But I stepped in,” Bajeera takes over, while Kylo stares at them both in disbelief, “and explained who I was, and swore to her you were still in office, alive and well. I offered to go and get you, but I also told her you must be terribly tired as you had concentrated so much Force trying to save her.”

“She believed us in the end,” Hux says. “And then we discussed the politics of it.”

“The politics of it?”

“Yes. I was blunt with her. I told her we didn’t care that much if she and all her cronies were dead or alive but we would never hear the end of it if the whole galaxy found out they were killed by one of ours during a ceasefire.”

“You told her I didn’t care if she was dead or alive?”

Hux shrugs.

“We are still enemies, aren’t we? The peace negotiations haven’t even started. We can’t let them think we care too much.”

“She told us how they survived,” Bajeera says. “She felt a strong pull in the Force from your side. She guessed it was a warning. But they didn’t know the star destroyer was there. They were not on the base at that time, so they had no access to any devices that could detect cloaked ships.”

“What? Where were they then?”

“They were on the Falcon. They left the base for the day. They were visiting another place on Yavin IV,” Hux replies.

“They were… visiting?”

“They saw the base was hit from orbit and understood they needed to get off-world –everyone except Organa thought you just violated the ceasefire agreement – but before they took off, they saw the Vanguard fall down from the sky and crash. Then they just jumped to lightspeed and escaped.”

“Your mother didn’t understand what happened to the Vanguard,” Bajeera explains. “She knew it wasn’t your flagship so she wondered if it had been attacked and destroyed by you or by someone else, perhaps by the gangs, she thought, in retaliation for what you did on Dantooine. She thought maybe the gangs were attacking the First Order, or they made a deal with the part of the First Order that wanted you gone.”

“When Bajeera said you had pulled the ship from orbit with the Force, Organa was speechless,” Hux adds.

Leia Organa, speechless? He rendered her speechless? That’s a first. And so she knows about Dantooine. And she also knows that Kylo tried to save her. She didn’t think he was attacking her –
even if apparently everyone else in the Resistance thought so, maybe including Rey. Leia didn’t think his peace offer had been a trap, and she got in touch to check what happened.

To check if he was ok.

“Kylo?” Bajeera says. He shakes his head, stunned by the news.

“In five minutes she will be making a live statement on the holonet,” states Hux. “To show they’re fine.”

“Who? My mother?”

“Yes. She told us to tune in. You do want to watch this.”

They’re all sitting in front of the comms dashboard in Kylo’s office, which is a small room next to his living area, watching a holo transmission of Leia Organa’s public statement on the holonet.

His mother stands straight, facing the camera, a little crowd of what’s left of the Resistance army behind her. There are so few of them, and they came so close to being completely annihilated. If it had not been for a lucky accident and their absence on the base, they would all be dead now.

Maybe the Force was with him. Or rather, it was with them. With Rey and Leia.

Rey is among them. She’s not standing in the first row behind Leia; no, she lingers at the back, her head down. Knowing Rey, she doesn’t want to be on display like this. She doesn’t like to be the centre of attention. But she’s here because Leia must have made them all show up for this. He can only imagine the conversations these people have had in the last two hours, after their escape from Yavin IV. Where are they now?

“I am General Leia Organa of the Resistance,” his mother says and, small and aged as she is, with thirty people left in her whole army against the might of the First Order, she sounds like she owns the galaxy. “We are here to respond formally to the First Order’s recent offer of peace talks. We confirm we will honour the ceasefire Supreme Leader Kylo Ren has announced. Tomorrow we will be replying to his suggestions of dates and places to start the negotiations.”

She stops for a moment, but this is not because she’s out of breath, or nervous, or moved by emotion. No, Leia Organa makes a pause for effect, and then proceeds to say emphatically:

“The Resistance takes note of the Supreme Leader’s recent actions on Dantooine and his apparent intention to remedy the wrongs the First Order had inflicted on many worlds under former leadership. We will follow the upcoming developments and the Order’s next actions very closely.”

“Not so long ago,” Leia continues, looking straight into his eyes, “none of us would have believed peace talks between our organizations to be possible. Not so long ago, nobody would have associated any hope for change in the galaxy with the First Order. Perhaps many of you feel surprised or even betrayed today to hear that I accept to start negotiations. There is much to forgive, many lives lost and much pain. But my most important objective has always been peace. I am willing to work with anyone who wants peace, though I will not accept it on any terms. Peace can last only when it goes hand in hand with freedom. It cannot survive under tyranny. I used to think Supreme Leader Kylo Ren and I didn’t share the same vision of what the galaxy needs. But after hearing reports from Dantooine, I have allowed myself to hope we might find common ground, if we try hard enough.”

She says this word – hope – for the second time already in this statement, and articulates it more
softly. Kylo knows she says it to him.

“Thank you,” Leia adds and a few seconds later the transmission ends.

“That’s all?” Kylo asks, incredulous. “But she didn’t speak at all about what happened on Yavin IV!”

Hux laughs from his chair.

“Oh, she’s such a clever old fox. Why would she speak of Yavin IV? Why would she broadcast the news that they were attacked by your ship? How credible would then your leadership seem, and with it, the likelihood of your joint success in bringing peace to the galaxy?”

“But everyone will find out anyway…”

“And how?” Hux asks. “Who in the whole galaxy even knows that the Resistance had been on Yavin IV? Everyone on the Pride knows what happened to the Vanguard, but only the Pride’s top command – Agheri and a few of his officers – knew it was related to the Resistance. And some of our officers here on the Finalizer. I have already sent out a note to say that incident is to remain classified, and any disclosure, whether to third parties or inside the Order, will be considered as treason. They won’t dare to talk to the media, not after they saw what happened to Riinah. And even if the info somehow leaked, there’s no story, because everyone has just seen the Resistance is alive and well, and their leader didn’t mention any attack.”

So his mother really went on the holonet to back him. She worked with Hux and Bajeera to help him. Republic supporters all over the galaxy are probably pulling their hair out of their heads right now and calling her a traitor. But what does she owe them, anyway? Where were they when the Resistance was making its last stand on Crait?

Leia Organa is a politician. And Rey is a survivor. Maybe neither of them likes it, but they must both agree that working with Kylo is the best option.

And maybe his mother doesn’t hate the thought so much. Maybe she is telling the truth when she mentions Dantooine and talks about hope.

Kylo is so relieved and overwhelmed he can’t speak.

“You should comm her,” Bajeera suggests. “She left us her coordinates.”

No, he can’t talk to her. She’s alive. Rey’s alive. The terrible weight on his chest is gone, his blinding headache is gone. But he can’t, he won’t talk to Leia. If they talk, they will have a row. He’s still so mad with her about everything. She must still be so mad with him. He can’t see himself saying “thank you” for her support, and he can’t imagine her thanking him for warning her and for destroying the Vanguard. So what are they supposed to talk about?

He shakes his head, stands up and leaves the office, Hux and Bajeera trailing behind him.

“You can rest, Kylo,” Bajeera says. “We’re watching over everything.”

“I know.”

It’s good, and it’s new, to know he can count on people to support him. But there are still so many things to do.

“We need to have a meeting with all the commanders in our fleet,” Kylo says, “before the peace
talks. I won’t make the mistake of taking surprise decisions again. I want them on board. We need to prepare our position together.”

“Very well,” Hux says. “I’ll organize this.” He looks very pleased; after all, he’s the last Grand-Marshal standing. At that meeting, he’ll be the single highest-ranking officer in the whole of the First Order, second only to the Supreme Leader. He will undoubtedly gloat and behave with unbearable arrogance to all the others who will be terribly envious. Well, that will be fun to watch.

“Just don’t organize that meeting in the next few days. I need to recover. Say a week from now.”

“I also think we should postpone the visit to Scarif by one or two days,” Bajeera suggests. “Let’s just stay where we are tonight and tomorrow.”

Kylo nods; indeed, he wasn’t looking forward to having to deal with Scarif so soon after the mutiny. He needs some down time. And staying close to Coruscant for another night and day opens up a lot of masochistic possibilities, such as staring at the planet for hours and thinking about Annelyse.

“We also have news from the Pride,” Hux says. “Hundreds of survivors from the Vanguard have been found. They’ve all been taken care of and will be detained, as per your orders.”

“They might not all be traitors,” Kylo states. “There are chances it was only Om’stan and his top officers. Tell Agheri to set the course for Coruscant to rendezvous with us. My Knights can interrogate the prisoners tomorrow.”

“Understood,” Bajeera says. “And one more thing, Kylo. The doctor…”

“No.”

There’s a moment of silence.

“No what?” Bajeera asks.

“I don’t want to talk about her. I won’t.”

“But Kylo…”

“I need to rest.”

“Very well.”

After they leave, he takes a hot bath. He hopes it will help him sleep. And he can sleep now, because not everything is lost. The only thing that is lost is Annelyse, and he won’t think about her. Familiar sadness and weariness take hold of him; the happy feeling, the lightness he experienced in the past two days thanks to Annelyse, it’s all long gone. It was still there this morning, it still lingered at five to midday when he got off the shuttle from Coruscant, and now it’s as if it had never happened. He can still almost feel the heat of her body and the touch of her lips on his, and yet it’s as if it had never happened.

Maybe in some weeks or months, after she hears about the results of the peace talks, she will cease to hate him. Maybe she will keep some good memories, once the image of him decapitating three people fades in her mind.

Who is he trying to fool? That image will never lose its vividness.

He gets out of the bath and puts his clothes on. A droid brings him tea he has ordered; his tortured
stomach needs it. He feels better. He’s still very weak, but it’s more from the strain of his incredible Force stunt than from illness.

Somehow the bath has revived him instead of lulling him to sleep, so he lies down on the sofa, wondering what to do. Watch the holonet? Scan the headlines about Dantooine? The day after his visit, there was already a lot of positive media coverage, and now, after Leia Organa mentioned it, there will certainly be more. Also, there will be extensive coverage of her statement, and some speculations as to the results of the future peace talks. Usually he hates reading about himself in the media but for once, he is interested.

However, the first headline he stumbles upon is about the Supreme Leader Ren dining with a mysterious woman at a gourmet restaurant on Coruscant – with a photo of them sitting at the table. The photo must have been taken discreetly by one of the other guests, and they must have made good money selling it to the media outlet. In the photo, Kylo is leaning towards Annelyse, their hands clasped together on the table. She is smiling.

He switches the holonet off and instead orders from his comms department a full media report on Dantooine, on General Organa’s statement, and on the attack of Yavin IV, should any coverage of the latter appear. He won’t take any more chances to do the search himself.

He picks up a holobook but can’t focus on it. So in the end he closes his eyes and slowly nods off.

Until there is a knock on the door.

It’s a loud knock; whoever it is, they aren’t shy or afraid. Either it’s a new contingent of mutineers or it’s Hux with more news. Kylo extends his Force awareness to feel the living beings in the proximity but he detects just one presence behind the door. Not another mutiny, then.

He waves the door open with his hand.

“What now, Hux?”

Annelyse steps into his quarters and slides the door shut behind her. Then she turns around and faces him.

Kylo stares.

She doesn’t say anything. Her face is impassive. If anything, she’s just watching him attentively.

For some reason, tears prickle at his eyes. He won’t have her watch him cry like a baby, so he turns onto his side, with his back to her, and puts an arm over his head.

Maybe she will just leave. Why is she here? To say goodbye? To shout at him? Why hasn’t she gone back home? Where has she been until now?

He squeezes his eyes tight shut and wills her to disappear.

He can hear a small sigh and she sits next to him on the sofa. She takes his arm, under which he’s hiding his face, and moves it out of the way. She slides her hand into his hair and leaves it there, the warmth of her palm against his temple.

And then she puts her other hand on his heart and it burns. It hurts. But he grabs it anyway – he can’t help it. He holds it there, pressed against his chest, and her hand feels like a kyber crystal, hot, alive and full of feeling, radiating its heat, singing to Kylo like his own kyber crystal did years ago, when it chose him as its master. The song pulses throughout Kylo’s body, and his heart sings back to it.
“You don’t know me,” he blurs out. “You know nothing of my story. You have no idea what my life has been.”

“So tell me,” Annelyse says, standing on her tiptoes and brushing her cheek against his face. She wraps her arms around his neck and kisses the corner of his mouth, and Kylo leans into the caress. “Tell me. Maybe we are characters from different stories, but that doesn’t mean I cannot listen to your story and understand it. You’ve never given me a chance.”

“Why are you here?” Kylo asks.

They have been silent for a few minutes. He is lying on the sofa, facing away from her, and holding her hand against his chest. She isn’t leaving nor saying anything, so in the end he has to turn back towards her and speak up.

“I’d have thought it should be obvious why I am here,” she says.

“I asked Bajeera to escort you to the shuttle.”

“I didn’t want to go to the shuttle. I’d just arrived. And I don’t like being escorted around.”

“I assumed you’d want to leave after what happened.”

“What a pity you prefer to assume things about me instead of asking.”

So this is a row. They’re having a row. He knew it, and that’s precisely why he wanted her to leave. What good can come out of her staying here for another hour to shout at him and then leave anyway? He doesn’t want to go through the goodbyes, the whys, and the how could yous. He’s not feeling well and he just can’t bear it.

He’ll need to have a word with Bajeera. She disregarded his direct order, and on top of it she must have helped Annelyse find his quarters.

“I didn’t want to leave, “Annelyse resumes. “I was worried about you. I thought you might feel unwell again. Have you?”

“Yes. No. It will pass. I used the Force, and it takes a lot of energy…”

“I saw.”

She is silent, takes his wrist and checks his pulse, then releases it and touches his forehead. He’s not running fever this time. It’s just an overwhelming fatigue.

“Bajeera says they found you in the refresher, on the floor.”

Kylo is furious with Bajeera. Why doesn’t she mind her own business and her own love story with the ginger?
He is determined not to answer, until in the end Annelyse shifts uneasily on the sofa.

“It was rude of you to leave without a word, and send me home like that,” she says softly but sadly.

“Were you paying any attention? Did you see what happened?”

“So you simply had no time to spare a thought for me later?”

“I was thinking of you all the time. And I really didn’t feel like hearing what you thought of me after that shitshow there.”

“Oh, so this is what it was about?”

“What else could it have been about? You thought I forgot about you?”

“I didn’t know what to think.”

“You need to leave,” Kylo says because he can’t stand this back and forth between them. He doesn’t know what to tell her. She’s sitting here, judging him, and all this because he didn’t look at her after he decapitated three people and crashed a star destroyer?

“Is this what you really want?” Annelyse asks. “You want me to leave? Because you’re doing everything,” she raises her voice, “to push me away. Is this your usual operating mode? You do whatever you can to make people leave you and then complain once they do?”

“What?” Kylo shouts, furious, and jumps to his feet. She stands up too, and now they’re facing each other as if preparing to fight. How dare she? Who’s asking her for opinions on his life? They don’t owe anything to each other. If she hates him so much, if this is what she thinks of him, who’s stopping her from leaving? He doesn’t need this. He’s a disappointment yet again, to yet another person. She could have kept that to herself. She could have just left without telling him this in his face… She doesn’t know anything! Doesn’t know how it felt to see his parents leave after they dropped him off at Luke’s, to see Luke standing with the saber over him, to see Rey pretend she was reaching for his hand…

He clenches his fists and Annelyse’s eyes dart to them, then back to his face. She takes a step back. Does she think he wants to hurt her? For a moment, a vicious moment, he lets her think so. He enjoys her fear. She’s making him suffer, why doesn’t she try her own medicine for a bit?

But she recovers quickly from her surprise. She steps closer to him again and takes his hands in hers. She slides her fingers into his fists and slowly, gently, tries to unclench them. It hurts so much he doesn’t even resist. So she’s holding his hands now and looks into his eyes, and he’s crying, because she’s right and at the same time she isn’t, because she doesn’t know everything and it’s not fair of her to be saying what she’s saying, but there is some truth in it, too.

“You don’t know me,” he blurts out. “You know nothing of my story. You have no idea what my life has been.”

“So tell me,” Annelyse says, standing on her tiptoes and brushing her cheek against his face. She wraps her arms around his neck and kisses the corner of his mouth, and Kylo leans into the caress.

“Tell me. Maybe we are characters from different stories, but that doesn’t mean I cannot listen to your story and understand it. You’ve never given me a chance.”

Her affectionate touch makes something melt deep inside him and he fears he’ll just collapse and cry his heart out.
“I didn’t meet you at the right time,” he says instead, and regrets it immediately because she flinches and lets go of him.

“This is what people say when they want to get rid of someone. It’s an excuse.”

“It’s not!” he explodes. “I’m trying to recover from terrible things. At the same time, I’m trying to end the war and transform completely my empire. It’s a very difficult time. I would like to show you a better side of me. But for the time being, it’s impossible. I don’t want you to see me cry, collapse, and I certainly don’t want you to see me chop people’s heads off!”

“You need to talk to me about things. Tell me what you’re planning to do with the First Order once the war is over. So that I see if I can… live with it.”

“I thought you were not interested in politics.”

“Are you particularly interested in medical research?”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I’m interested in you, not politics.”

Kylo is silent.

“Bajeera talked to me,” Annelyse adds. “She said if you hadn’t killed them, in the end there would be a coup against you, and the war would continue. She said you had to send a message.”

“Yes. It might have been brutal but it was the only way to preserve peace.”

“It wasn’t easy to look at. Not for someone like me who swore to save lives and not to take them.”

“I am well aware. That’s why I don’t expect you to understand. But if you came to tell me I’m a monster, I must tell you I’d do the same thing if I had another chance.”

But she’s not saying anything and her hands are on him again; one strokes his shoulder and neck, the other caresses his hair. He knows it will stop, it’s a goodbye, so he tries not to enjoy it too much, not to get used to it, because he doesn’t want to crave it desperately once she’s gone.

“I’m sorry I left so abruptly,” he says. He can’t help it, he leans into her touch; it’s so soothing.

“Are you feeling all right now?” Annelyse asks quietly.

Yes and no. He still feels this unpleasant tightness in his chest, a difficulty to breathe, though it’s much less dramatic than the previous times. But he doesn’t want to talk about it. He takes her hand and kisses her knuckles.

Annelyse kisses him on the cheek, then snakes her arms around his waist and looks up into his eyes.

“Your mother is alive. You’re still the Supreme Leader. And we will have peace,” she says. “Think about this side of things for a change.”

Don’t leave, Kylo thinks enclosing her in his arms, and barely stops himself from saying it aloud. He closes his eyes and lets her warmth envelop him. He can feel her light, gentle strokes on his back; there’s so much affection in these little touches, and he doesn’t deserve it. She doesn’t even appear to be making a judgment. She’s not saying she understands what he did but she’s not saying she doesn’t, either; she’s not saying he did the right thing, she’s not saying he did the wrong thing. She’s holding him close.
“Bajeera says you’re not leaving until tomorrow night,” she whispers. “Do you want me to stay here tonight?”

He’s so surprised he doesn’t know how to reply.

“Well?”

“Of course I do,” he says miserably. “But then what? Did you hear what I’ve said? What happened today might happen again. The fact that the war in the galaxy is over doesn’t mean there will be no dangerous enemies to eliminate. Such decisions might need to be taken again. And I’ll do what needs to be done.”

“I know.”

“So?”

“I have already told you. Do not presume to know what I want.”

“You really want to stay?”

“I want to try.”

He tilts her chin up so that she has to look into his eyes.


“Why? I don’t know yet. It’s impossible to know that early why. But ask me again in a few weeks and I might know better.”

“In a few weeks I might already have a residence on Coruscant.”

“So I’ll tell you in your residence, if you invite me.”

He remains silent, holding her in his arms, but still wary.

“How is it possible that you’re so gentle, so sensitive, and then you can be so brutal?” Annelyse whispers. “I find it confusing.”

“I find it very confusing, too.”

“So,” Kylo says as, twenty minutes later, they’re eating together a light meal that Annelyse insisted he should have to settle his stomach, “You made acquaintance with my chief Knight, Bajeera.”

“Yes. Quite a character, isn’t she?”

“Definitely.”

“Do you know she’s involved with this funny redhead General?” Annelyse asks and Kylo bursts out laughing. He didn’t think a few hours ago he would laugh again today – or for the rest of his life.

“Grand-Marshal. Yes, I’m aware. You couldn’t imagine a more improbable pairing even if you tried.”

“Aren’t they characters from different stories?” Annelyse suggests with a smile.

“Well, no. Not in the sense I meant it about us. They’re both soldiers. But in another way, you're
right. I’d never have expected them to be a good match.”

“She says her body colour turns him on.”

“Stars, you two got really close! I don’t want to hear about their relationship. I’m still getting used to the idea.”

“Have you… ever been in bed with an alien woman?” Annelyse questions hesitatingly. Kylo slightly chokes on his food. Her directness never ceases to take him by surprise.

“Once.”

“What race of alien? A Twi’lek? They’re considered to be very beautiful.”

“No. A Mirialan. And to be honest, it was mostly because they are supposed to have an understanding of the Force. I was curious.”

“And?”

“And we had an interesting conversation about it.”

Annelyse laughs.

“What about you?” he asks and immediately regrets. Not sure he wants to listen about her alien conquests…

“An alien man? No.”

“Not on your bucket list?”

“Not really. It’s not my fantasy. But you know what was on my bucket list?”

“A Supreme Leader of the First Order?”

She laughs again and her eyes sparkle just like yesterday in the lab and in the restaurant, and this morning at breakfast. He loves that.

“Almost! A Jedi.”

“Really?!” Kylo exclaims, surprised.

“Yes. You know, the smooth moves, the natural authority, the lightsaber… But I suppose by Jedi I just meant a Force user. Not necessarily the Light side.”

She’s definitely flirting with him now.

“Obviously,” Kylo says. “Because it’s difficult to take a Jedi to bed. They have a rule of no attachments. ‘There is no passion, there is serenity’. That’s really a mood dampener on a date, don’t you think?”

“While Dark siders…” Annelyse prompts, grinning. She gets up from her chair and goes on to sit on his knees.

“…While for Dark siders, or more exactly the Sith, ‘peace is a lie, there is only passion’. Isn’t that more exciting?” he tempts, his hands roaming over her back.
“I’ve noticed that with you,” she teases and bites his earlobe.

“Would you like me to show you again?” Kylo offers.

In the bedroom, as he takes his shirt off, she moves to stand behind him and kisses his back, between the shoulder blades. It’s a new and lovely sensation. Kylo straightens up and she trails her fingers over the muscles rippling under his skin. She reaches around him to his belt, unbucks it and slides her hand inside his trousers. She opens the buttons and strokes him through his underwear until he becomes hard. Then she puts her hand under the waistband of his boxers and he moans as she touches him.

“Take it off, Kylo,” she whispers. “All of it.”

A moment later he’s on the bed naked, watching her as she removes her underwear, then climbs on top of him.

“Not taking your dress off?”

“Not yet.”

She straddles him and he thinks he knows where this is going when suddenly she rises on her hands and knees and crawls closer to his head. She bends down and kisses him; it’s a deep, wet kiss, she tastes of fresh fruit they had for dessert, and of the lemon that she added to her water. He reaches underneath her and slides his fingers between her slick folds.

“You’re ready,” he whispers. “So quickly.”

“I’m ready. But you’ll have to wait for it.”

She now moves beyond his head and straightens, and then he understands. He puts his arms under her thighs to hold her above him as she lowers herself onto his face.

The bottom part of her dress falls around his head and hides the sight of her face from him. She’s hovering above his mouth, her folds brushing his nose and lips. It’s an amazing sensation, and also… an amazing sight. He’s never seen a woman like this, so close, so intimately. He spent some time with his head between her legs last night but it was dark in her bedroom and he didn’t see much; now, the lights are on. He flicks his tongue against her entrance, then licks her sensitive spot. She starts moving over his face, seeking friction, sliding along his tongue. She puts her hands into his hair, then rides his face slowly, her thighs trembling in his arms.

He feels powerful and powerless at the same time. He has a firm grip on her legs, he gives her so much pleasure she trembles and moans, but it is she who dictates the pace and holds him in place. He likes this double feeling. It brings him some kind of balance as they are both wielding power over each other. He is enjoying this new position, he is enjoying seeing her in control, so liberated, so unembarrassed, seeking her pleasure. He wants to make her come like this.

Then suddenly she lifts her hips, gathers her dress and looks down at him. He feels a bit self-conscious because his face is covered in her wetness, but she smiles.

“Let’s try something different,” she says and turns around. She’s above his face again, but facing in the other direction. She bends down over his body and takes him in hand.

He badly needed that touch; if she can stroke him just a little, he’ll come together with her. He tugs her hips down and she lowers herself again, her dress falling over his head.
He starts licking her again and then, all of a sudden, he feels her mouth on him. He can’t see what she’s doing, he can only feel, and it’s even more exciting like this. She caresses him with her tongue, gives him slow licks up and down his length, sucks him lightly, then finally she plunges her mouth down and slowly starts bobbing her head while he laps at her more and more desperately as his own body is throbbing with pleasure.

With her slick on his tongue and face, and her wet mouth enveloping him, it feels a bit as if he was inside her, but it’s also very different, and he closes his eyes as he gives into the sensation. They fall into a rhythm; the room is quiet except for their panting and the sounds of their lovemaking. She starts moving faster over his tongue, and he thrusts up into her mouth, and spreads his legs so that she can caress him. The pleasure is building up, Kylo groans with each dip of her head and raises his hips to meet her mouth, and she is clenching around his tongue. He knows she’s close, so he lets himself chase his pleasure too.

“Kylo!” she moans and raises her head as she comes with a few violent spasms that he can feel on his mouth and tongue. She rides his face, shuddering, and finally stills and shifts slightly upwards. He is panting below her, aching for his own release. A moment later, he pulls her down and starts licking her again, but very lightly. It must be to her liking because she sighs contentedly and takes him into her mouth again.

It doesn’t take long. He abandons himself completely to the heat and wetness of her mouth, and moans loudly into her core. Her lips move faster now, tight around him, and his whole body tenses. A few more dips of her head, a few more thrusts of his hips and he comes in her mouth. She stills for a moment to take the first wave of his orgasm, then resumes her movement. He can feel her throat tighten as she swallows, and he cries out; he buries his face in her folds and breathes her in as she sucks him through his climax, until he’s all spent. She gives him one more lazy, slow lick, and Kylo shudders all over.

She falls onto her side and he grabs one of her ankles, now lying on the bed close to his head, and covers it and her foot with kisses. She strokes his thigh affectionately.

Kylo tugs at her ankle.

“Come here,” he whispers.

She shifts on the bed, finally takes her dress off and crawls to him, then lies on her side next to him. Her cheeks are pink and she grins widely. She pulls him close and opens her mouth to him, and he can taste himself, which at first is strange, but very exciting, too, especially as he knows she can also taste herself on his tongue. His own taste is salty and a bit bitter, while she tasted salty but also sweet. They both moan at this realization and it’s a long, messy, and incredibly sensual kiss.

“Thank you,” he murmurs. “That was amazing. I’ve never done that.”

“I loved it, too.”

“I’ve noticed.”

The both laugh quietly. He feels so relaxed, so light-hearted he can barely believe it. Is he a monster for feeling this way after the events of the day? And are they both sick to have sex only hours after a bloodbath? Is this some kind of a trauma coping strategy for both of them?

And when the moment’s passed, will she realize it was just that, and remember he is a monster, and run away?
“Kiss me again,” he demands and she complies. He’s swimming in her mouth, drowning in her. There’s something so reassuring and strong in this woman, despite her smaller frame, that he feels stronger himself when he holds on to her. He knows he can’t rely on someone else to keep him together, it’s not for anyone to fix his broken pieces, make him whole and happy. *He* needs to do it. But this is theory, and the truth is he hasn’t felt as happy as now – with her – in years.

Some time later he opens his eyes and she’s still close, her forehead touching his, her fingers in his hair.

“I fell asleep,” he realizes with horror. “I’m sorry! Did I really fall asleep in the middle of kissing you?”

“Sort of,” Annelyse admits and laughs, pulling him closer to her and giving him a kiss. “It was incredibly sweet. My favourite moment with you yet.”

“I’m such a loser,” he mutters, stroking her back.

“You’re feeling well?”

“Yes. Thanks to you.”

“I’m glad.”

“Let me make love to you again,” Kylo says.

“All right,” she replies, looking delighted, and shrieks as Kylo pounces; he has her now on her back and he settles between her legs.

“You look content,” he remarks, watching her from under the curtain of his dark curls. He’s hard and when she spreads her legs more widely, he doesn’t even need his hand to guide him, he just slides into her wetness and warmth, and lies still for a moment, to enjoy the feeling of being so close, being one.

She looks like she’s enjoying it too, her eyes closed, enveloping him tighter with her legs, her arms wrapped around his neck.

“You feel so good inside me,” she whispers. And when he starts moving, really slowly, she’s melting into him, moaning into his mouth, barely moving herself, just taking him in, opening herself up to him, letting him take her. He then flips her over onto her stomach and settles again between her spread legs, their bodies flush, flat on the bed, but she raises her hips to him ever so slightly for a better angle, and whimpers into the pillow as the friction increases. He kisses and bites the nape of her neck, and she pushes her hair aside to give him better access. The sight of her under him, her neck bared to his lips so invitingly, and the feel of her whole body against him, is wonderful. He takes her arms and spreads them, enlaces his fingers with hers, and thrusts into her harder, but at a steady, not too fast pace. When they both get closer, he flips her over again; he wants to see her face when they’re coming. The buildup is slow and he controls himself because he can feel she wants it that way.

Finally she arches under him, seeking even more friction, and he obliges, making his strokes faster and harder to penetrate her deeper. When her orgasm starts, she rolls her hips against him wildly and he guesses he’s hitting a special spot, so he doesn’t hold back, he gives her all he has, and only at the end, when she slows down, he lets himself go and fills her with his release.

When he looks at her again, she’s smiling.
“…Definitely a Dark sider,” she murmurs, and he covers her throat with greedy kisses.

“I want to try too,” he says, stroking her arm, as they rest in bed, naked and drunk on love hormones.

“Try what?”

“You said you wanted to try. To be together. I want to try too.”

He knows couples get together and split up, as they realise, after days or weeks or months – and often years – that they’re not a good match, or not anymore. At this point, a few days into their relationship, if it can be called this way, it’s statistically very likely that it will end in nothing.

But there is a hunger in him, and maybe most people, he thinks, don’t approach a relationship with a hunger like this. They can afford to be more nonchalant about it. More reckless. He’s had so few good things in his life, and he’s lost so much, that he will hold on to this. He won’t let it go to waste.

She’s not like some First Order women officers who would admire him and never dare to question him on anything, or like those women he met in the cantinas, who were excited by his power and the title of a First Order Commander. She’s also not like Rey, who did challenge him and didn’t care about power and titles, but wanted him only conditionally, and her conditions were so hard that in the end he felt what she wanted wasn’t him at all. Annelyse is not indifferent to war, cruelty and brutality that his life is still full of; she won’t close her eyes to it. But she can also see beyond that. She has a moral sense, but she doesn’t judge him, like all the others have done all along. And when people judge him, they invariably judge him not good enough. His mother, his father, his uncle, Rey. Luke Skywalker and Rey, the two Jedis, might actually be the most judgmental people he’s ever met. In the end, Rey pushed him away, she didn’t even really want to talk to him, and his uncle’s apology at Crait still stings. He pretended to fight Kylo just to buy the Resistance some time, it was all a lie, designed to trick him; Luke wasn’t even really there. And now that Kylo knows it, Luke’s reluctant apology seems as insincere as the rest of their encounter.

Annelyse isn’t like any of them.

They talk for hours, eat another snack, and finally go to sleep. Kylo wakes up a few hours later, just like he did last night. He looks at Annelyse’s sleeping form and decides he needs to do something. He slips out of the bed as quietly as possible, dresses quickly, goes to his living room and from there enters his office. He locks the door behind him.

Then he activates the comms system and types the coordinates that Bajeera left on the dashboard.
The healing

Chapter Summary

“My sad, serious, lovely prince,” Annelyse says quietly, and each of her words, each look she gives him, each squeeze of her hand and each stroke she gives his hair floods Kylo’s battered, hardened heart with warmth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A woman’s face appears on the viewscreen; she has dark blond hair tied in two buns on the sides of her head, she’s young and tired-looking. Kylo doesn’t know what part of the day cycle it is where they are, but even if it’s the waking hours, the fatigue is understandable. They must have been stretched to the limit since Crait, not to mention that some of them might be injured and still recovering.

Seeing him on the viewscreen, the woman freezes. He considers this to be progress; probably a few days ago she would be so horrified she’d cut the connection. Now, after the announcement of peace talks and Kylo’s intervention on Yavin IV, which Leia must have told her people about, the young rebel is still unsettled by the sight of him but her first instinct isn’t to fight back or run.

“Supreme Leader Ren,” she speaks, trying to keep her voice level.

“I want to speak with my mother,” Kylo says.

The woman hesitates.

“She asked not to be disturbed… she’s not feeling well…”

Anxiety spikes in him. Was it all too much for her as well? Is she suffering from similar health difficulties?

Or is it their last conversation, a few days ago, that impacted her so? General Organa, though fearless, is getting older. He should have been gentler with her. He should have considered… what if something happens to her now and he’ll never see her again?

“What’s wrong with her?”

The young woman looks surprised at his question.

“She’s just very tired. And sad. I think.”

“Please tell her I am here,” he says. “If she’s not feeling well enough, I’ll comm again in a few hours.”

The woman stares for a few seconds but then nods, stands up and hastily leaves the room. Kylo wonders where they are. Perhaps they’ve been jumping from world to world since Yavin IV. But at present they must be in some kind of base because this is not the Falcon’s bridge.
Suddenly a figure appears in the doorway and approaches the comm station. It’s Dameron. Kylo clenches his fists and looks daggers at the other man, who glares at him in return.

“What do you want, you brute?” Poe barks at Kylo and leans so close to the viewscreen that Kylo can see every pore on his tired face. He has no compassion for the pilot though.

“Get out of here. I am waiting to speak with my mother.”

“Why don’t you leave her alone? Why are you still tormenting her? You’re the reason she suffers every day! She almost got killed today because of you, and after you promised her peace, too! Don’t you ever have enough?”


“Or what, Supreme Leader?” Poe sneers with black hatred in his eyes. “You will choke me via holocomm? I hear remote killing is your new thing. Why don’t you go and smash another of your star destroyers, or chop off some more heads, now that will make you feel better, you bloody lunatic. The whole galaxy is still mocking your stupid tantrum on Crait. You’re pathetic!”

“I will kill you,” Kylo promises.

“Poe!” Leia says, stepping in front of the viewscreen. She looks alarmed. And yes, she also looks worse than last time. Tired. She has clearly been crying a lot recently. For a moment, Kylo feels dark satisfaction that something finally got to her. Always so self-controlled and self-satisfied, never questioning herself… maybe their last conversation managed to shake her a little.

“What’s going on, Ben?” she asks quickly, glancing between him and Poe. They are both fuming.

“This little piece of shit,” Kylo spits through clenched teeth, “this little fraud who’s ingratiated himself with you by killing thousands of my people – and yet he’s a nice guy, and I’m apparently a villain – is not coming to the peace talks. If he shows his face, I swear I will kill him. Slowly. I will have him beg for death. Do you understand, General Organa?”

“Get out of here, Poe,” Leia orders drily. “And for the future, do not interfere in a conversation between me and my son.”

“Leia…” the damned pilot starts, gesturing angrily towards the viewscreen.

“Dismissed,” Leia cuts him off.

As Dameron is leaving, Kylo gloats – for a second, until he realizes how pathetic it is to gloat. To rejoice in the fact that his mother defended him and not the other guy. Like a ten-year-old child.

Leia turns towards the viewscreen. Her small, red eyes look at him without anger, but with a lot of pain.

“I only have one son, Ben,” she says slowly. “Only one. Who is bent on breaking my heart over and over again.”

Kylo doesn’t have a reply to that. For a long moment, they look at each other in silence and some of his anger evaporates.

“I’m sorry,” he says sullenly. “It’s not what I wanted this conversation to look like.”
Leia sighs and he remembers all the times he apologized as a boy for breaking something, or making a mess, or scaring another child, or throwing a tantrum for one reason or another, and then his mother always sighed like that.

“I saw the message you sent to your troops today,” she changes the subject.

How did she see his message? It was broadcast only on the First Order’s internal channels. She surely doesn’t have the technology to break the access codes…

“Hux played the recording to me when we talked earlier today. To prove you were not behind the attack on Yavin IV.”

“You were not supposed to see that,” Kylo says. So she saw him holding Rinnah’s head by the hair and screaming he’ll kill all the traitors.

“No, I guess not. It was…”

She stops for a moment, looking for the right words.

“Spare me your indignation,” Kylo interjects. “You and I don’t have the same methods.”

“No, we don’t. At the same time, I don’t have traitors in my army.”

“I have a few million people in my army. You have thirty.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Leia admits. “Still, one can’t possibly imagine me holding a traitor’s head separated from their body in a holocomm message to my troops.”

“No, I can’t imagine that,” Kylo agrees. “Your body count might not be that different from mine, but you indeed never dirty your hands.”

And is he imagining it, or is his mother’s lip twitching as if she was suppressing a little smile? It’s gone as soon as he notices it and he isn’t sure. Leia sighs again.

“I have a feeling we’ve had this conversation already,” she remarks.

“I also saw your message earlier today. On the holonet.”

She nods.

“You’re helping me,” Kylo points out, frowning. “Why?”

“You really don’t know why?” Leia asks.

It would be nice if she could actually say it one fucking time.

“You tried to warn me and save us today. I felt it. And you did good on Dantooine. You really want to have peace. So as we’re now working towards the same objective, I thought I’d help you out.”

She’s silent for a moment and he is waiting, but… it’s not coming. Never mind then.

“I saw what you did with the star destroyer,” Leia resumes. “You are extremely powerful. More than I thought you or anyone could ever become. I simply didn’t think something like that was possible.”

He is silent because he doesn’t really know what to say. Is this a praise? Is she admiring his skill? Or is she condemning what he did? He can’t tell.
“We picked up a Force-sensitive girl on Dantooine,” he says to change the subject. “Bajeera, my Knight who spoke to you earlier today, is teaching her… but I have also trained her a bit and I will do that again. It’s nice to teach.”

Leia nods.

“Bajeera is good,” she comments. “I was glad to get to know her. She is loyal to you. You need people like that around you. If you can teach new Force-sensitives, so much the better. It can be your closest, most trusted circle.”

Strangely, she doesn’t bring up any of the Light/Dark issue. He expected her to say that someone who uses the Force like he does shouldn’t be a teacher to others, and he has already been preparing a nasty reply to that. So, would his mother agree with him that this distinction belongs in the past and shouldn’t be used anymore? Or does she think he turned to the Light and this is what he’ll be teaching? He can’t tell.

“I know you’d have been a good teacher to Rey,” Leia says suddenly. “But she has chosen differently. You should know she’ll be leaving us soon. She says once there is peace, we won’t need her anymore. She has the books she took from Luke’s… I think she’ll be learning on her own.”

Kylo nods. He’s somewhat pained by the mention of Rey, as he expected he would be, but not surprised to hear of her plans.

“I suppose she needs to find her own path.”

“Yes. Your paths have crossed and perhaps in different circumstances, at some other time… but Rey is only starting to learn how not to be alone. She dreams of having a family, but for the time being she doesn’t even know very well how to be with people. Even with us, on the base, she’s not comfortable. She needs to come to terms with her new life, with the Force, with the possibilities of her future.”

Kylo understands that. He too, like Rey, first and foremost wants to be less lonely. And he too doesn’t know yet how to be with someone. He thought they’d learn that together, he and Rey, but it’s not what happened. However, he is learning that now, in a different way, and with someone else.

“I’ll reply tonight to your suggestions for the dates and places for the peace talks,” Leia continues, visibly inferring from his silence that the conversation is coming to an end.

“I wanted to tell you… I’ve met someone recently,” Kylo says before he can stop himself.

Leia’s eyes widen and he almost snorts. What, his own mother finds him so unattractive that she can’t imagine anyone would be interested in him? Is there a limit to how disappointing she can be?

But suddenly she smiles so brightly he blinks. There it is: the smile he remembers. He hasn’t seen joy in these eyes since he was a child. He is moved and hurries to speak in order to hide the emotion.

“She’s a doctor,” he blurts out, stupidly. As if he was trying to get his mother’s approval, which is pathetic. “She came to treat me when I fell ill. And yesterday we had dinner together.”

“So it’s true!” Leia exclaims.

“What, you knew?”

“Well, all over the holonet there are pictures of you with a woman, walking down a boulevard in Coruscant. Someone has sent them to me… actually several people have,” she chuckles. “But I
didn’t think it was that… I thought maybe it’s one of your advisers, or officers… or…” she trails away.

“Or what?”

“I thought maybe you were trying to make Rey jealous… and it’s someone… unimportant.”

Great to hear about all the various ways in which Leia Organa thinks low of him. He deserves to be called a murderer and a madman, fine. But what in the galaxy made her think he’s also a womanizer? And a liar, for that matter, because last time she wondered if he was trying to trick Rey when he asked her to rule the galaxy with him.

“Well, no. It isn’t. It’s none of these things. But we’ve only just met.”

Actually, he’s already spent more time with Annelyse and talked to her more than he had done with Rey when he offered her the galaxy. Not to mention the physical intimacy, which he has shared with Annelyse but not with Rey, and, well, it is an important part. Seen like this, the feelings he had for Rey, and his former plans for the two of them, seem slightly exaggerated. Or at least, not based on anything real and tangible. They talked a few times for a few minutes, and he imagined their whole future together. Decided it was destiny. It smacks of unhealthy obsession, which is creepy; he doesn’t like it. Because what is it called when you stalk and proposition a woman you barely know?

Leia is smiling.

“I so want to see you. I so want to hear more about the doctor!”

“I am still what I was less than two standard weeks ago at Crait, mother. You told me very explicitly what you thought of me so do not pretend now to have forgotten everything just because you want to meet my girlfriend. We can’t be a happy family again, just like that. And I’m also not forgetting the things I told you about. I have grievances that might seem small to you if compared to what I have done, but I have suffered too.”

“I know, Ben.”

“Father was…” he stops there and tears prickle at his eyes. He can’t speak about it.

“I’m sorry,” he only says. “I regret it every minute. I always will.”

“I’m sorry for sending you away. I’m sorry for what Luke did.”

“The fact we are sorry won’t change anything. It won’t change the past, it won’t raise the dead, it won’t even make us feel much better.”

“But that’s all we can do. And I love you.”

She says it so calmly and unexpectedly that Kylo almost jumps.

“I love you, Ben. I always have. I always will.”

“You should have told me more often!” he shouts, bitter because he won’t just take it from her, not like this, not after he waited for love for so long and it’s only now she throws it at him…

“No,” Leia says. “I did tell you that quite often. But you don’t remember because I wasn’t showing it properly. I should have shown you better.”

Kylo’s whole grief, his pain, his sense of loss, come back to him and the tightness in his chest
returns; once again breathing becomes difficult and sweat appears on his forehead. He needs to end this conversation soon or he’ll pass out in front of a Resistance general.

“I am looking forward to these peace talks,” Leia resumes quietly. “I want to see you. After all these years. And I do want to hear what you propose. I still believe in you, Ben. I believe you want to do something good now.”

He nods. He can’t speak.

“What’s her name?” Leia asks suddenly.

“Annelyse,” he says before he has the reflex to pretend he doesn’t understand the question.

Leia smiles and suddenly, without any warning, bursts out crying. It’s really an outburst, so quick and violent that she turns away from the viewscreen and wipes her face hastily.

His mother, the Resistance General, the Republic senator, Princess of Alderaan, the relentless enemy of the First Order, is crying. Kylo has seen her cry before; she cried after many of her quarrels with his father, after Han Solo had left as he often did because that was the only thing he knew to do when things got difficult. And things got difficult surprisingly often. Back then, she cried out of anger and frustration rather than anything else. In her last conversation with Kylo, just a few days ago, she cried the same angry tears. But now it’s different; now she just looks devastated, and afraid, and tired. He’s angry with his mother, she and his whole family did him wrong before he did any wrong to them, and yet he is forced to acknowledge that Leia Organa has known a whole ocean of pain, too, in her life.

“Ben,” she says, calmer now but her voice is still trembling. “When we meet, promise me you won’t just leave after the peace talks, once we sign the treaty. Promise we’ll be able to spend some time talking. I won’t bear it if you leave without a word. I know you have reasons to hate me but please, let us talk.”

“I promise.”

She breathes with relief and calms down. Her eyes are shining. In fact, during the peace talks he will be suggesting that she could have a role in the new galactic government. He hopes she would appreciate that. He’s not sure how his own generals will take it but it could be a private arrangement, for now. He’d rather die than admit this is an excuse to keep in touch with his mother.

He goes back to the bedroom and undresses quietly, then slips under the duvet. It’s very warm here, Annelyse’s body heat filling the entire space. He wraps himself around her, his chest pressed to her back, his arms around her. He tangles his legs with hers and breathes her in. He feels so relieved after talking to his mother, the terrible taste of their previous hateful conversation gone. He’s also strangely, ridiculously elated that he told her about Annelyse. Maybe he should have held his tongue as this relationship is so fresh and fragile, but he just really wanted to share it with his mother.

Annelyse stirs in her sleep and hums quietly, then she turns to face him. Her eyes are closed but she kisses him, on his nose, his mouth and his chin, and puts her arms around his back.

“Where have you been?” she murmurs into his mouth. “You’re supposed to be resting. And I was cold.”

She definitely wasn’t cold, she feels like a small heater, but Kylo finds this sweet. She noticed he was gone. She missed him.
“I talked to my mother,” he says.

Annelyse opens her eyes and pulls away slightly to study his face.

“And?”

“I told her about you. She has already seen you on the holonet anyway.”

Annelyse laughs and kisses him again.

“You told your mother about me? Already? You really are a serious guy.”

“I am.”

She strokes his forehead and hair affectionately, and his hands wander across her back. Their naked bodies are flush against each other, the touch of skin on skin soothing and pleasant. It’s a moment of quiet harmony, when Kylo Ren’s heart opens and he becomes as close to Ben Solo as possible, even though he’s not that boy anymore.

“My sad, serious, lovely prince,” Annelyse says quietly, and each of her words, each look she gives him, each squeeze of her hand and each stroke she gives his hair floods Kylo’s battered, hardened heart with warmth. He finds the acceptance he has wanted all his life, even though for years he pretended he didn’t care for it; he finds hope he never thought he could be the source of; he finds a burgeoning affection he doesn’t even think he deserves – and peace which he has needed so desperately. The tight invisible clutches wrapped around his heart and stomach – which were there for years and, despite Snoke’s disappearance, have still not left Kylo, occasionally causing him to gasp for breath, shake or faint – are starting to loosen. The heavy black cloud starts to lift from his mind.

“Are you all right, Kylo?” Annelyse asks quietly as he gazes at her with wonder.

“Yes, I do feel better. I had a difficult moment again when I talked to her… but now it’s all normal.”

“That’s good, but I wasn’t asking only about how you were *physically.*”

“I know.”

“So?” she insists gently, her hands caressing his shoulders, and he’s melting under her touch.

“It’s difficult to talk to her. We haven’t seen each other in person for years. We were enemies. I have a lot to forgive her, and she has even more to forgive me. My father’s death will always be between us… but she said she loved me.”

“Of course she loves you. She must know how much good there is in you. I know it after a few days, and she’s known you all your life.”

He looks away, his grief overwhelming.

Annelyse brings his hand to her lips and kisses his knuckles, then slides it under her head on the pillow and presses her cheek into his palm.

“Look at me, Kylo. Everything will be fine. You will heal.”

If only she had an idea in how many ways he needs to heal. Or maybe she does? Maybe she sees through him, maybe she can see his pain. She knows his physical ailment is only a symptom of deeper grief. She knows some reasons but not all of them, and she said she wanted to hear his story,
so he will tell her. Not tonight, but he will. About Snoke’s torture and manipulation. The full nightmare of murdering Han Solo, from which he knows he will never recover fully. His uncle’s betrayal. Rey’s rejection. Years of loneliness and aloofness, brutality and bloodbaths. Heal from all this? Be normal? He doesn’t even know where to start.

Well, actually he does. He will start with the peace talks, a residence on Coruscant, and another, longer, face-to-face conversation with his mother.

“How can you know I will heal?”

“I’m a doctor, have you forgotten?”

Kylo smiles. She turns her lips again to the inside of his palm, against which her head is leaning, and kisses it as he looks at her, their heads just centimetres away from each other on his black pillows.

“I will help you heal,” Annelyse says.

Chapter End Notes

… And this is the end! Thank you so much for reading and please leave a comment to tell me how you liked it! I really enjoyed going deeper into the psychology of characters and Kylo’s different relationships with people around him. Hux and Bajeera’s little romance is a bonus, it wasn’t planned from the beginning - I guess I just had to listen to what my characters wanted :-)

So, this story is now complete but next weekend I’ll start posting the sequel to my main story, Enough to Hope. A sneak preview just for you: Part 2’s title will be "Lost". So stay with me and enjoy its first chapter in a week’s time!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!