The Dark Light of Forever

by WhisperOfWarmth

Summary

"... so rather than call it help, how about we have an... arrangement? Quid pro quo, if you will. I do something for you, you do something for me?"

"What could you possibly do for me, that I couldn't do for myself?"

"Get the girl."

Notes

This is a work in progress, intended to be multiple chapters. As of right now I only have the most basic concept of where I want this story to go, so updating may be a bit slow.

Thank you to any and all who take the time to read this, to leave kudos or comments. It's appreciated, more than you know.
Chapter 1

Hux walked along the empty corridors, boots echoing against the cold tiles, thinking.

547.

Five hundred and forty-seven men had been lost in this latest battle against the Resistance. Snoke had refused to listen to Hux's pleas to pull out of the area of danger, to regroup, to strategize. He had insisted that the X-wing starfighters were no match for the tie fighters, and didn't feel it necessary to leave any behind to guard the dreadnaught.

What Snoke didn't count on (but Hux KNEW), was that General Organa's fighters had become a lot more organized, and much better coordinated than they had been in past years. They systematically took out over half the ties, and had managed to compromise the core engine of the command ship, triggering a huge explosion and the horrific amount of life lost today.

And who did Snoke blame for this? Who did he hold accountable, despite all his protests to the contrary?

General Hux, of course.

He had just returned from that 'meeting' with Snoke, where he had been thrown mercilessly around the room like a rag doll. His face was bruised and swollen, and he could still taste the dried blood from when his teeth clamped down on his tongue.

He found the room he was looking for, the Officer's recreation lounge. In spite of the late hour, he knew the one person he needed to talk to was in there, the room likely darkened to his morbid tastes.

"May I have a moment of your time?"

Kylo barely turned his head in Hux's direction. He had no desire to see or speak to the General.

The fact that Hux had cornered him, alone, like this, was very unsettling to Kylo Ren. The two didn't speak very much outside of work related issues, but they had been around each other long enough to know the others' habits, to a small extent.

And Hux knew, that this time of day was when Kylo Ren, when not otherwise engaged, would catch a few moments of absolute quiet, in the Officer's lounge.

Nobody else was in there; and it further unsettled Kylo, when Hux walked swiftly around the room and switched off the two security cameras. Rather than comment on this, or show his growing unease, he simply said,

"A quick moment."

"Very well. Ren, I've been doing a lot of thinking, and . . ."

"You've, been thinking? That's quite an accomplishment for you, isn't it? Congratulations."

" . . . and I feel that you and I, we need to be on the same page," Hux finished, ignoring Kylo's sarcasm.

"What are you talking about?"
"I'm talking about unity in the face of annihilation. From the Resistance, and from Snoke. I know that you despise me, and I can accept that. I've made no effort to conceal my contempt for YOU, and it seems you've accepted that as well. But at the moment, our situation is such that it would behoove us to work together, rather than remain in this pointless competition with each other."

"It's neither pointless, nor a competition. The word 'competition' implies that the two people facing off against each other in a fairly equal standing. You, are not my equal. You never will be. We want different things. We will obtain those things by different means."

Hux merely smiled and shook his head. "That's where you're wrong. We want the same thing: freedom. A chance to run the First Order as WE see fit, the chance to make the decisions that will drive this empire forward, to stamp out the chaos of the galaxy and restore order."

"Very pretty words, General. But I'd suggest you save your empowering sentiments for rallies, and not me."

He turned to leave, but Hux grabbed his arm, stopping him. Immediately, Hux flew backwards, hitting the opposite wall in a hard slam. Ren walked over and crouched down until he was eye-level with the crumpled redhead.

"Equals? I think not."

Hux sat up, spitting fresh blood from his mouth; apparently the force of impact had cracked a tooth.

"How powerful you are," Hux said, slowly rising to his feet. "Powerful, fearless--yet Snoke still has you doing his grunt work. Locating Skywalker, finding the girl...and what do you think will happen if/when you bring that girl to him, Kylo Ren? He'll slay you where you stand, and she will take your place."

Ren stood still, his face overlaid with an odd mix of rage, and fear.

He knew.

He knew Hux's words were true, had known for quite some time.

In an extremely rare moment of vulnerability, Kylo looked Hux in the eyes, and said, softly, "I know. But I don't know what to do."

He waited for Hux to gloat, to bring more of his deepest fears into the light, to mock and shame him.

But he didn't.

In an equally rare moment of openness, Hux merely nodded, and said "I know you don't, Ren. You need help. And you're like me, in that you find asking for assistance of any kind to be a deplorable weakness. So rather than call it help, how about we have an...arrangement? Quid pro quo, if you will. I do something for you, you do something for me?"

"What could you possibly do for me, that I couldn't do for myself?"

"Get the girl."

Kylo tilted his head and looked at him, confused. As hard as he tried to hold it back, a spatter of
excitement had leapt into his cheeks, giving his normally pale face a hectic color scheme. Hux, of course, being the shrewd observer that he was, saw this change; and it further cemented his resolve to push on with this. Meanwhile, Kylo was still speaking: "You just said yourself, that finding the girl would be the nail in my coffin. How is you expediting my Death a boon to ME?"

"What if we could not only get her, but convince her to join us here? To be an ally, and, ultimately, your pupil?"

Kylo shook his head. "She's very strong, Hux. Not just with the Force, but mentally, and emotionally. And even if she DID agree to that, I can't see how that would matter, if Snoke . . ."

"Which leads me to my next part. Quid pro quo. I get the girl, and you kill Snoke."

"Kill -- Snoke?" Kylo asked in a hushed voice. More of that adrenaline rocketed through his body at Hux's words, making him feel horribly dizzy. He couldn't lie; killing Snoke had been something he had always thought of doing, way back in the unreachable part of his mind. Yet to hear his secret desire voiced out-loud; and by HUX, Hux, of all people . . . it was unnerving. More than unnerving, it was terrifying.

"Yes. Kill Snoke, and take his place as the new Supreme Leader, with me at your side as your right-hand man."

"And -- and where would Rey fit into all this?"

"Once you've properly trained her, she will take your place as enforcer and commander."

When Ren was silent, contemplating Hux's words, Hux went on:

"Snoke has displeased me for quite some time, Ren. He makes rash decisions that are driven by fear, or anger, rather than logical thought, and we continue to lose countless men, women, materials and resources, and now, allies, because of his refusal to change his ways."

"Hux . . . what guarantee do I have, that once all is said and done, you won't attempt to kill me, as well? For that matter, why aren't you lobbying for the position of Supreme Leader, yourself?"

"I'm not physically suited, to lead," Hux said, scathingly honest in his harsh opinion of himself. "And a leader needs to be somewhat physically imposing. You have that, accompanied by your abilities with the Force. People both fear and respect that, and they respond to it, in a more powerful way than just an ordinary man. Besides, we both know I work better behind the scenes. Together, I think we could rebuild the Order, re-structure it, making it far superior to the constructs that Snoke has set up thus far."

Ren folded his arms across his chest and said, stubbornly, "That still leaves me with no proof, that you won't betray me once the smoke clears."

He stepped closer to Ren, and surprised him by saying, firmly, "Take off your helmet."

Ren balked, at being given an order by Hux. Whether they were in the process of forming an alliance or not, he did not take kindly to being given commands by anyone other than his master. Nevertheless, slowly, Ren did as he was told, setting the heavy piece down on the floor beside him.

He despised being exposed like this. He felt his natural face to be weak, full of the doubt and fear that the helmet hid so nicely from public view. Snoke, Hux, and just recently, Rey, were the only ones to ever see him without it, and even then, that felt like three people too many.
But Hux seemed to see none of the weakness that Ren saw within himself. His gaze was firm, and steady, and blessedly absent of the condemnation that Hux was known for.

"Now I'm looking at you. I can see you, eye to eye, man to man. You have my word as a man that I would never betray you, and I would always put the needs of The First Order above everything else."

He held out his hand.
Ren looked at it, then at Hux's face.

Ren put out his own hand, his face contorting as he invaded Hux's brain, searching for something, anything, to be suspicious of. He dove in so suddenly, so forcefully that he knew Hux had to be in pain; but, to his credit, he didn't scream out, or plead with Ren to stop, as others would have in that moment.

Ren found nothing of suspicion.

Hux had been sincere in everything he had just said. Furthermore, he had many, many ideas for rebuilding the Order that were necessary, practical, and in some cases, downright brilliant.

This could work.
This, could *work*.

He drew out of Hux's mind, and found that he was smiling a little.

He shook Hux's hand firmly, and nodded.

"Quid pro quo."

Hux nodded.

"We have to strategize this as carefully as possible, Ren. And all of this has to be decided before I bring the girl, because once she's here, the plan has to move forward, no matter what."

"Hux, I want you to promise me something else. Something important."

"Yes?"

Looking him in the eye, Ren said, "I don't know by what means you expect to get Rey here. I don't know by what means you intend to convince her to join us. But no matter what you do, you have to promise me, that you won't physically harm her. Regardless of what she says, or does, or threatens: she does not deserve physical pain. Am I understood?"

Hux drew back a bit, startled. He could not recall having heard Ren speak of ANYBODY with this level of compassion before. What was more troubling was that underneath all of this, Hux could almost swear he sensed that Ren held just the tiniest bit of... affection? For the girl? For Rey?

What had *happened* between them, on Starkiller base?

But, then again, maybe this unintended confession was something that Hux could use to his advantage, with Rey.

"You are understood," Hux told him, watching as unmistakable relief flooded over Ren's face.

"This will be odd," Ren said, somewhat self-consciously. "I'm entirely used to hating you around
"This will be odd," Ren said, somewhat self-consciously. "I'm entirely used to hating you around others, and, to be perfectly frank, my personal opinion is still hanging in the balance. But how will I endeavor to get along with you, now?"

"No. Things have to appear the way they always did. We mustn't give Snoke any reason to suspect that anything between us is different. Continue to argue with me, belittle me in his presence." Here he paused, allowing himself a small smile. "It shouldn't be hard; you've had enough practice, after all."

"Fair enough. A word of advice to you: be more vigilant in controlling your thoughts around Snoke. If he picks up any of what you're -- WE'RE planning, he'll end both of us on the spot."

"I appreciate that, thank you. Now, tomorrow, after you've finished your shift on the bridge, come to see me in my office. I have a basic idea for how to carry this out, but I'm open to suggestions and improvements."

Ren snorted out a low chuckle. "There's a Terran term for what's happening here. 'Trator con el diablo'; meeting with the devil."

"Oh? And who is the devil here?"

"You. You are. I'm just a monster."

And with that he turned and walked out of the lounge, and back towards his chambers.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

"This could be your home, your family," he said softly. "You won't be abandoned here, or forgotten. I promise."

I'm bringing her to you, tonight. As a warning, she is, understandably, infuriated to be here. My efforts at convincing her to join aren't working; it seems she wishes to speak to YOU on the matter. So prepare accordingly.

Ren read and re-read the message Hux had sent to him, and he tried to control his facial expression, but it was hard. When he had been a child and had gotten overly excited over something or other, his body had responded to that by emptying out his stomach for him.

Now, for the first time in what felt like ages, he felt he might throw up.

Hux had a group of men that were loyal to him, from back when he was simply a captain, up until now. These men were formally employed as his personal guards, but really, they served a much greater purpose than that. They were his advisors, his co-conspirators, and, in the most basic sense, 'friends'.

It was these men that he sent out to retrieve the girl, to procure the treasure of Rey for Kylo Ren.

Hux knew where she was, he had been tracking her for the past week. Apparently, she had managed to locate the Jedi master Luke Skywalker, but had been rejected by him as a possible student. Heartbroken, she hadn't rejoined the Resistance but had instead stolen a non-descript ship and flown back to, of all places, Jakku.

It was here that Hux's men found her, alone, living in a broken-down AT-AT walker, having reverted back to the scavenging lifestyle to sustain her meagre existence.

Speaking with her personally had been an interesting experience for Hux. He hadn't expected the level of raw intelligence that he had been met with, or the outraged fury, at being captured.

Hux couldn't help but glance at her, several times, as they walked her to Ren's chambers. She was quite beautiful. Small, graceful-- and apparently quite strong with the Force. Even with the handcuffs on, she had managed to force-pull one of his men's spears from their hands, and take out two of the stormtrooper guards, before effectively neutralized.

As Hux watched, one of the troopers jabbed her in the shoulder with his staff, in an attempt to make her walk faster.

Faster than fast, Hux pulled out his blaster and shot that man dead.

As the others, including Rey, stared at him in awe, he said, calmly,

"Rey is a GUEST here. She will not be handled in such a rough manner. Am I clear?"

"Yes, General," the other three guards replied at once, as they continued their walk.
She had calmed a bit once they reached Ren's chamber doors. Hux chanced a look at her face, and was a bit surprised to see that her expression had softened, turning into one of hope and, very little, excitement.

Despite all her protests to the contrary, Hux felt that she was just as anxious to see Ren, as he was to see her.

When they got to the doors, Hux dismissed the guards, and took hold of the girl's arm himself. He couldn't trust normal Stormtroopers to be present for the undoubtedly treasonous conversation that was about to take place. His own men met them, and they all went into Ren's chambers.

Kylo Ren looked . . . strange. As though he was on the verge of a heart attack. His face had turned as pale as the floor, and even from where Hux stood, he could see the fine beads of sweat that had collected around his temples.

He took it upon himself to walk over to him, to stand in front of him so that his face was hidden from the view of the others.

"Calm. Yourself."

Kylo nodded, and took several deep breaths, trying to do as Hux said. When Hux had decided Ren was as calm as he was apt to get, he moved away, and stood to the side, watching as Ren slowly crossed the room towards the girl.

"Rey. I can't tell you how happy I am to see you."

The girl stared at him in disbelief. Kylo's kind words did nothing to assuage her anger.

"What do you WANT from me, Kylo Ren?! Why can't you leave me in peace?"

"Rey. You and I, we have a bond. I feel it, and so do you. I can't be away from you anymore. I literally can't. It's painful, in every way imaginable. If need be, I will get on my knees, I'll debase myself to every soul in this room, to beg you to stay."

Rey laughed out at that. "'Beg me to stay?' As if I have a CHOICE? As if I'm not standing here in captivity? What do you take me for, a fool? Because --"

Kylo waved his arm in front of her, and the handcuffs unlocked from her wrists and clattered to the floor.

"Drop your weapons," he said calmly, quietly, to the people behind them. Immediately all blasters dropped to the floor -- except for Hux's.

"Hux. Trust me, please."

Hux sighed and unclipped his blaster, bending and setting it slowly on the floor.

He watched in disbelief, as Ren took his saber from his belt and placed it into Rey's arms. She took it, her small hands shaking slightly.

"Now, you have a choice. Nobody in this room is armed except YOU. You could kill me, you could find your way to a ship, and leave."

Now he straightened up and looked her in the eye, his tone changing.

"But where would you go? Back to Jakku? Back to being nobody, from nowhere? Maker, Rey,
you are so much MORE than that! More than scavenging for portions, more than suffering in the
desert, alone, forgotten. More."

Tears had begun to fall from Rey's eyes. Kylo, being far more gentle than Hux would have
thought him capable, took the sleeve of his robe and pressed it underneath each of her eyes,
wiping the moisture away.

"This could be your home, your family," he said, softly. "Luke refused to train you? I'LL train
you. There are good people here, Rey. I know you don't believe that, but it's true. So many
opportunities for growth, for friendship, for love. You won't be abandoned here. You won't be
forgotten. I promise."

He held out his hand to her.

"Say that you'll stay. Say that you'll be at my side, that you and I, we can work together. Please.
Please?"

Rey stood for a second looking down at Kylo's hand, and for a split second, Hux was afraid. It
truly looked as though she was going to ignite Ren's saber and cut off his head.

Hux breathed out a sigh of relief when, instead, Rey dropped the weapon to the ground and threw
her arms around Kylo, instead. From where Hux stood it was difficult to tell, but he'd have bet his
life that Ren was crying, as he held the small girl on his arms.

"I'll only agree to this, IF I can still call you Ben."

Kylo laughed and bent down, kissing the girl's cheek.

"You can call me anything you like, Rey."

Now she pulled away, looking worried.

"But your Master, Snoke; what is HE going to think about --"

"The General and I have a plan for that, my dear," Ren said, nodding towards Hux. He crossed
the room and brought Rey his personal chair, bidding her to sit down.

"We have a lot to talk about."
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

To letting the past die," Kylo said solemnly, raising his glass, "And to the dawn of a new era in The First Order."

Hux entered the elevator with a pounding heart and sweating palms. But he maintained his usual expression as he gave the usual commands to his aides as he prepared to go see Leader Snoke.

Everything had to appear as normal, after all.

Once the elevator door closed behind him, and he was alone, he found himself hyperventilating. He was terrified, to push the button. It had been two hours since Ren and Rey had left, the Dark Lord and his 'prisoner', to see Snoke.

Would they have been able to do it? To pull off the miraculous feat of not only killing Snoke, but his hulking guards, as well?

If the plan had in some way failed, if even the slightest thing had gone wrong, Hux was about to enter a deadly situation. If Snoke was still alive, then Hux was walking into his own execution.

The elevator stopped, and Hux took a deep breath, then stepped out.

At first, his eyes weren't precisely sure what he was seeing. Snoke's normally dim throne room was darker than ever, and it took Hux a moment to realize that it was because of the smoke. Several structures in the room were on fire, several new charred place along the wall and ceiling.

His eyes adjusted, he stepped slowly further into the room, and his eyes picked up another image that didn't quite register at first: Snoke.

Or rather, Snoke's body.

Or part of it.

Snoke's lower half, from his torso to his toes, was slumped over to the side in his throne. The other half, including his head with the eyes frozen wide in disbelief, was laying on the floor.

He had been cut in half, clearly with a lightsaber, as the cut was perfectly cauterized, and there was no blood present.

More bodies now, laying all across the room. Red, but no blood. Clothes.

In his head, he did a count: one, two, three, four, five . . .

Where was the sixth?

A smell hit Hux's nostrils then, making his lips curl up in disgust. He walked up to the spinning oscillator Snoke had in the middle of the room, with the huge whirling blades. Hux peered inside, and there was another body in there, torn into bloody pieces by the saws.
Six.

As his mind slowly began functioning again, he realized: he had yet to see Ren. Or the girl.

As if answering his inquiry, a low moan from near Snoke's throne caught his attention. He cautiously approached it, and there was Rey, slumped over with her head in her hands.

Hux knelt beside her and gently pulled her her hands away, carefully searching her all over. She had a few minor cuts along her larms, and one just below her neck, but they didn't appear to be very serious. If anything she was just badly shaken up; Hux would guess that before this moment, she had never seen any hand to hand combat before. Or killed anyone, for that matter.

"Are you alright?", he asked her, speaking slowly and calmly.

She nodded.

"Where is Ren?"

Her eyes went wide, as if the mention of Kylo had brought him back to the forefront of her mind.

"Ben?", she yelled out, getting shakily to her feet. "Ben! Answer me!"

She and Hux both listened, eyes searching the dim room, when, at he same time, they heard it. A hoarse breathing, a faint scratch.

A movement, from the corner.

At first it appeared as though one of the guards was still alive and getting to his feet, and Hux immediately put out his arm to shield Rey, while taking out his blaster.

"Wait," said Rey, walking out from behind Hux. She went to the figure and knelt beside it, cautiously.

"It's him!"

Hux put away his blaster and rushed over to the two of them. Kylo was on the floor, struggling underneath the weight of a dead guard. Together, Hux and Rey lifted the massive body off of him, then Hux slowly raised him into a sitting position.

"Are you alright?", Rey asked him, gently touching his face.

"Are you? Are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "Scratches. I'm fine."

"Then I'm fine, too."

She leaned over and threw herself into his arms, nearly knocking him back over with the intensity of her hug. He hugged her back.

"We did it! I can't believe we did it!"

She let go of him, and he turned his head towards Hux, grinning a little.

"Quid pro quo?", he asked, holding out his arms to the general.

Hux shook his head. "I don't believe we need to go that far."
"Ah, but, what if, as your Supreme Leader, I commanded you to hug me?"

Hux sighed, yet he couldn't help the smile that leapt to his face, at Ren's 'order'.

"Supreme Leader or not, this will be the only time I ever allow you to do this, in our lives. Understood?"

Ren nodded with a grin, then enclosed Hux in his arms, squeezing him hard.

It was odd, being hugged. He hadn't been touched like this in a great many years, and it left him feeling unsettled. Once Ren let go, Rey hugged him, as well; and THAT was a bit easier for Hux to handle.

"Well," Hux said, gruffly. "We have lots to do, don't we? We have to get these bodies out of here. This room has to be cleaned from top to bottom. People have to know that they have a new Ruler."

"I agree. But first, let me have my moment of mourning, please."

And, surprisingly, Hux needed no explanation, for what Ren meant by that.

Rens entire life, since infancy to now, had been filled with those he loved, leaving. His father Han was constantly absent, both due to the nature of his smuggling business, and the increasing frequency of discontent between him and his wife. Leia was involved with the senate since before Ben could walk, and her attention and time were constantly pulled in that direction. And his uncle Luke, the man he had looked on as a second father--he had woken up one night to find that man, his beloved guide, mentor and friend--that man had been standing over him with a lightsaber, ready to strike him down in his sleep.

Snoke, whatever his faults were, and however manipulative he had been with Kylo, had nonetheless been there. He had been the one constant, the one thing he could count on amidst all the changes, all the leaving, in Kylo's life. The steady, the permanent, the always.

And now that, too, had left him.

So Hux and Rey stood quietly to the side, as Kylo Ren knelt and bowed his head to his slain master, praying to the God he didn't believe existed to forgive him this sin, in a long, long list of sins.

Afterwards, Ren levitated what was left of Snoke's body from the throne.

And then he sat on it himself.

"Hux?"

"Yes?," Hux asked, coming to stand beside Ren.

Ren put his hand on Hux's shoulder, and Hux wanted quite badly to cringe from the touch, although he used a superhuman effort to suppress his.

"Grand Marshall Hux."

Hux's heart thudded in his chest.

Kylo Ren, had said it. He had, in 3 words, given Hux everything that he had wanted, had all but begged for, from
Snoke.

Grand Marshall Hux.

It was an emotional moment, but, unfortunately, neither his new position, nor Ren's gave much liberty for showing emotion.

So Hux simply bowed his head in Ren's direction.

"Thank you, Supreme Leader," he said, quietly.

Ren nodded.

His reign had begun.

....

What's wrong?"

Kylo shifted back and forth in the seat.

"Snoke's throne--it's very uncomfortable," he said, making a face.

Hux pulled his DataPad from his pocket.

"With all due respect, YOU are the Supreme Leader now, not Snoke. If you don't like it, it's in your power to change it. I can help. Tell me what you'd like changed, and I'll see to it that it gets done right away, sir."

Kylo sighed.

"Please don't do that. Don't call me sir, don't call me Supreme Leader. Call me Ren, like you always have."

Hux gave Kylo a small smile, and shook his head. Such a thing, such a lax manner of being, would not have been easy for Hux, likely not even under direct order. He had been taught since childhood to respect authority, and those wielding positions of power; even if he didn't personally get along with the individual in question.

"That would be far from appropriate," he told him, looking him in the eye. "Your new rank demands a certain level of respect, and subordination. Your subjects hearing me address you in such a casual way would diminish their regard for you."

Ren sighed. He had known this, of course, but still. It was horribly difficult trying to adjust to this new leadership role. He wondered (and not for the first time) whether he was truly READY for it.

"You're right, as always, Grand Marshall," he conceded, absently rubbing the back of his neck. "In front of other people, then, call me whatever you deem correct. But right now, when it's just the two of us, keep to the status quo. That's an official order, understood?"

He said that last bit as an attempt to both lighten the situation with humor, as well as give Hux a reassurance in his undoubtedly uneasy mind that things between them, while they HAD changed, had not been altered as much as he may have thought.

Yet Hux's sense of humor was nearly non-existent. However his orderly brain had responded to the last strain of Kylo's (un)official command, so he nodded in agreement.
"Very well, Ren."

"Better."

He stood and walked to a small area behind Snoke's throne, which Kylo knew, from past experience, that his former master kept his alcohol. He found what he was looking for; an extremely rare, vintage bottle of Alderaanian wine. How Snoke had managed to procure such a rarity, he had never been quite sure. What he DID know was that, after every major battle, every significant victory that The First Order accomplished, he would call his apprentice into the room and share a half-cup of libation in quiet celebration.

He had never seen him partake in this ritual with Hux, however; in truth Snoke had had little to do with Hux in anything other than a professional capacity.

Well, things were going to change in that department, now that Kylo Ren was at the helm of things. He didn't realize it (and likely would have been upset, if he had), but he shared his mother's style of leadership, which was extremely hands-on.

He poured two glasses now, then straightened up, bringing one carefully across the room to Hux. Hux took it, allowing himself the briefest of smiles as he did so.

"To letting the past die," Kylo said solemnly, raising his glass, "And to the dawn of a new era in The First Order."

Hux clinked his glass together with Kylo's, enjoying the sound the crystal made in the echoing room.

It was several weeks later, and many major changes had happened in The First Order, so many that it was hard for either man to wrap their head around the enormity of it all.

The story that went out in regards to Snoke's death was simple. Lord Ren had captured the Resistance spy, Rey, and brought him before his master. In the middle of an interrogation, Snoke's red-cloaked guards had suddenly turned on Snoke, murdering him in cold blood. The Resistance spy joined forces with Kylo Ren to dispatch the guards, thus earning herself a place at his side. And Lord Ren, was now Supreme Leader Ren.

Anything else would have been dangerous. For the public to know the treason, the treachery behind this methodical, well-organized plan would have held dire repercussions for the three involved. It would have started a mutiny, and likely ended with the public execution of the trio.

People were, understandably, confused and frightened by this sudden shift in power. Lord Ren BEFORE had been a terrifying force to be reckoned with. Temperamental, childish, angry-- they failed to see how this man could step into the shoes of Snoke.

But Ren surprised Hux, Rey, the First Order, and even himself, by rising grandly to the occasion of supremacy.

As difficult as it was for him to change the habits accumulated over a lifetime, he did, indeed, put conscientious effort into his new image as a leader. A leader, and not the irrational child that had been known as Lord Ren.

Hux was more than surprised with the amount of time that Kylo Ren put into learning, perhaps outweighed only by his awe at his newfound aptitude to teach. Kylo wasn't just interested in the 'what' of things, he wanted to know the WHY. Drills, procedures, protocol -- for every thing that Hux showed him, told him, introduced him to, Kylo had at least a dozen questions more about.
He shook hands, he memorized names and faces. He knew who Hux's top officers were, and the duties they had. He sat in on meetings. He took the time to compliment those who he felt had done a good job, on whatever task they had in front of them.

For example, last week, at the end of a meal he had shared with Hux, he had insisted Hux page the chef responsible for his food to his chambers immediately.

The woman had entered slowly, head down, and shaking. All the color had drained from her face, so sure was she that Leader Ren had found fault with her cooking, and was calling her in to dispose of her (the way his predecessor had done countless times in the past few years, with the chefs that came before her).

When he, in fact, praised her, she was so shocked that she actually became faint, and had to sit down for several moments before she could leave.

There was a bit of a worry, for a long time, over Rey.

After the battle with the guards, she had been overcome with a viral sickness that weakened her, incapacitated her for several weeks. She spent this time in Med Bay, regaining her strength, visited daily by Ren, until she was well enough to be moved into her own chambers.

Hux was the one tasked with bringing her into her new home, and the experience was an interesting one.

"This is all -- for me?"

Hux nodded, then began to walk briskly around the rooms, pointing out different areas of her quarters to her. But when he turned around to ask her a question, he was somewhat surprised that she was still standing in the doorway, seemingly anchored to the spot.

"Are you alright?", he asked, coming back towards her.

She shook her head, her face having gone pale.

"I think you've made a mistake, Grand Marshall. This --", she said, sweeping her arm around the room in a wide gesture, "This is too much for me."

Hux gave her a small smile, and shook his head. "Trust me, this is actually quite small, compared to Leader Ren's chambers."

She smiled as well, seemingly soothed by his words, and stepped further into the room.

"Leader Ren specified that you be outfitted with training fatigues, and a variety of dresses for both formal and casual occasions. Your measurements were taken by our best seamstresss, so everything SHOULD fit. If not, please let one of your maids know as soon as possible, so the situation can be rectified."

"M-maids?"

Hux nodded again. "Yes, you've been assigned two female servants, Iyalla and Aruka, I believe. They'll come to call on you later on."

Rey said nothing, but she still seemed to be in that state of overwhelmed shock. Hux ignored this and continued to give her the tour, walking her into the refresher.

"Where do I draw the water from? Is there a river nearby?", she asked him curiously, when he
showed her the large tub.

"Draw water? No, no, it comes out of here," he said, pointing to the faucet. At the same time he couldn't help but feel sorry for this girl. Ren had told him that Jakku was horribly primitive, and Rey was likely not used to even the most basic amenities in life, but still. The fact that she found something as commonplace as running water to be fascinating, both charmed, and saddened, Hux.

She touched one of the dials experimentally, and jumped back, nearly knocking him over, when the water streamed into the tub.

"It's hot!", she said in awe.

"Yes, its hot. But it can be adjusted, to whatever temperature you like. Your maids will help you become better acquainted with everything, so don't worry."

"Thank you," she said, softly. "You and Ben have been so kind to me, since I've arrived here."

Hux smiled, a real smile, and gave her a swift nod.

"It's odd, but, I'm not quite sure what to address you as," Hux said, slowly. "Leader Ren has yet to specify the proper salutation for your rank. Essentially, you're taking his place. Therefore I think the correct terminology would be Lady Rey. Are you alright with that?"

Rey smiled. "Lady Rey. That sounds lovely, but I'd prefer you just call me Rey. At least, when it's simply the two of us."

Hux nodded. "Very well. The same goes for you, then."

"Hux. Hux -- is that your first name, or your last?"

"Last."

"May I inquire as to your first?"

Concealing the grimace that wanted to appear on his face at the disdain his name caused him, he told her, quietly, "Armitage."

Instead of laughing, she clasped her hands together and made a small gasping noise.

"That sounds wonderful! That's the name of a prince, from a fairy story!"

Surprisingly, for the first time in years, Hux felt himself blush.

"Thank you," he mumbled. This young woman was so sweet, and kind, and had that charming naivety about her . . . Hux had a hard time picturing Ren training her to use the dark side of the Force.

Then again, MANY things he could not have imagined had come to light, recently.

And it was still only the beginning.
"The purpose of the First Order is to bring order, to bring peace, to the galaxy. You don’t know this, you’re young and you don’t have a wide view of life, but the galaxy we live in, is in chaos. People are fighting on multiple sides, in an attempt to bring the disorder to an end. I'm fighting on the side I believe in the most."

As dull as it was to be on a planet that the First Order was stripping for Ore, this was the most excitement Ren had had since becoming Supreme Leader.

Hux, who was always looking out for Ren’s best interests, was strenuously and categorically against Ren leaving the safety of the base, for any sort of reason.

“You’re not just Kylo Ren, anymore; you’re Supreme Leader Ren. You now have a target on your back greater than you could imagine. It’s not safe for you to go off on ventures off-planet unless absolutely necessary.”

Ren appreciated Hux’s concern, and respected his opinion on the matter, but at the same time, HE was the ruler, here, not Hux. He could make his own decisions, and he made the decision, to go with his men to this deserted planet on in the Outer Rim system, to collect Ore from the caves, to finance future F.O. projects. It should be safe, all things considered. Their intelligence had reported that not many people lived on this wasteland of a planet, and those that did, were spread far away from the caves they sought. So, Ren left, leaving Hux behind to watch the base, with Rey, for “protection”, and set off on this dull-but-thrilling adventure.

The work of separating the valuable minerals from the cave was tiring, yet still vaguely rewarding. Kylo worked alongside his men, swearing them all to secrecy from Hux on the matter, as the redhead would surely nag him, if he found out that he was out there doing menial labor. At the end of each day Ren would sit around the campfire with the men, listening to stories and sharing in the comradery of the crew, until it was time for bed. On one such a day, they had moved to another section of cave to begin the process anew. The scans had not indicated any lifeforms nearby, so they felt it safe to go in with minimal preparation or scouting beforehand.

Ren took it upon himself to explore the ruins outside then cave. Apparently, there had once been a village of some sort here. Broken huts, small patches of land that had probably once been used to grow food to eat, stalls for animals—Ren wondered what it could have been, to drive everybody away from here.

As he stood looking into the hut, a small sound from behind him caught his attention. He turned, thinking it was one of his men, checking up on him.

He was beyond surprised to find a small, disheveled child standing a few feet away from him, staring up at him curiously.

He could see his men on the opposite side, they having also spotted the child, and preparing to fire on or capture this possible threat to the Supreme Leader. He quickly held up his hand, stopping them from coming any closer. His eyes never left the child's face. The child . . . was this a male, or a female? It was difficult to tell; it stood before him in tattered clothes, a pale face streaked brown
with dust and grit, and long hair hanging in hectic clumps about its face.

"What is your name?", he asked, and immediately winced at the sound of his own voice. It was rough, it was somewhat harsh. He was not used to speaking with anyone other than those in The Order, or enemies; and the voice he used for those two situations was vastly inappropriate now.

He made an effort, although it was a bit of a struggle, and lowered the pitch of his voice to sound soft, and gentle.

"My name is Kylo Ren," he said, noting how odd it felt, to have to introduce himself. "What's yours?"

There was a hesitant pause, but not a very long one, at that. Apparently Kylo's soothing tone and his non-threatening posture served to ease the child's anxiety, and it unconsciously leaned closer to him.

"Alayai", was the soft-voiced response. So, this was a female.

"Alayai," Kylo repeated, pronouncing the unusual symbols carefully. "Where are your parents, Alayai?"

The girl tilted her head and looked at him with her wide eyes, seeming confused by the question.

"P-parents?"

Kylo nodded patiently. "Parents. Your mother, your father?"

Another pause, and then, "I don't know, sir."

"Well, who takes care of you? Who brings you food?"

"I do. I take care of me," the girl answered, somewhat defensively. At the same time, she straightened up, and was now looking him in the eye.

Kylo couldn't help but utter a small smile, at the child's bravery. But still . . .

"So, you're all alone," he muttered, mostly to himself. He straightened out of his crouch and looked around the area critically.

"You live here?", he inquired, gesturing to the small dwelling behind her.

She nodded.

"How old are you?"

"How old are YOU?", she shot back. Evidently his questioning had raised some sort of defiance in her, and he could see her hackles raising, little by little, the longer he spoke with her.

"I'm 32," he answered her, dryly. "Now you answer my question."

"I'm not sure, but, I think I'm twelve."

Kylo closed his eyes and let out a low whistle through his teeth.

"Twelve?", he repeated, in disbelief.

She nodded. He had a hard time believing that, she was so small, so thin. But then again, if she
was left here to fend for herself, he could see how she might not have grown to the proper height and weight for a female of her age.

A small, barely audible sound came to Kylo's ears at that moment, one he could immediately identify. It was the sound of a growling stomach.

He eyed the girl once more. Clearly, she was hungry; she was thin almost to the point of emaciation.

He turned and spoke rapidly to one of the Stormtroopers, telling him to bring him rations from the ship.

Not wanting to point out her hunger to the girl (he was positive that would be met with a denial; the girl was hungry, but she was also strong-willed, and somewhat prideful, it seemed), he said, offhandedly,

"My men and I have been traveling and working in this area all day. It's more than time for us to take our evening meal. We have so much; maybe you'd care to join us?"

She peered behind him at the ship, and her eyes took on a very subtle, leery cast. He had an intuition that she was going to turn him down out of fear, so he hurried on and said,

"It's such a lovely, warm evening, I don't believe I want to eat on the ship. I'd much rather be out in the open, under the stars."

Behind him, one of the men was building a fire in the open area between the dilapidated huts, and others were spreading out makeshift tarps for them to sit on, spreading food in the center of it.

He held out his hand to the girl, giving her what he hoped was a reassuring smile. Still, she hesitated.

"How much, sir?"

"How much, what?"

"How many credits for a meal, sir?", she asked, sounding very matter of fact.

“You have credits, do you?”

She nodded. “I have a small stack, hiding in my house. I use them whenever traders come by.”

“Well,” he said, slowly, “How about I make you a deal? You come and sit beside me, talk to me a little about this planet, about YOU, and I’ll consider it a fair trade for some food. Agreed?”

She smiled. “Agreed.”

Alayai ate heartily, and even then, Kylo pressed seconds, thirds, and fourths on her. Yet despite the voracious appetite, Kylo guessed that she had not had human interaction in quite some time. She was incredibly shy, afraid to speak or to answer questions unless asked gently, multiple times. From what little Kylo could gather, she had been alone for a number of years. Foraging through the fields, or procuring a meal in exchange for credits from the occasional traveler or trader, to survive. She could not remember a time when the huts that she lived in had been inhabited by anyone other than herself, and she had no concept of the idea of family, or friends. The longest interaction she had ever had with someone was an old man who had stopped to rest on his way
someday else, and had ended up staying until he died. That period of time had lasted about a year, and in that time, the man had taught her how to read, to write, and to count. Kylo had no doubt of this; he could sense that the girl was bright, and a quick learner. He had told her the names of everybody sitting around the fire only once, and she remembered them all, as she became more comfortable in their presence to ask questions to individual people.

Kylo was immensely enjoying this girl’s company, and found his heart heavy, at the thought of when they would be done here in a few days. This girl, she was so full of life, so wanting to love and be loved . . .

But, no.

No.

Hux would likely be furious, if he were to try and bring her back to the base with him. And even if he did; where would she go? What would she DO? A military base is no place for a parentless child to be running around, getting into Maker knows what. But at the same time she had been independent for so long that she likely didn’t NEED supervision, the way others her age might.

Thinking about it further, Kylo came to the realization that he felt such compassion for this child because she, in effect, reminded him of Rey. Fiercely independent, smart, good-hearted, and incredibly lonely. Dark side or not, Snoke had failed to drive the empathy, the humanity, completely out of his soul. That was why he had found it impossible to kill Rey, and why he wanted so badly for her to join him. He felt a love for her, a deep love, but it wasn’t at all like what he knew others thought it to be. Rey was his match, his equal, his counterpart, but in a completely and unequivocally unromantic way. The closest way Ren had of describing it would be the relationship akin to that of siblings, except slightly stronger. He felt worried, anxious when he was not around her, when he couldn’t be positive of her whereabouts, her safety. An overwhelming drive to protect, to shelter, to care for. Caring for Rey was like caring for the best, the purest part of himself.

He was aware that Hux thought that the feeling between Rey and himself was one of romantic love, and nothing could be further from the truth. Yet such intensity, such devotion could only be seen as romantic, to those who didn’t understand what a Force bond entailed.

Hux would never understand that, just as he likely wouldn’t understand his urge to bring THIS girl home with him, now.

So he wasn’t even going to bring it up. He’d leave her an abundance of food, and as many credits as he could find on the ship, to have for when future traders came. Before they left, he would put his men to work reinforcing the walls of her hut to be stronger, to keep out the elements better. They also had an abundance of emergency gear on board, like medicines, first aid kits, blankets, and artificial lighting. Surely THESE would help her . . .

“Alayai. How would you like to come back, with us? To my home?”

He was in her hut, at the end of another long day. She was laying on her pallet, preparing to go to sleep. The past few days, as the men were finishing up their work, the girl and Kylo walked around, exploring the caves, laughing, talking, and really forming a slow, genuine bond with each other. This last night, the men had finished their work, and were prepared to leave in the morning. And Kylo wanted, more than anything, for Alayai to come with them.

The girl eyed him warily.

“How would you like to come back, with us? To my home?”

He told her a little about the First Order, about what the base was like, about the different things
that went on there.

“You would be comfortable. Fed and clothed. A bed. I’m afraid there aren’t any young men or women of your age, but there is this lady, Rey. A kind spirit. I’m sure she’d be more than happy to be your friend. As would I, of course.”

When the girl was silent, he went on:

“I know that you like to read. There are books there, on all subjects imaginable. And you could learn things, if you wished. We have various instruments and mediums of art, you could learn anything you desired.”

“Can I ask YOU something?”

He nodded.

She pointed to his belt. “You have a lightsaber. Are you a Jedi?”

He shook his head. “No. I was trained as a Jedi, though, once. A very long time ago.”

“Are you a Sith?”

Again, he shook his head. “Alayai, I’m just Kylo Ren. The purpose of the First Order is to bring order, to bring peace, to the galaxy. You don’t know this, you’re young and you don’t have a wide view of life, but the galaxy we live in, is in chaos. People are fighting on multiple sides, in an attempt to bring the disorder to an end. I’m fighting on the side I believe in the most. I have others who fight along with me. I’m not going to lie, I’ve made some extremely bad choices, to become what I am today. I’ve done bad things, to a lot of people. I’m not perfect. But nobody is, you know? You do the best you can with what life gives you, and in the end, you hope everything works out how you want it to.”

The girl nodded thoughtfully. Kylo had just told her a lot of information, personal information, about himself and his views, yet to him, it looked as if she hadn’t had trouble understanding him at all. Yet she still looked back, back towards her hut with scared eyes.

“One of the hardest things in this life, is letting go, Alayai. Holding on to the way of life you’re used to, out of fear. But so many times, you’ll find that what you step into is so much better than what you were holding on to.”

He stood up and walked to the entrance of her hut, standing silhouetted in the door.

“We take off in the morning, at first light. To get back to my base is an all-day journey. If you decide you want to go on this journey with us, well, be ready. Okay?”

She nodded, and he left her to think, and to sleep.

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As the ship landed in the hangar bay, Kylo looked out the window with a small sigh. Hux, as expected, had a procession of stormtroopers ranks to greet him, for his arrival home. Kylo braced himself and stepped off the ship after his men had exited first.

He was holding Alayai’s hand.

He would have paid money, to have a picture of Hux’s face. He eyed the girl, he eyed Ren, and then he eyed the girl again.
“Grand Marshall Hux,” Kylo said as he approached, in as normal a voice as possible. “I entrust you ran things smoothly here while I was gone?”

Hux took a moment to gather himself, before answering, in a somewhat strained tone of voice, “Of course, Supreme Leader.”

“Supreme Leader?”, said the girl, looking up at Kylo, “Is that what they call you here?”

He nodded. “Most people, yes.”

He turned towards Hux and said, with a barely concealed smile,

“Hux, this is Alayai. Please see to it that she’s put in chambers close to those of Lady Rey. Have her settled, and then I expect for you, Lady Rey, and Alayai to join me for the evening meal. Understood?”

“Ah, Supreme Leader, you said chambers? I’m afraid there are no temporary housing chambers on the floor of Lady Rey.”

“That’s fine, Grand Marshall. She isn’t a ‘temporary’ guest here. But I’ll brief you more on that, later. Now please, find her a suitable room, preferably one with a large bed. Understood?”

Hux’s face had turned almost purple, in an effort to hold his tongue and not question what in the hell was going on. But it would have been inappropriate for him to question the Supreme Leader in front of his subordinates, so he merely nodded and said, quietly,

“Very well. Follow me, young lady;” before he turned and marched away.

Alayai looked up at Kylo nervously. He gave her a reassuring smile.

“That is Grand Marshall Armitage Hux. He’s my right-hand man around here. He seems a bit grumpy on the outside, but inside, he’s a very nice man. Don’t be scared. You’ll get to know him better at dinner. Rey, too. Now hurry along, catch up to him, and I’ll see you in about an hour.”

The girl smiled, and hurried after Hux, and towards her new quarters.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

"If that was the case, why didn’t you ever tell me this before?"

"Our, ah, our professional and personal relationship wasn’t quite so close as before, was it?"

"Now, in regards to tomorrow, I want two lines of guards leading up to the room, and inside, I need ten of your sturdiest men, five on either side of Leader Ren. This is a diplomatic situation but I want you to instruct your men to be prepared to react, if necessary. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir," the Captain said, bowing her head before moving to fulfill Hux’s orders.

Hux was on-edge, and it likely showed, in the nervous clip in his voice, or the minute tremble in his hands, as he held his cup of tea.

Snoke, when he had been Ruler, had established alliances with many planets throughout the galaxy. These planets provided the First Order with support, with financial and military aide. Yet in these past few years, Snoke had lost several important allies who had not agreed with the increasingly foolish decisions he had made.

One of the most important allies he had lost was Princess Zyla, a member of the royal Yaflinn family in the Mid-Rim system. Since Snoke’s death, Hux had been relentless in reaching out to the princess, to assure her that the First Order’s change in leadership was infinitely for the better, and to try and convince her to become allies once more. What made her and her people so uniquely valuable, was their secret-not-secret connection to the underground world of arms trading and crime, and the families involved with that. When they had been unified, the First Order was allowed a hand in the massive flow of monetary gains that came from these ventures. After the alliance fell through, so did the rest of it.

And, as hard as it was to admit, Hux knew that The First Order NEEDED some way of bringing in more revenue, and fast. After a long discussion on it with Ren, and his advisors, they had come to the conclusion that building a new super-weapon, such as Starkiller had been, would not be in their best interests.

They were better off spreading their creativity and (waning) finances towards fortifying their bases, expanding their weapons arsenal, and improving the training and expanding of their army.

And, although none of these things were as costly as another Starkiller would have been, it still didn’t come cheap.

In the past few months, Hux and Captain Phasma had gone on an exhaustive recruitment campaign, and it had been more successful than expected. They had brought in at least 1,000 new men and women looking to leave behind lives of nothingness to serve the cause of The First Order, and these individuals were in the process of being conditioned, trained, and assigned to regiments.

More time, and more money.
Hux had been overjoyed when he finally got Princess Zyla to agree to an in-person sit down meeting, but now that the time for her arrival had drawn near, he was nervous.

He went into Ren's throne room to speak with him, but was met with the (now usual) sight of him talking with her.

The girl. Alayai.

Hux hadn't known quite what to think, the day Ren had returned from mining ore with the child. She was thin in the extreme, and seemed quite skittish around other people.

Ren had calmly explained that he had found her, living alone, and had felt a compassion for her that prompted him to bring her home.

"A child has no place on a military base," is what he had said to Ren, when they were completely alone.

"She’s young, yes, but at the same time, she's really not a child. Her independence has wizened her far past 12 years. And you don't have to worry, she won't cause any problems."

"How do you know that?"

"I feel it," he had replied, to which Hux had no answer. Ren was often saying that he felt, or he sensed things, and while Hux was respectful of Ren's practice of the Force, his own belief in it was dubious, at best.

But in this case, Ren had turned out to be correct.

Alayai wasn't any trouble. She had a curious mind, and once she got more comfortable in her surroundings, she asked questions of everyone, from maintenance to engineers to Stormtroopers, to Hux himself. She spent hours each day in the library, reading through the holo and paper books on a variety of subjects.

And she had developed a fast, lovely friendship, with Rey. The two had much in common, having both been deprived of family and companionship on a squalid planet, and being forced to fend for themselves. She was allowed to sit in on a few of the training sessions that Ren held with Rey, and she was fascinated by them.

Ren looked up now as Hux entered the room and walked up to the throne, arms behind his back, waiting patiently for Ren and Alayai to finish their conversation.

Alayai hugged Ren and left, bowing her head towards Hux as she passed him. Ren watched her go, with a look that was a close to fatherly as Hux had ever seen before.

"Supreme Leader, I have some requisition forms I need you to sign."

Kylo sighed and took them from Hux, reading them over carefully.

"I've asked you, repeatedly, not to address me as such when we're alone."

Hux shifted uncomfortably. He still wasn't used to that, to what he considered a gross breech of etiquette. But he simply nodded and said "Apologies, Ren."

Without looking up from his papers, Kylo said, quietly, "You're worried, about tomorrow. I can feel it."
When Hux neither confirmed or denied this, Kylo went on:

"You shouldn't be so nervous, Grand Marshall. The Princess, she's quite fond of you."

Hux looked at Ren curiously. "Fond? What do you mean, fond?"

"Well, maybe fond isn't the correct term. Maybe it's enamored.", he said with a sly grin.

Hux just shook his head. "With all due respect, Ren, I believe you're mistaken. In the past, I've hardly spoken to her at all. Snoke was the one who had the primary contact with her, not me."

Kylo finished signing his papers, and held them out to Hux with a sigh.

"Well, regardless, whatever you HAD said must have made an impression. She thinks that you're, forgive the term, 'adorable'. In particular she's fixated on your red hair."

Hux gruffly cleared his throat, and unconsciously touched a strand of the hair in question.

"And how would you know this?"

"People's thoughts are louder than you'd think. Especially when they're attracted to someone. The last time she was here, her thoughts were all but screaming at me."

"If that was the case, why didn't you ever tell me this before?"

"Our, ah, our professional and personal relationship wasn't quite so close as before, was it?"

"Fair point," Hux conceded. He straightened out his coat and placed the papers in an inside pocket.

"If there's nothing else, I'll take my leave. Later on this evening I will be back, with a proposal for what I feel we should be saying to the Princess."

Ren nodded. "Alright. When you get back to your office, please send the maintenance groundskeepers to me at once. I need to discuss landscaping renovations on mine and Rey's training area."

Hux bowed his head towards him. "As you wish"; and he left.

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"I must say, I'm rather impressed, and relieved. You were quite the brash young man when I first met you, Supreme Leader. But it seems you've bloomed into quite the Ruler, one that both of our empires can respect."

The meeting had gone better than Hux could have expected. The Princess was patient and receptive to hearing their position, and Ren -- Ren surprised him. It was the first time Hux had seen him interact with people outside of the First Order, and he blew Hux and everyone else away, with his demeanor. It was the first time he had seen him looking like a true ruler, an accurate representation of the crown, and Hux, while he would never say this to his face, was unbelievably proud of him.

Ren's posture was straight, his clothes practical yet elegant. He was very respectful of the Princess and her entourage, continually checking to make sure they were comfortable. He actively listened, and asked questions or made statements to show that he was listening. He declined the use of servants and instead passed around trays of refreshments and drinks himself, which personally
Hux didn't think of as being becoming to a leader, but had clearly made a positive impression. He had none of the habits of the old Ren. He didn't interrupt, he didn't make facial expressions to convey anger or displeasure, he wasn't threatening. Charming, in a subtle way.

"Thank you, Princess. Such a statement is truly humbling, coming from one such as yourself. Do I take this to mean the alliance between our factions has been restored?"

"On one condition: you, Lady Rey, your protege, and your Grand Marshall join me for a feast, at my palace. Say, sometime in the coming week?"

Ren graciously agreed, and escorted the group to their ship. When he came back, Hux was waiting for him in the throne room, to discuss their plans for moving forward.

But Kylo wasn't quite interested in that. He wanted to talk about the dinner.

"I'm afraid I was being dishonest with the Princess. I really have no intentions of attending that dinner."

Hux frowned at that. "May I ask why?"

"Formal occasions like that, Grand Marshall, are not my cup of tea. Lady Rey's, either, for that matter. Therefore I think in a few days time, when it's closer to the event, I'll give her an excuse as to our absence, and send YOU instead."

"What? I can't do that! I think it would look vastly inappropriate, if I were to show up, alone."

"Then you won't go alone. Alayai will go with you. She makes the perfect buffer, don't you think?"

"Your solution is to have me appear with a child?"

"Not a child, a pleasant young woman. And, trust me, Princess Zyla will not miss my presence so much as she may say; it's YOU she wants to see."

Hux sighed and nodded. "Very well."

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The day came, and Hux had spent a great deal of time preparing himself to go. He was wearing his fanciest greatcoat, and had meticulously combed and styled his hair for the occasion.

Now he waited outside of Alayai's chambers, to walk her to the ship.

The door finally opened, and Hux couldn't help but smile.

Hux had to admit, the girl had cleaned up very well. She had put on a healthy amount of weight since coming to the First Order, and her skin and hair beautifully reflected this change. She was wearing a simple green dress that complimented her eyes, and Rey had styled her hair for her into one elegant, braided bun.

"How lucky I am, to have such a pretty escort," Hux told her, bowing and kissing her hand. The girl giggled and blushed, beaming at the normally gruff Hux's compliment.

"Now," he said, as they walked towards the ship, "Your behavior is always exemplary, Alayai. But this is slightly different of a setting than you're used to. We're going to be meeting other members of the royal family, and the impression we leave on them is vital in keeping with this
alliance. Do you understand?"

Alayai nodded. "I know, Rey told me. Curtsy. Take small bites, smile, speak only when spoken to. Thank the Princess when we leave."

Hux allowed himself a small chuckle, at that. "And what about Leader Ren? Did he have any advice for you?"

"Yes. He said to always remember that the best desserts are the ones with chocolate in them."

---

Dinner went well. Hux and Alayai were introduced to several members of Princess Zyla's immediate family, and Alayai made a charming impression. The dinner was small and intimate, filled with exotic dishes and flavorful drinks.

After dinner, the princess gave Hux a tour of the grounds, pointing out new structures and halls that had been changed since the last time he had been there. Alayai was taken on a similar tour, by a young man who had quite taken with her at dinner. He was the younger brother of Zyla, a prince in his own right, about the same age as Alayai. As Hux and Zyla walked the upper halls of the palace, they observed the young couple walking around the gardens below. Milael, the prince, seemed very proud and pleased as Alayai held on to his arm.

"Ah, to be young, with love beckoning from every corner, eh, Armitage?", Zyla asked him, quietly. "Oh, I'm sorry, is it well with you that I address you by your first name?"

He nodded. "It is as your highness wishes."

She smiled and shook her head. "Please, Armitage--you and I have been acquainted for at least 10 years, now. I'd like it very much if you called me Zyla."

Hux gave her as natural a smile as he could, despite the fact that her request made him intensely uncomfortable.

"Very well. Zyla."

Below them, Milael had apparently been bold enough to steal a kiss on Alayai's cheek. She blushed and said something to him, and they continued walking along the pond.

Zyla sighed. "I suppose now he'll be pestering me to 'visit' your planet more often."

"Prince Milael is always welcome in our midst. As are you."

They watched the young couple below a bit more, before Zyla turned to Hux and said,

"You know, you are to be commended. For Lord, er, Supreme Leader Ren. Such a drastic shift in attitude and maturity, I can only surmise that it is the result of your counsel."

"You're kind to give me so much credit, but truthfully, Ren always had it in him to be a leader. He just needed the proper setting in which to showcase it. Even if it came at the hands of a tragedy," he said, adding in that last part hastily.

Zyla nodded. "Tragedy. Yes, tragedy. I must say we were surprised to learn of Snoke's death; and at the hands of his own guards? Truly shocking."

Hux nodded, his face conveying no uneasiness at Zyla's observations.
"And that other girl, Lady Rey. Such an incredibly lovely young woman, and talented!"

"A perfect match for Leader Ren," Hux said softly, hardly aware that he had spoken out-loud. But Zyla had heard, and was vigorously shaking her head.

"Match? If you mean match in a romantic sense, no. Their relationship reminds me much of the one between Milael and myself."

Now she peeked at him shyly, over the top of his drink, and said, timidly,

"If anything, Armitage, he is far more suited to YOU."

"Me?", Hux asked, disbelief coloring his tone. "I don't --"

"It's rather funny, isn't it? That no matter the place, the planet, the upbringing, men are all fundamentally the same. They become so focused on the tedious details of life that they fail to see a thing that's right in front of them. Something that a woman could see right off."

Hux shook his head. "I'm no sure whether I agree with your assessment as a whole, but in the matter of Lord Ren and myself, I can assure you, that you are mistaken. What would even have you draw such an erroneous conclusion?"

She pointed down below. "Look. Look at Alayai. Look closely at her face. Do you see the expression she has?"

Hux looked. Alayai and Milael were sitting by the fountain. He was speaking to her, telling her a story, perhaps, judging by his articulate hand gestures and facial expressions. She was listening, her eyes soft and shining, her gaze rapt and attentive.

"That's how Ren looks at you," Zyla said, softly. "I noticed it right away. But it's more than the looks. He clearly trusts you, in a way I wouldn't have thought someone like him capable of trusting. And --"

"Princess Zyla," Hux interrupted, gently. "Your hospitality has been most gracious this evening. My young friend and I thank you. However it is getting rather late, and we have a long journey ahead of us."

Zyla nodded, understanding that her words had caused Hux to slip into a state of mind in which he was ill at ease.

"You're right, of course. Come, let's go collect the girl from my brother. If we CAN, that is."

--

Hux and Alayai took their leave warmly, with the invitation that Milael come to visit in two weeks time.

"I'm afraid, Prince Milael, that the First Order is not the same as here. Rather dull, in fact. Mostly Stormtroopers and training drills."

"That's all right," he had responded, smiling. "It's not the stormtrooper I'm coming to see."

Alayai blushed, and he took the opportunity to kiss her hand, again. His sister tried (and mostly failed) to give him a stern frown.

"Please tell Leader Ren I'm looking forward to collaborating with him in the coming weeks. And
with you."

Hux bowed, and Alayai curtseyed, and they were soon on their way home.

"It would seem that you had quite a time, young lady."

"Oh, I did!", Alayai exclaimed, before sinking back into her seat. The day had worn her out, and she was quite tired. "I can't wait to tell Rey about the food. And the art! And --"

She fell asleep mid-sentence, her face still carrying that lovely, dreamy contentment.

Hux gently covered her with his greatcoat, then settled into his own seat, staring out the window as planets and stars blurred past them.

Staring, and thinking.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Kylo smirked at him. "If it's difficult for you, Hux, it'll likely kill me."

Hux visibly winced at Kylo's choice of words, before pressing on.

"M-mom?"

Kylo Ren stood in his bedroom, the room pitch-dark save for what little moonlight streamed in through the window. He thought that he must be dreaming, but he wasn't sure. The voice calling out to him, the fingers lightly trailing over his face — they felt so real.

Ben?

A chill went up his spine, moving from his toes to his neck. He turned himself around, slowly, and came face to face with his mother.

"I'm dreaming," he said to her, immediately. "This is a dream. There is no feasible way that you're standing here in front of me."

Leia smiled at him, and moved to sit in one of his chairs.

I'll sit, then, if that makes this easier for you to accept.

Something was . . . off, about her voice? Wasn't it? It had a distinctive, pealing ring to it, that Kylo couldn't recall being there before. And the way Kylo was hearing it; her mouth was moving as she spoke, but the sound of her words didn't quite reach his ears. Rather, it seemed to originate in his mind, first.

"How did you get past my security system? And the guards? How did --"

Ignoring this, Leia leaned forward slightly, looked her son in the eyes, and whispered, softly, I'm sorry.

"Sorry?"

She nodded.

Whatever Han and I did, whatever we DIDN'T do, to create this, Ben, I'm sorry.

Now Kylo realized, with a fresh horror, that Leia wasn't quite solid. He could see the other side of the wall through her clothes. But horror or not, nothing could stop the hot wave of indignation, of raw anger, that swelled within him at her words.

"Sorry? Sorry?? I'm sure you are, woman," he responded, laughing bitterly. "If you weren't ready for the responsibility of children, of a FAMILY, then you should not have married Han Solo. If you didn't want me, you should have killed me, and spared me the pain of this life."

I did want you, son. I wanted you, and I loved you, more than anything I'd ever had in my entire
"Throwing me away to your brother was an excellent way for you to show that love, wasn't it?"

*I did what I thought was best for you. You speak of responsibility? The responsibility of a mother
is to do what she feels is the best thing possible for her baby. You, were strong with the Force.
You needed guidance and teaching, something I could not provide you with. I sent you to the one
person I trusted. You don't think that hurt me, too? To watch you and Luke walk away?*

Refusing to be appeased, Kylo went on, angrily:

"It wasn't just that. Even before I went with Luke, you and Han were never there! Han and his
blasted ship, you and the confounded senate . . . and how did that go for you, mother? The thing
you chose over your family, how did they treat you, once they found out your father was Darth
Vader? How?"

Leia was quiet for a long while. When she looked up and spoke again, her voice was laced with
pain.

*Ben, everything we did, we did for you. My work with the senate, and then, the Resistance, was
my attempt to make the galaxy a better place for you. Your father attempted to build up his
smuggling business and reputation enough so that if you decided one day you didn't want to be a
Jedi, you would have something to fall back on. We made mistakes. I'm sorry. And I know Han is
sorry, too. And Luke. We all three failed you, and you have every right in this universe to be angry
at us.*

Kylo sat down on the edge of the bed, his eyes filling with tears.

"What's -- what's odd, is that, I still love you. In spite of everything, I still love you, and I still love
dad. I even love Luke."

More tears came in a surprisingly strong torrent, and Kylo buried his face in his hands, sobbing
brokenly.

A light pressure around his shoulders made him look up. His mother was standing by him, her
arms wrapped around his shoulders. Yet despite his hard Kylo knew she was pressing against
him, he could just barely feel her touch. He could also just feel the smallest pressure of her lips
pressing a kiss on his forehead.

Taking a deep, shuddery breath, he gathered his courage and asked, quietly,

"You're gone, aren't you? You're--you're dead."

Leia shook her head.

*Dead, but not gone. Nobody is ever truly gone. I'll always be with you, my son.*

The sun had started to rise, the first pale-pink rays making their presence known in his bedroom.
He watched as Leia, smiling, faded slowly away under the light.

*Nobody is ever truly gone.*

---

Hux stood outside Kylo's throne room, looking down at the report on his datapad. He was trying
to gather courage to go in, to tell Ren about his mother.
Reports had been circulating back to the First Order for weeks, that the fierce, resilient general of the Resistance, Leia Organa, had fallen ill. Apparently the Resistance was in tatters as the result of her lessened leadership role, making it easier and easier for the First Order to locate stray squads and methodically take them out, one by one, until not much of a rebellion remained.

Earlier this morning, Hux's men reported to him that General Organa had succumbed to that illness.

Hux knew how Kylo had felt about his father, but he knew that Kylo still had lingering feelings of love and compassion for his mother. Under Snoke's rule, the guideline for attacking rebel starships had been to take no prisoners. When Kylo came into power, one of the first things he had done was mandate that, should they encounter any part of the rebel fleet, the ships be captured and thoroughly searched for General Organa, and if she was found, she was to be taken prisoner, NOT immediately executed as all the others would be.

Hux thought about this now, as he took a deep breath, and knocked.

"Enter!"

He walked through the sliding doors, and looked around for Kylo. Kylo wasn't on his throne, rather, he was on the far side of the room, his lightsaber ignited, slashing at the practice dummies that had been built for this purpose.

"May I talk to you for a moment?"

Kylo switched the saber off and walked towards Hux, sweating slightly. His forehead glistened under the dim lights.

"Supreme Leader--"

"Ren."

"Ren, I'm afraid our intelligence reports bring somewhat difficult news for me to deliver this morning."

Kylo smirked at him. "If it's difficult for you, Hux, it'll likely kill me."

Hux visibly winced at Kylo's choice of words, before pressing on.

"It seems that, the General of the Resistance, Leia Organa, has --"

"I know what you're in here to tell me, Hux," Ren interrupted him softly. "I could feel her go, early this morning. I know."

Hux stepped closer to him and briefly put his hand on Ren's shoulder, squeezing lightly.

"Ren, I'm sorry."

Kylo merely shrugged his shoulders. "Death is a natural part of life. She lived quite a life, and I'm sure she won't be easily forgotten to those that knew and loved her."

He was taking it so well, so calmly, that it worried Hux, a bit.

"If you need to disappear for a few days, or be alone, I can handle anything that comes up. You don't have to worry about --"
But Kylo shook his head vigorously, moving away from Hux to sit back on his throne.

"Disappear? Of course not. Things still have to be taken care of, life has to move on, doesn't it?"

"Supreme Leader, I agree. However I do believe an appropriate period of mourning would be --"

"Mourning? For a member of the Resistance? Our *enemy*? Surely such a thing is of a treasonous nature, wouldn't you say?"

"Not mourning for a member of the Resistance. Mourning for your *mother*", he said, slowly.

Kylo looked up at him, and so much pain was present in his gaze that Hux could feel the hurt penetrate his own body, making him feel sick and light-headed. But Kylo quickly covered it up.

"Today, is a day of celebration," he said firmly. "With Organa dead, the pitiful Resistance won't be able to stand much longer. I want your men to double their efforts, to locate and annihilate the last members of this group. And the Stormtroopers... give them the day off. No training, no drills, no exercises. Understood?"

"Ren, I --"

"Am. I. Understood?"

Hux looked at him a moment longer, and, seeing that he was in no condition to be argued or reasoned with, simply bowed his head.

"Understood, Supreme Leader.", he said, before turning and swiftly exiting the room.

--

Hux came back later that evening, to check up on Ren.

He knocked once more, and was once more bid to enter.

He entered, and was somewhat surprised to see Rey and Alayai with him. All three were sitting in a loose circle on the floor in front of the throne.

"Grand Marshall, please, join us," Rey said, standing and coming to Hux. She took hold of his arm and began pulling him towards the others. But Hux braced his feet, holding back.

"What's going on?"

"We are singing Alderaan folk songs," Rey said cheerfully.

"Alderaan folk songs?", Hux repeated quizzically. He looked around Rey's shoulder, at Ren. Ren was sitting, head bent, and holding Alayai's hand. Even from this angle Hux could see that tears were coursing down his face.

"Is he quite alright?", he half-whispered to Rey, confused.

She nodded, then explained to him, also whispering, "Part of his mothers' people's culture. When a family member dies, you sit in a circle and sing the deceased's favorite songs."

"But he's--"

"He crying. I know. That's part of the custom, as well: letting out your feelings. He's fine, this is just his way of coping."
As if to prove Rey's statement true, Ren called out, gruffly, from the floor "Either join us or don't, Hux. But please make up your mind, you're interrupting."

There were countless things that Hux needed to take care of, that evening.

He had an entire stack of papers that Ren needed to read through and sign, in regards to an upcoming expansion of the stormtrooper barracks.

A prototype of the newly redesigned blasters had come in, and Hux needed Ren to test it and give his approval, in order for him to be able to order a full shipment of it.

Hux's men had found several uninhabited planets in the outer rim system that housed a wealth of valuable natural minerals, and he and Ren needed to talk over plans to send troops to mine these places.

So many time-sensitive, important professional things that he and Ren needed to take care of -- and Ren, was sitting on the floor. Singing.

So Hux chose the most sensible course of action: he followed Rey and sat gingerly down on the floor next to Kylo.

"I'm afraid my singing voice isn't the best," he warned them, apologetically.

Ren put his hand on Hux's arm, patting it. "Neither is mine. The important thing is that you're here."

They sang through song after song, hour after hour. Ren would slowly speak a verse to them, and they would repeat it after him. They repeated what had been Leia's favorites multiple times over. By the end of the evening, they could all sing a number of the tunes from memory, and Ren -- --Hux was thankful, that this act, this impromptu vocalized celebration of an extraordinary woman's life, had seemed to give Ren some much-deserved peace.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

_Hux was amazed. He hadn't known that Rey had such energy in her, such a grasp of the Force. It was wonderful and terrifying to see her so powerful, so in-control of the situation._

Hux sat with Kylo in the latter's dining hall, the large table overlaid with papers, going over plans and schedules for the coming week. It was just the two of them, with Kylo's guards posted outside, as always.

It was rather pleasant, today. The warmth of the sun flooded through the windows, giving the room a cheerful vibrancy. Kylo had several sweet dishes in front of him, and Hux, a pot of his favorite fragrant tea. They were moving through the paperwork with thorough efficiency.

In the middle of a sentence, Kylo quickly turned his head to the side and sneezed, three times in rapid succession, against his forearm.

"That reminds me," Hux said, taking a small sip of his tea. He frowned; he had been talking so long that his cup had grown cold. He replenished it with the still-steaming tea from the pot, before continuing: "In a few days, it will be time for the First Order's annual required physicals and mental health evaluations."

Kylo groaned; he had always hated these days, even when Snoke had been alive. He was of the mindset that if he felt fine, he didn't need any sort of physical or mental prodding. He had rather hoped that now, since he was the Supreme Leader himself, he could exempt himself from this most tedious of affairs. But, apparently, Hux had no intention of letting him off the hook so easily. Still, it didn't hurt to ask:

"Do I have to?"

Hux nodded. "I'm afraid so. As Supreme Leader your health should be one of your most prioritized concerns."

"Is this something you're doing, as well?"

Hux nodded. "Myself, Lady Rey, Alayai, my Lieutenants, EVERYBODY. We have troops returning all the time from foreign places, where all sorts of diseases run rampant. It's imperative that we stay three steps ahead of anything that may be spread from person to person."

Kylo nodded, although it was obvious, seeing his face, that Hux's words did little to relieve his apprehension.

After a few silent moments, Kylo spoke up again, and said, quietly,

"What if I went, and they told me I was dying?"

Hux glanced up from his papers, his mouth twisting into a frown.
"The probability of such a thing is quite low."

"Low, but not altogether impossible. But honestly, tell me what you would do, if it was discovered that I was dying?"

Hux turned fully towards Kylo, staring at him, trying to gauge whether he was being serious or not. It was difficult to tell with him, sometimes.

He was being serious.

"I don't believe we've talked much about this, if at all, have we?", Hux said, slowly. "However I suppose it would be prudent to have contingency plans in place, in the event of your demise."

"You likely have more than a handle on how to continue running things, if/when I go. I'm not worried about that. All I ask is that you take care of the three things I care about most: Rey, and Alayai."

"So, for formality's sake, you're stating that I would be the Supreme Leader?"

"Well, of course."

Hux was quiet a moment, taking that in. He had assumed that Ren would designate Rey to be the next Supreme Leader. To think that he thought Hux capable of such an honored position was both surprising, and humbling. Then something occurred to him and he asked:

"What's the third?"

"Excuse me?"

"The third. You said, take care of the three things you care about most. You named Rey, and Alayai as two of those things. What's the third?"

For some reason, Kylo's face had turned a bright, distinctive pink. He quickly looked away from Hux's gaze and occupied himself with the remains of a danish on his plate.

"Obviously I misspoke; I meant to say, two."

Hux watched him a moment longer, then nodded.

"Alright. Now, the next order of business --"

---

Hux sat on the tiny bunk in his cell, pulling his arms back into his sleeves and tucking his chin into his collar, trying to gain a little warmth in the terribly cold room.

He and team of Officers were coming back from Trelauw, having gone to meet with a small local army that had expressed a formal desire in joining the First Order. It being a diplomatic mission, Hux had made a severe misjudgment by not taking a formal stormtrooper guard with them. On their way back, their small shuttle was overtaken by a pair of unfamiliar assault ships, quickly overpowering them and taking all members of the crew as hostages.

The apparent leader of this attack, a large 4-armed Gonoshen, had questioned Hux and his Officers, inquiring as to their mission to Trelauw and their rumored intentions to acquire the army there. The Gonoshen represented a planet that had wished to overtake the small but extremely talented Trelauw army for their own usage, and The First Order was standing in the way of this
Unable to achieve a word out of Hux or any of their commanding Officers as to the whereabouts of the First Order base, they had been separated and led into holding cells where they awaited word of their fates.

Most likely, if a satisfactory deal could not be established between the Gonoshen command and The First Order, all prisoners would either be reconditioned to be a part of THIS army--or killed. From a strategic standpoint it did not make sense to dispose of intelligent, capable high-ranking officials in this manner, because they possessed talents that could be shaped to fit your own needs. However, Hux had made it very clear that he would rather choose death over being slaved into someone else's command. He had been taught that a traitor was far worse than one who remained true to his or her cause, even until the point of death.

And they had been out of commission, so to speak, for over 2 weeks. Snoke, when he had been alive, had always mandated that on any missions where capture was possible, the absolute hold-out limit for recovering the detainees was 5 days. Hux, when Ren came into power, had lowered that time-frame, to just 3. No more.

Anything after that would result in an unnecessary compromise to the safety and security of the base.

So he doubted the Gonoshens would even be able to get in contact with the First Order, to let them know that they were holding some of their members as prisoners. He hoped that Ren was smart enough to take them for dead, and to appoint a new Grand Marshall to take his place.

So Hux sat in his cell now, hunched into his clothes, waiting. He tried to ignore how hungry he was (he had last been given rations four days ago), and how cold.

Yet despite all this, he was aware of a feeling of general apathy towards the situation--or maybe it was acceptance. No matter what his fate was to be, he did not appreciate long waits, or suspense.

A loud noise caused him to jump a little.

It sounded like--screaming?

Very loud screaming, by more than one person.

He had time to think that maybe his captors were beginning the process of torturing/murdering his officers; and he steeled his mind, tried to quiet the sick adrenaline flood that was coursing through his body. Hoping that, if/when his turn came, he could bear the pain in silence. Not let them see him scared, or hurt. To die like a man.

And heard the screams again. Louder this time, more urgent than before.

And then he heard a new sound, one he almost thought he recognized but was afraid to name, afraid to be hopeful.

It sounded like--humming.

A fierce thrumming noise that paused every few seconds, as if connecting with something else. Each pause brought about more screaming.

It sounded like--a light saber.
A few moments later a large Gonoshen guard was hurled through the air like a rag doll and slammed with brutal force against the steel bars of his cell, crying and pleading in an unrecognizable language as he fumbled a key into a lock and pulled them open.

The moment the lock was off, he rose into the air, clutching at his throat and gasping, his face turning an impressive purple with blood spurting in sporadic streams from his ears and eyes.

Hux watched from the corner, gruesomely fascinated, as his cries gradually drifted off and the invisible hand that had been holding him up let go, causing his dead body to fall to the ground with a meaty thud.

Rey.

Rey stepped over the dead body and into the cell, moving faster than fast, making a beeline for Hux. Her upper body was still shaking and heaving with exertion, and her hands trembled as she held her lightsaber.

Hux was amazed. He hadn't known that Rey had such energy in her, such a grasp of the Force. It was wonderful and terrifying to see her so powerful, so in-control of the situation.

"Grand Marshall! Finally! We must have scoured a half-dozen planets, looking for you!"

He felt a little embarrassed, to be standing here so underdressed and shivering in front of her. He shook it off and straightened up as much as he could, trying to maintain some of his dignity.

"How did you find me?", he asked, in genuine disbelief.

"When you didn't come back when you were supposed to, Ben was, er, he did not take it well. I had to sit and calm him for hours, to dissuade him from going to search for you, himself. So he sent me and the Stormtroopers. We started with where your last transmission came from, and worked our way here."

"Have you seem the others? Are my men --"

"Your men are fine."

As if to give credibility to her statement, a stormtrooper appeared in the cell doorway behind them. Addressing himself to Rey, he said "Commander, all First Order Officers have been liberated, are present and accounted for, Ma'am."

"Good work, Soldier" she said, nodding. "Have everyone convene back at the Ship and send all First Order Officers to med bay for examination. Grand Marshal Hux and I shall join you shortly."

"Yes, Ma'am", he said, bowing and snapping his heels before turning to carry out her orders.

"I must say, Supreme Leader Ren has been training you to good purpose. You're controlled, efficient and thorough. Very impressive, Rey."

She blushed and looked down at her feet, smiling.

"Coming from you, that's high compliment, indeed."

They stepped out of the cell and began their walk towards the ship.

"And don't worry," she said in a low voice, "I brought extra clothes for you to change into, on the ship."
It was a relief, to land at the base. The troopers and Hux's men disembarked, Hux's men in particular eager to get to the mess hall and fill the stomachs that had been deprived of sustenance for so long.

Hux looked up, and did a double-take. Kylo was standing there, sans guards, at the door of the ship. Everybody bowed to him as they passed, but he barely acknowledged them. His eyes were on Rey, and on Hux.

Rey walked towards him first, and her voice was low and soothing.

"I completed my mission, Supreme Leader," she said, addressing him formally, in case anybody else happened to be standing in the area. "All First Order officers are accounted for. Enemy vanquished."

He nodded at her, a small smile pushing out from his strained face. "Well done, Lady Rey. Impressive."; and then, in a much lower, softer tone: "I'm proud of you."

She nodded, smiling at the compliment, and walked towards the base, leaving the two men alone.

"Three days, Ren," Hux said to him, slowly. "My mandate for search and rescue has firmly been three days. Yet it's been over two weeks, and you still had people out searching for me? I can't begin to tell you how disappointed I am in you, for your lack of judgement in this."

Kylo bowed his head, as he knew the truth of Hux's harsh words. But before he could open his mouth to defend himself, something miraculous happened.

Hux stepped over to him, and, after taking a surveying look around to ensure they were completely alone, he put his arms around Kylo, and lightly squeezed. Kylo was so surprised that he couldn't move, he couldn't speak. Equally surprised was Hux. It was the first voluntary hug he had given in his adult life, and, although his mind was berating him for his lack of protocol, he found that it was easier to do than he'd expected.

He let go quickly, and said, in a very low voice, "Thank you."

Then his voice and posture changed back to the norm for the Grand Marshall, and he began marching briskly back indoors, with Ren keeping pace at his side.

"We need to discuss our new acquisition of the army of Trelauw, and steps for incorporating their fighting style into our own training exercises. They have several hand to hand combat techniques that, while somewhat unique, I feel would provide valuable --"

Hux spoke on and on, and Kylo was listening, but just barely.

His mind was on other things.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

"Whether you knew it or not, you provided a beautiful balance to our lives, in the short time you've been with us."

Hux walked out into the courtyard, feeling slightly irritated. He had come from the training floor to Ren's throne room, with the intent to discuss some ideas he had for new combat drills. Yet when he entered the room, Ren had been nowhere to be seen.

He did a brisk search of all the places he was likely to be, but to no avail. Eventually he stepped outside, into the warm night air, when his luck turned.

He spotted Kylo sitting on a bench in the lunar gardens, his head tilted backwards, gazing up.

Hux sighed as he made his way to him. Sitting out in the open like that was something Hux was very much against, as he found it unbecoming to the image of a Supreme Leader. But, seeing as how Ren had still had the presence of mind to have his guards with him, Hux supposed he couldn't reprimand him too much.

"Are you engaging in meditation, Supreme Leader?", he asked, when he was standing in front of him.

"No," Kylo replied, not taking his eyes off the sky. "I needed some air, that's all."

Hux frowned, as he stepped closer, peering at him in the darkness. "You needed air? Are you feeling ill?"

He pulled his datapad from his pocket. "Shall I schedule you an appointment with your physician?"

Kylo just leaned his head back further, laughing to himself.

"You amaze me sometimes, do you know that?", he asked, still chuckling. Before Hux could respond, he went on:

"I know you're a bit unfamiliar with the concept, but what I'm doing right now is called 'relaxing'. It's a period of time where you engage in an activity that brings you some measure of happiness. So, I'm looking at the stars."

"It brings you happiness, to stare at lights in the sky?", Hux couldn't help but ask, skeptically.

"It's not just 'lights', Hux. It's everything. Those lights contain everything. They hold life, they hold possibilities."

Hux clasped his arms together behind his back, looking up.

"Your language, Supreme Leader, while colorful and descriptive, attribute too much worth to something so simple. They're just lights; lights that will one day burn out and fade into nothing, the same as anything else."
Kylo sighed. "You might be the only person I know, who can turn a thing of beauty into a depressingly morbid summation of the future. A rare talent, to be sure."

When Hux didn't respond, Kylo went on:

"When you were a kid, at least, did you never just lay in the grass, and look up at the stars?"

"No," he answered honestly. "Brendol Hux would not have allowed such frivolous leisure time in my schedule."

Kylo turned his head towards him for the first time, his eyes full of confusion.

"Has everything always been a schedule with you, then?"

"Yes. I'm extremely fortunate, I suppose, that my time has always been so carefully structured. Less unknowns, less distractions. Makes for a simple, successful life."

Kylo reluctantly nodded. "I suppose I can't argue with that." He abruptly switched gears, and said, softly, "In truth, staring at the sky isn't the only reason I'm out here. I needed the quiet, to think. I'm actually rather glad you came to find me; I would have sent for you eventually. I may need your counsel for a most serious matter."

Hux immediately tensed up, his mind tuning into high gear, trying to figure out what Ren could possibly be referring to.

"Have we a problem with one of our allies? Or within our ranks? Or has --"

"No, no, nothing like that. It's about Alayai."

"Ah," Hux breathed out, relief evident in his tone. "Well, what about her?"

"She came to my chambers last night, we spoke for nearly 2 hours. Hux, Prince Milael--he wants to marry her."

Hux was so surprised that it took him a few moments to respond.

"To -- marry? At, what is she, now? Fifteen, about? And he, barely seventeen?"

"I've spoken, at length, to Princess Zyla, in regards to this. Apparently, it is their custom to marry off the members of the royal family much, much younger. Zyla's own parents were wed at 12 and 13. Milael is a late bloomer."

Hux stood silently, thinking over what Ren had said. Then, slowly, he observed:

"If they were to marry, that would surely help to ensure a more permanent, lasting connection between our two empires, wouldn't it? Granted, the girl isn't your child in the traditional sense, but the Princess seems to consider her as such. From a practical standpoint, this merger could --"

"We're not speaking of mergers, or practicality. We are talking about a child that, although you're correct in that she ISN'T my daughter, I DO consider her as such. For me to grant approval or deny it, is a more complicated process than simply assessing whether such a venture in her life would be beneficial to my own personal gains."

Then he sighed, and said, in a softer tone,

"But at the same time, Hux, they love each other. Its present, in every single thought and action
they have with one another. It's difficult for me to ignore the presence of that love, in my decision-making process."

"Love," Hux said, not quite aware of the scoffing tone of voice he was using. "Life in general would be better for everybody if individuals thought more with their brains and less with their hearts. Sometimes I wonder why I seem to be the only one who realizes that."

Noticing the way Kylo was staring at him, he quickly went on:

"With all due respect, Supreme Leader, I believe you'd be better seeking advice on this matter from Lady Rey. She's likely much more in-tune than I am, with these 'feelings' you speak of."

"I've already spoken to Rey."

"And?"

"She's thrilled at the idea of a wedding. She's already planning the event in her mind."

Hux allowed himself a small chuckle. "Well, I suppose it's beneficial that you have her, then."

"Put it in my schedule for the upcoming week, please. Arrange a sit-down meeting between myself and Princess Zyla, so that we can discuss this in detail."

Hux nodded and pulled out his datapad, making a note to himself.

"If there's nothing else, I believe I'll take my leave back to my chambers, now."

"Actually, there is something else."

Hux turned fully towards him. "Yes?"

Standing, Kylo put his hand on Hux's shoulder, and said, "So far tonight you've mentioned thinking with your head, and your heart, but you neglected to mention thinking with your stomach. Well, I'm thinking with mine. I'm hungry. I need you to message my chefs and tell them to prepare me a snack in my dining hall, preferably something sweet. Also order a pot of tea for yourself, because you're going to join me."

"I am?"

"You are. That's an official order, Grand Marshall."

Hux sighed, yet he couldn't help but smile a little as he pulled out his datapad once more to do as Kylo commanded, following him back into the building.

---

The music started, and Hux watched as Kylo danced with Alayai.

After weeks of careful planning, from both parties, a grand wedding had taken place in the palace of Princess Zyla. Kylo and Zyla had come to the agreement to each pay half the credits it took to sustain such a lavish affair, but even at half, Hux had had a headache for days, authorizing such a large expense.

And it was, expensive.

Rich foods, plentiful drinks. A live orchestra. The ballroom of Zyla's palace as been decorated as beautifully as possible, and guests from all corners of the galaxy had been invited. Zyla's family,
First Order members and allies, everybody sought an invitation to see the beautiful young couple on their happy day.

Once Prince Milael married, he, along with Alayai, would receive Milael's familial inheritance of one of the smaller planets in their system, where they would rule.

There had been so much planning and preparation for the big day, that the ceremony itself, so calm and quiet, seemed almost anti-climactic, or at least it did to Hux.

Outwardly, to expressed to Kylo and Rey how relieved he would feel once the day was over, so that they could finally get back into the normal routine and order of things on base. But, in reality, deep down, he felt a bit melancholy. He would never admit this, but the thought of Alayai leaving left him gloomy and unsettled. As she had with Kylo and Rey, the girl had played a significant part in his life, the past couple of years. And he was proud of her, that she could go from being a malnourished scavenger to Princess of an entire planet.

Ren had wanted quite badly to walk the girl down the aisle, but formality dictated that he was seated in a throne near Zyla's at the head of the aisle. Therefore, the job was left to Hux.

When it was nearly time, he went to the room she was preparing in, and softly knocked. The door opened on the most beautiful bride he had ever seen in his life, looking both tremendously excited, and scared to death.

He entered the room slowly, looking at her.

"Do I look okay?", she asked anxiously, nervously smoothing out her white dress. "Am I --"

"You look perfect, Alayai. Milael is a lucky young man. But you're missing one thing, to complete your ensemble."

"What?"

He pulled a small box from his pocket, and placed it in her hand. She opened it; it was a lovely necklace, two diamonds set into the shapes of the sun and moon, respectively."

"This is -- this is --", she stuttered, too surprised to think of a proper response.

"It's a custom of my--my mother's people," he told her, softly. "Wearing something to represent balance. The sun and the moon, represent balance, which is important in all things in life, and especially, I assume, in a marriage." He stood behind her and carefully fastened the necklace into place. "Whether you knew it or not, you provided a beautiful balance to our lives, in the short time you've been with us. I wish you that same blessing in your new life."

She threw her arms around him, hard; so hard she almost knocked him off his feet. He smiled and hugged her back, gently. Then he gruffly cleared his throat and held her out, before offering her his arm.

"Come, now; its most improper for a Princess to be late to her own wedding."

Now, past all that, they were at the beginning stages of the reception. Hux stood to the side and watched as Alayai asked Kylo to dance with her for the traditional brides dance with her father, which, even from where he stood, he could tell had made Kylo quite emotional.

Behind Hux, sitting at the table of champagne, was Rey. She was watching the dance as well, smiling --
-- but Hux couldn't help but notice the tears running down her face.

He moved slowly over to her position, and took the empty seat next to her.

"Are you quite all right?", he asked her, quietly. At the same time he handed her a handkerchief from his pocket. She took it and gently dried her eyes.

"Im fine. I just -- I can't reconcile the idea that the girl who's spent two years in my life, won't be here anymore. No more late-night chats, no more sneaking into the mess hall to pilfer desserts . . ."

"Sneaking into the mess hall? Perhaps it's a good thing she's leaving, then; it'll likely improve our food budget some."

Although his joke was somewhat dry, it did serve to put a smile on Rey's face.

"I suppose you're right. But honestly, Hux, I feel worse for Ben than I do for myself."

"Why?"

"This has been hard for him, to let go. Anything or anyone that he's ever cared about, in his life, he's had to part with, at some point."

"With all due respect, Rey, the girl isn't dead, she's just getting married. I'm sure she'll be back to visit, quite often. And once they begin having children, well, I'm sure Leader Ren will make a most happy adoptive grandfather."

Rey sighed, and nodded. "You're right. Of course, you're right."

"And he's not completely without something he cares about, my dear. He has YOU; and he's quite lucky, for that."

"Me, and you, as well."

"Me?", Hux asked, wanting to scoff at the idea but not quite finding the mental or moral force to do so.

"Yes, you. He cares about you quite a bit, Hux. Much more than you realize. Or LET yourself realize."

A surprisingly strong surge of feeling rose up in Hux's chest, at Rey's words. Yet he quickly pushed them away, dismissing it to himself as indigestion from the spicy, exotic foods he had sampled earlier.

"You know, Lady Rey, I used to believe I'd go insane just dealing with Ren and his ridiculous Force-related musings. But now with BOTH of you, well, I'm about three steps from being committed to a padded room."

She laughed at that, and seemed about to say more, when Hux pointed to the dance floor.

"Their song is done. Go, dance with him."

She rose from her seat, handing him back his handkerchief, which he tucked carefully back into his pocket.

"When I'm done with him, will YOU dance with me, Grand Marshall?"

"I'm afraid I don't dance."
"Well, I hope you can explain that to Princess Zyla, because she's heading this way," Rey whispered with a wink, before going to join Kylo.

Hux internally sighed, as the Princess approached him with a smile.

He wondered if Ren would consider dancing to meet the conditions to qualify for combat pay.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

"Kylo," H ux said, using a softer tone, and, for the first time in either of their lives, addressing Ren by his first name. "It's time to go."

No matter what happened in his life, no matter how much things were altered, or changed, one thing would forever remain a constant in Kylo Ren's life: his training rituals.

Every day, usually in the very early mornings, he participated in a carefully structured exercise program that incorporated weights, cardio, flexibility and balancing. But before he engaged with those elements, he would spend at least an hour in meditation, combined with practicing the Force in various ways. He preferred to start the day like this rather than end it as such; the sweat, the concentration and adrenaline helped him to reset himself, to mentally and emotionally prepare himself for whatever his day might bring.

Ruling an empire was much more tedium, more work than Kylo ever would have suspected it to be. For the first time, he began to have sympathy for his former master, and all the weight he had carried on his shoulders.

Planning raids, orchestrating battles, settling tax and trade route disputes--so many responsibilities that he often wondered whether he would crumble under the pressure.

But it wasn't all bad.

Kylo felt (and he hoped others felt this, as well) that he had finally come into the maturity that he had been struggling for his entire life. In a few years time, he had ascended into manhood. The kind of manhood his parents, hopefully, would have been proud of their son, for achieving.

But he couldn't attribute this new life, this new attitude as being solely the makings of his own doings. He would not have come this far, he would not have grown up at all, if it hadn't been for the constant and consistent support and guidance of his Grand Marshall.

Of Hux.

Kylo never ceased to be amazed, almost flabbergasted, at the mental genius of his right-hand man. And their relationship had evolved drastically from what it had once been, so full of spite, mistrust and contention, to one of sharing, understanding, collaboration.

Of course, this wasn't at all to say that Hux didn't still get on his nerves, sometimes. But at least now Kylo was able to handle that irritation in a manner other than a Force-choke, or sending the redhead on an impromptu trip through a wall.

Kylo thought that he and Hux had become friends, although he knew that Hux would never vocally (or even consciously) acknowledge this term. Hux had a very rigid, by-the-rules way of dealing with life, and his adherence to order and professionalism shaped every interaction he had.

Most of the time, that is.
There had been a precious handful of times, in the past couple of years, where Hux had unexpectedly let his guard down to reveal the carefully hidden, decidedly more human side of himself. Brief, yes, but impactful nonetheless. Trying to subtly coax (or trick, from a certain point of view) Hux into these rare moments of relaxed softness had become a bit of a hobby, for Kylo. And for Rey, as well.

And Rey, was the other magnificent part of Kylo's life.

He had fulfilled his promise to train her in the ways of the Force, and she had far surpassed any level of expectations he had had for her. She had truly come into her own as a skilled wielder of the Force, and as a person, since coming to The First Order. She had a sweetness, a magnetism about her that drew people in. She was a brilliant pilot and an excellent Commander when need be, but Kylo (and Hux) had discovered that her biggest strength was her skills in negotiation. She had a talent for being able to take a situation or a problem, view it objectively from all sides, and come up with the best possible solution. Not only that, she had the gift of drawing people to seeing her side of things, and acting according to her suggestions. Hux would frequently take her with him during important meetings with foreign entities, confident that whatever goal he hoped to achieve with them, Rey would be instrumental in obtaining that goal.

Now, after finishing his training, Kylo headed back to his chambers, to change to have breakfast with the lovely lady herself.

He walked outside of the gym doors, and nearly ran into Hux.

"Sorry," he mumbled, rubbing his still-sweaty face with a towel.

Hux looked at him critically. "Supreme Leader; where is your shirt?"

Was it Kylo's imagination, or did Hux's normally pale face suddenly have a strong hint of a blush, in it?

Surely just his imagination.

"I ended up tearing it, so I just left it behind. It wouldn't be quite appropriate for the Supreme Leader to be seen in ragged clothing, would it?", he asked Hux slyly, as they walked along, the guards keeping pace behind them.

"I would hardly call opting to walk around half-nude, instead, a viable solution to that dilemma."

Kylo laughed out at that. "Oh, come on, Hux. You and I both know that hardly anybody comes to this floor except us, the guards, and the occasional cleaning crew. It's not as though I'm actively trying to 'show off' . . . or am I?", he said jokingly, purposefully flexing his muscular arms directly in front of Hux.

There was no mistaking it now, and not Kylo's imagination; Hux WAS blushing. He quickly looked away from Kylo and said, dryly,

"I'm afraid your physique may be lost on this audience, Supreme Leader. Perhaps you should save your exhibitionism for Lady Rey."

For Rey?

Seriously?

For as brilliant as Hux was, how, Kylo wondered, had he STILL not deciphered the nature of the relationship between himself and Rey?
"I suppose in certain reaches of this galaxy of ours, showing amorous displays of courtship towards a woman you think of as a sister might be deemed acceptable. But I rather hope that isn't the case HERE, Hux."

When Hux didn't respond, Kylo continued: "However, once I change, I AM planning on joining her for breakfast. Why don't you join us, as well?"

"Thank you for the offer, but no. I'm afraid I'm not much of a breakfast person."

"You're sure? I can't tempt you with a plate piled high with scrumptious, crispy bantha bacon?"

"Bantha bacon?", Hux repeated, with a frown. "I feel obligated to inform you that maintaining peak physical health would include cutting down on foods that have an excess of fats, and --"

"Yes, yes, I'm aware, Grand Marshall," Kylo interrupted him, sighing a little. They had reached the doors of his chambers, and his two guards took up position on either side of the door. "But sometimes you've got to indulge in unhealthy things every now and again. They balance out the rest of life. And most of the time, they're fun."

For a moment, just a split second of time, Hux gave Kylo a real, rare smile. It crinkled up the corners of his eyes and lit up his whole face, giving him a look of vitality, and youth. A smile, a chuckle; and then his usual stoic expression slipped back over him.

"I'll take your word for it," Hux murmured, as he slipped his datapad out of his pocket. "Now, when you're finished eating, please let me know right away, so I can begin preparing you for your day. There are several meetings I'd like you to attend, on --"

---

He had been kneeling in the same spot for hours. Beside the boarding ramp, repeatedly twining and loosening his fingers from each other.

Hux had sent everybody back to base, with the exception of one ship for himself and Ren.

"Supreme Leader."

No answer. Not even a twitch in his direction.

Hux internally sighed and approached him, slowly, from behind.

When one of Hux's most trusted advisors told him of the uninhabitable planet within their system, one that would meet the requirements for expanding to a second base, Hux had been wary, but optimistic. He had been speaking to Ren for months about how they needed to have more than one base, for contingency's sake, should something happen to their current one. He sent his men out continuously, in the hopes of finding a suitable place for expansion. And Sumnara, the little blue planet so close to their own, had seemed like the perfect fit.

After eager insistence from his advisor, Hux had gone himself, to inspect the lay of the land. Everything seemed to fit; the weather, the atmosphere. There were thousands of fruit bearing trees, and several large sources of drinkable fresh water. The only flaw he could find was that the terrain was just a bit uneven, dipping and bowing into many circular indents, large and small, all across the land. But he didn't take this too much into consideration; after all, it could be evened out. Hux couldn't imagine why, in such a perfect place, there weren't other people.

But he would soon find out.
After deeming that it was safe enough, he brought Ren, along with Rey and a team of their best landscapers and engineers, to the planet, to begin an official inspection/approval process for possible building.

Hux had wanted Rey to remain at the base, to protect it. But Kylo had insisted that she accompany them, and it was something he would soon regret.

The group had walked to and fro, enjoying the bright hot sunshine, the calming breeze. The architects were speaking with Ren, giving him detailed predictions of where certain buildings could possibly go, and the designs they had in mind.

It had happened so quickly, that nobody had the time to react. They barely had time to notice the sky darken, and turn an angry, painful red-orange. Out of the sky poured hundreds, maybe thousands, of sharp, pointed rocks. A meteor storm, and a bad one, at that.

Being so far from the shelter of the ships, the group had no choice but to drop where they were, covering their heads with their hands for protection.

But Rey, had gotten hit.

She had taken an extremely large, heavy stone directly to the base of her neck, and had passed out immediately. Kylo had seen this and leapt from his own position to cover her unconscious body with his own.

When it was over, everyone gathered in a panic around the limp, bleeding girl.

Taking control, Hux had ordered her to be taken on the emergency shuttle right away back to the base, and Med Bay. Then he ordered everyone else back as well.

Before they had taken her, the medical droid on board the larger ship assured Ren, multiple times, that Rey would be all right. But where Rey was concerned, Kylo could not be placated with reason, with logic. In the first real outburst he had had since becoming Supreme Leader, he had taken out his lightsaber and went screaming along the grove they were near, chopping multiple trees (and anything else he could find) in half.

When he was through, he sat quietly near the outside of his ship, trying to calm himself.

And Hux stood beside him, now, calmly trying to get Ren's attention.

Ren looked up at him, seeing him but looking through him. At some point, in the interval, the bottom half of the cut on his face had been torn open from one of the falling meteors, and blood was running in a slow, steady trickle down his cheek.

Hux crouched beside him. He took the handkerchief out of his breast pocket and cautiously pressed it to the wound, bracing himself to possibly be thrown backwards with Ren's brain. He could only assume, after all, that Ren must be furious with him. Ren was the one who insisted Rey come, yes; but Hux was the cause for their being here, today, at all. Hux was the one who failed to take the giant craters along the ground for what they were: remnants of meteor showers past.

And because of his lack of foresight and judgement, Hux felt that he was the one responsible for Rey being hurt.

But Ren, didn't see it that way at all. What he believed, was that his own selfish action had manage to hurt yet another person he loved. So when Hux tended to him, he simply sat still and allowed Hux to apply pressure to the cut, cleaning it with a bit of the water from a small puddle on
the ground. Ren had closed his eyes, seeming almost unwilling to meet Hux's own as the latter performed this task for him.

When he finished, Hux drew away and stood back on his feet, looking down on Ren. Ren seemed so . . . so small, so vulnerable. So lost.

And that, again, made Hux feel horrible.

He also noticed that Ren appeared to be shivering.

Hux hesitated, then took off his greatcoat and draped it carefully over Ren's shoulders. Ren clutched the coat around him, yet still made no move to look Hux in the eye.

"Kylo," Hux said, using a softer tone and, for the first time in either of their lives, addressing Ren by his first name, "It's time to go."

Ren nodded and stood, following Hux to the ship. Once boarded, instead of taking the command seat, Ren went and sat on a box near the corner, staring out the viewport. Hux's coat was still around him and he pulled it tighter, leaning his head against the wall.

They took off quietly into the night sky, into the endlessly dark vacuum of space.
Chapter 10

Hux could hear the periodic crashes long before he saw the source that was causing them.

He walked slowly down the hall towards the throne room, taking deep breaths, trying to settle himself before approaching Kylo Ren.

They had been back to base for nearly a week, now, and Rey still had not woken up. Kylo had been patiently (for him, anyway), listening to the explanations of the various First Order physicians that the girl would be fine. She had simply been badly hurt, and her body had placed itself into a temporary coma, in order to heal itself. She would awaken when her body felt that she was ready to do so. Personally, Hux himself was more than put-out with this dubious diagnosis; he preferred to hear exacts, and specifics. "When her body was ready to do so", did not fit into a quantifiable, definite time-frame. It made him uneasy, although he said nothing of this to Ren, who was just barely keeping himself under control as it was.

Or as much 'control' as was possible for him.

While he had had no more public outbursts of anger since the day among the trees, behind closed doors was a different story. He roared, he bellowed, he slashed at training dummies and furniture at all hours of the day or night. While he still attended all he operational functions that he needed to, there was no more of the warmth, the open lightheartedness that he had once had. He simply sat, eyes on the table, and listened to whoever was speaking say their piece, without offering either praise or criticism. Hux was the one who held these meetings together.

Holding himself together was a different matter.

Being the Grand Marshall of a large army during a war means that you have a fairly intimate relationship with injury, and with death. You become so accustomed to large amounts of turmoil and chaos, lost lives and injured souls, that you cease to see, anymore, the importance of one single person against the larger tide of many individuals. That had always been Hux's mentality in the past: one life is not important. What IS important is the collective, the whole. But somewhere along the line, these past few years had altered Hux's perception on the matter. He had been eased so gradually into the world of having personal relationships that he hadn't even realized it was happening, he hadn't seen the change in himself until certain events brought it out.

Alayai's wedding had been one of these events, when, for the first time in his life, he came to the realization that he had seen the young girl, as a person. Not as another cog on the wheel, or something that he had to incorporate into a schedule, but a real person. A person who had thoughts, opinions, ideas and dreams. A person -- that Hux had liked, quite a bit. Had thought of, in fact, in an almost-fatherly way.

Rey had been another person, another event, that made Hux uneasily confront this new part of himself.

With Rey, he couldn't just dismiss her injury as unimportant. He couldn't just look at it as another casualty in a long history of casualties, and, should she for any reason NOT recover, well, she was replaceable.

Because she wasn't.

Hux saw her, too, as a person. Not just a person, but a friend. And he was worried.
No less worried than he was for Ren, and the obvious pain he was going through, in regards to this entire situation.

But this was where Hux and Kylo differed, as people. Hux could experience the greatest mental or emotional pain possible, and still carry on with his duties as though nothing were wrong. When he was 12 years old, his mother had died in his arms, after a long battle with a viral illness. His father had been away, leaving Hux and the servants in care of the dying woman. Hux had kissed her, laid her down, and called for the servants to make the necessary arrangements. He then attended his daily classes at the Academy as normal. None of his peers even realized that the quiet boy's mother had passed until nearly a month later.

But Kylo, well, he was led by his emotions. Being a force-user he was tied to his feelings, the way others are tied to their lungs for breathing. His mood affected everything about him, and he clearly found it difficult to detach from this and focus on the business-like aspect of things.

Hux tried to be understanding of this, and accommodating, but it was difficult. He was split between wanting to give comfort, and firmly telling him to pull himself together, there's still work to be done.

That's why Hux was coming to see him now; he had several papers that Ren needed to go over and sign, and things that he and Hux needed to plan for the coming week.

As Hux approached the doors, he couldn't help but take in the weary look of Ren's guards. One of the ways that Kylo had of coping with his pain was physical exertion, in particular taking long walks around the lengthy perimeter of the base. And anywhere that Kylo went, well --

Hux told the two to go to the mess, get a coffee and take a bit of a break. They left gratefully, their step much lighter at the thought of food and a chance to sit for awhile.

And then Hux entered.

Kylo was on the extend far side of the room, vigorously slashing into his practice dummies with his lightsaber. The growling red light struck again and again, over and over, mutilating the wooden constructs into meaningless splinters.

Hux stood quietly and waited to be noticed. Normally he would have called out to him, or approached him from the side, but given the current situation, Hux felt it would be dangerous to do so.

Eventually Kylo noticed him, and, somewhat reluctantly, switched off his saber and made his way across the room.

"Hux. What can I do for you?", he asked, his voice deceptively calm.

"I actually have several forms I need you to read over and sign. And I wanted to discuss strategy on --"

"Can any of this possibly wait, Hux? I'm afraid I'm not in the mood for such tedious trivialities."

"They're neither tedious, nor trivial. They're time-sensitive issues that I need you to work with me on."

"Whatever your salary is right now, double it", Kylo said sarcastically, plopping himself down on his throne. "Clearly your superior grasp of word definitions entitles you to a pay raise."

Ignoring his comment, Hux went on: "There are things to be taken care of. Time and tasks must
"move forward."

"They can move forward, later," Ren said stubbornly, standing again and going back to Hux. "You can move forward, now. I'll help," he said, taking hold of Hux's arm, intending to physically move him to the doors. But Hux planted his feet and wouldn't budge.

"Supreme Leader," Hux began, cautiously broaching the subject they both were avoiding, "She's going to be--"

Kylo whirled on him, so fast and so close that Hux had to jump back a few steps, to avoid catching an arm to the face.

"Don't tell me that she's going to be fine. I am TIRED of hearing that word, that phrase."

"Supreme Leader--"

"We. Are. Alone.", Kylo cut him off, wearily. "This is another thing I'm sick to death of, you 'forgetting' to call me REN. And I warn you, Armitage, I am getting a bit sick of reminding you. My next 'reminder' will likely come in the form of fingers around your kriffing neck."

In spite of the very real scariness of Kylo's threat, Hux found himself, absurdly, smiling.

"That sounds more like you than anything else I've heard this week. "If choking me is what it takes to get you focused again --", he paused, walking closer to Kylo and pulling down his collar with his hand, exposing his neck, "-- then by all means, have it at."

Kylo looked at him incredulously for a few moments, and then, suddenly, he started to laugh. He laughed so hard that tears came from his eyes. When it had tapered down enough for Hux to be heard, Hux said,

"Alright, Ren. You don't want to hear that she'll be fine. That's an acceptable request. So I'll tell you something different. Rey, is strong. Rey is going to be very hungry once she wakes up, so we'd best put the chefs on alert to be prepared to make her favorite dishes, no matter the hour. Rey is going I have a multitude of people who wish to visit, so we should set up time constraints in which they can do so. Okay? Those are practical things to focus on, on top of our everyday work. Are those agreeable terms to you?"

Kylo nodded, and then he did something surprising. Before Hux could react, Kylo had thrown his arms around him, and was hugging him, for the third time in their lives.

Hux realized (and not for the first time) that Kylo had a rather childlike way about him, when it came to pain. He needed to express it through screams and destruction, yes. But he also needed comforting, and reassurance.

Somebody to let him know, verbally or otherwise, that everything was going to be alright.

So Hux stood there and let Kylo hug him, knowing that he needed this, that this was part of his process.

When Hux felt that an appropriate amount of time had passed, he tried to separate himself from Kylo's grip. Now that he was in a better mood, it seemed a good time to discuss the paperwork Hux had brought with him.

Hux tried to move, but he couldn't. It wasn't because Kylo was holding him too tightly; Kylo had, in fact, let go. Hux couldn't move, because Hux's body had inexplicably stopped taking commands from his mind.
Hux had read, before, that people under extreme duress could sometimes partake in what was referred to as an ‘out-of-body’ experience. During this time, the person somehow consciously separated from their core self, and, as this separate entity, watched as their body went through whatever actions they were committing to.

Hux, while not exactly under extreme duress, felt he might be having such an experience, now.

He very clearly watched his face getting closer to Ren's own, until they were mere inches from each other. He saw himself looking into Ren's eyes, saw a word that he had never consciously associated with another person before, 'Beautiful' write itself in a flourish across Hux's mind.

And he saw himself, Armitage Hux, Grand Marshall of the First Order, lean up and into Kylo Ren, Supreme Leader of the First Order, take his face between his hands, and press their lips together.

It was so soft, so light, that Hux wasn't sure, at first, that anything had happened, at all. He let go and stepped back, his heart crashing in his ears.

A pause. A humming static. And then Ren was leaning into him, his hand curled around Hux's cheek, and kissing him again.

Hux's first kiss had been when he was 14 years old, at a dance held for members of his academy, and the all-female preparatory school down the road. He hadn't wanted to attend at all, but his father had insisted.

Brendol Hux had arranged a companion for his son, the daughter of a man he worked with. The evening had been extremely awkward for Hux. He was, as he always had been, a very serious, introverted young man. He felt horribly uncomfortable in social situations, and the thought of something like a dance sent his mind into a panic.

His date, while a lovely young woman, was completely and totally his opposite. She was confident, she was outgoing. And, for some reason, she seemed to like him very much. But the feeling wasn't mutual. Hux barely felt a personal connection to the people that he knew well, much less this complete stranger.

At the end of the long night, he had taken her back to her dormitory at the prep school. He held his hand out, intending to shake hers --

-- but she had taken that hand and pulled him into a kiss. It was awkward, it was sloppy. And it had been his first one, ever.

First, and his last . . . until now, that is.

Ren's lips were so soft, so sweet. His hand on Hux's cheek was so gentle, so warm and firm. Hux's mind was screaming at him about the need to disengage, about professionalism and rank and a babbling slew of other warnings. But for once, maybe for the only time in his life, he didn't listen to his mind.

He listened to his heart.

His heart told him to gently put his arms around Ren's waist, to hold him as close as he possibly could. His heart told him to explore Ren's smooth, angled jawline, to kiss, to taste, to breathe him in.

After a while (or maybe it wasn't that long at all; it was difficult to tell. Time had seemed to stop
entirely, in these few bare moments) Hux began to be afraid. Of what they were doing, yes, but more so the intensity of it, the energy. Hux could not force himself to end this, and Ren seemed to be afflicted with the same helplessness. It was falling, and rising, and falling again. An endless circle, a complete breakdown of rules, of control. It was exhilarating. It was terrifying.

At last, reality intervened. The sound of Stormtroopers boots approaching finally penetrated Hux’s brain fog, and he quickly separated himself from Ren, moving several steps away from him just as the two troopers burst into the room.

"Supreme Leader! Lady Rey, she is awake, sir!"

Ren thanked them and dismissed them. When they were alone again, he turned slowly towards the redhead.

"Hux --"

"I'm sure you'll want time to visit with Lady Rey, Supreme Leader," Hux said, struggling to put the same brisk, detached tone into his voice that had always come so easily before.

Before.

Already, there was a before, and an after. He could feel it. Every single thing in his life, now, would be held up and examined against this piece of time. Things that had happened before, and things that had happened after.

But Hux was fundamentally unable to face whatever the After might hold, so he clung stubbornly to the Before.

"I'll cancel the rest of your appointments for the evening, so you can go to her."

"You--you don't want to come with, to see her, yourself?"

Hux backed away another step, shaking his head.

"I'm afraid my schedule is far too busy this evening, to permit such a thing. Please send her my regards."

Hux’s sudden coldness, his palpable fear, tore at the walls of Ren’s heart. He wanted to hold him again, to soothe him, to let him know that the world wasn’t falling apart, but he couldn't seem to open his mouth, couldn't find the correct words for what he was thinking, and feeling. He wasn't entirely sure if the right words even existed, for this.

He was able to pull himself together enough to say, very softly, "I'm sorry."

Hux merely nodded, then turned and began walking away.

"I'll see you in the morning, Supreme Leader," he said over his shoulder, just as softly. He walked out, and the doors slid shut behind him.

Kylo stood stock-still in the middle of the floor, trying to gain some sense of clarity, of perception, on what had just happened.

All he could decipher, was numbness.

So he shook it off as best he could, and went to see Rey.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

And how long had that face been there? How long had all the dominoes been in place, waiting for that single push?

Kylo sat at the head of the table, listening to Lieutenant Worwald outline his plans for upgrading the First Order weapons arsenal. He had multiple holo-charts set up with newly designed blasters, upgraded air-to-ground assault missiles, reinforced combat tanks and AT-AT walkers, and more. He also had an extensive list of price analyses for each proposed change. The man had some good, practical ideas, and Kylo was doing his best to truly listen to them all, offering his opinion or criticism when needed, but otherwise respectfully silent.

But he found that, throughout the course of the meeting, his eyes were continually drawn not to the Lieutenant, but the man who sat on his left, carefully taking notes throughout his presentation. Grand Marshall Hux.

Things between himself and the redhead had been strained, to put it lightly, since that day in the throne room. Kylo, while he had never been at a loss for words before, find himself afraid to try and speak to Hux, now, on what had happened. And Hux seemed to mirror that fear, quickly steering out of any and all conversations that he felt weren’t directly related to First Order business.

He had also taken himself out of Kylo’s personal life, or as much as he had been in it, anyway. He no longer joined him for meals, he no longer smiled, or made the occasional joke. He rarely even allowed himself to be alone with Kylo, for any reason unless absolutely necessary, and when it WAS necessary, his posture and his facial expressions conveyed such discomfort and uneasiness that Kylo was effectively prevented from acting as anything other than the Supreme Leader with him.

Kylo found himself wishing that Hux had the Force, even the tiniest bit. That he could hear it, if Kylo spoke into his mind, instead of out-loud. It might make this whole thing easier to bear, for both of them, if they didn’t have to speak what they were feeling.

As it was, all Kylo could think about, was how badly he wanted to do that, with Hux, again.

Kylo’s uncle Luke had always maintained the old-era Jedi stricture on forming romantic attachments. Given what had happened when Kylo’s grandfather had formed an attachment to Padme Amidala, Kylo could understand that. But Luke’s lessons had left Kylo severely deficient on the concepts of love, or sex, or even something as simple as having what younger children referred to as a ‘crush’, on another person.

It was his father that took him aside one day, at the painfully late age of 19 and a half, and explained things to him. His talk, while vastly informative, and answered many questions Kylo had had about his body, and feelings, had been extremely awkward, nonetheless. And frustrating, in a way, because Han’s talks had entered around the relationships and dynamics between men, and women.

Women.
Not taking into account that his son had been around predominantly men his entire life, or that he MIGHT have experienced past, confusing feelings towards his fellow male students. Feelings that he never acted on, or could even make sense of, but were there, regardless.

Even when he came to the First Order, and Snoke had more or less offered him the freedom to explore being physically intimate with the women of the base, nothing seemed to truly pan out. The first, second, and third kisses of his entire life had been at an Officer's dinner that Snoke mandated he attend for morale purposes, from three ladies that had had far too much to drink. They had been soft, and warm, and undeniably beautiful--and one lady in particular had been willing to take him back to her quarters, and give him a little more than a kiss--but he had felt nothing.

Still, he told himself that the issue wasn't attraction (or his distinct lack of it), it was intimacy. While his father's talk had been centered around fulfilling physical needs, his mother had a different approach.

"Nothing means anything, if you don't have a connection with the other person," she had often said. "A kiss is just two pairs of lips pressing together. But a kiss with somebody you love? That you've invested time, emotion, pain and joy in? Then, it means everything."

So Kylo had waited, thinking that, when the right girl came along, he would know it.

And then he met Rey.

A woman where the word 'beautiful', didn't even begin to describe her. Beautiful, in every way possible. Smart. Strong. An open heart. Kindness.

And they had a Force bond, something his uncle had told him about, but Kylo hadn't quite believed in the existence of. They were connected to each other on a level so pure, so transcendent, that Kylo knew, without a doubt in his mind, that if she were to ever leave, or die, he'd die, too. He wouldn't have a choice, his body would have felt compelled to join its counterpart, no matter where it had gone.

He had thought, THAT was it. THAT was the love his mother talked about, the primal connection his father spoke of.

But that wasn't it, either.

Rey couldn't have been any more his sister if he had watched his mother birth her with his own two eyes.

Maybe I'm just not MEANT to be with anybody, he had thought to himself, more than once. After all, there couldn't possibly be a match for everybody in this wide galaxy. Such a thing wasn't logical, or even feasible. He thought this, and he more or less incorporated it into his mindset.

But at the back of all this, at the very base of his mind, locked away, was a face.

A face with blue eyes. A face with freckles. A faced framed by vibrant red hair.

Hux's face.

And how long had that face been there? How long had all the dominoes been in place, waiting for that single push that would force Kylo to confront his true feelings for his Grand Marshall, for his friend?
The push hadn't been a push at all, really: it had been a kiss.

When Hux had kissed him, it had sent a rolling shock through Kylo's entire body. It was as though his whole life, he had been seeing everything in the dismal tones of black and white; and Hux's kiss had splashed his world with red-gold dawns, blue waves, emerald fields. It had felt real, it had felt right, in a way nothing had ever felt 'right', before.

But Hux was afraid.

Hux wasn't a man to whom fear came easily, but Kylo knew, he could feel, that Hux was terrified of what they had done. That one kiss had been a hard shakeup of the person he thought he knew (himself), and he had been unprepared to deal with the aftermath.

So Kylo dealt with it, alone.

Well, not entirely alone. He had Rey. But this was something, maybe the only something, that he felt odd, almost shy, talking to her about. He hadn't meant to tell her at all what they did, but she had sensed something wrong with him, on one of the many visits he made to her during her recovery period. So he had told her, head down, not really sure what to expect from her, what her reaction would be. Shock? Disgust? Disappointment?

But he hadn't seen any of that, when he looked into her eyes.

What he saw was happiness. And relief.

*You've been waiting for this for so long, Ben,* is what she had said to him.

And he HAD been. Whether waiting for Hux in particular or for love in general, he wasn't quite sure. But he had waited, he had been patient, and now that it had been broached, he couldn't just turn his back on it.

Not that Hux was giving him any choice in the matter.

The meeting ended, and everybody began to gather their things. Heads bowed to him as they passed from the room, eventually leaving Kylo alone with guards, and Hux.

"Grand Marshall," Kylo said, after clearing his throat several times. "You were rather quiet during Worwald's presentation. Should I take that to mean you found his ideas objectionable?"

"Quite the contrary, Supreme Leader. I'm pleasantly surprised by the practicality of his intentions. I was merely quiet in order to concentrate on taking notes; I have quite a few things I need to talk over with financing before seeing if his ideas are sustainable to our budget."

Kylo nodded. "Are you on your way to that department now?"

"That's my intention, yes."

"Perhaps you can spare half an hour, before? That meeting went on quite a long time, and I'm hungry. Maybe you'd like to join me, for a snack?"

"No, thank you, Supreme Leader."

Kylo glanced at his guards. They were standing by the doors, waiting for him to exit. He couldn't ask them to leave without arousing their suspicion, or without making Hux even more uncomfortable than he already was. So he had to settle for lowering his voice.
"Hux," he said, quite softly. "Please. Talk to me."

For a few seconds, it had seemed as though Hux would relent, and Kylo could feel his heart pounding in anticipation. But just like that, the moment passed. The light in Hux's eyes went out, as if someone had drawn down a shade behind his lids. His face returned to its normal expressionless pallor.

"I'll come by your chambers after my meeting with finance, to discuss their evaluation."

He turned and left without another word.

All Kylo wanted to do was put his head down on the table, and cry.

But his guards were standing there. And people were milling about the hallways.

And Kylo was the Supreme Leader.

So he pushed his pain down and walked slowly, thoughtfully, back to his own chambers.

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Entering Rey's room had been like entering a flower shop.

Snow-blossoms, dalas, roses, donars, green daisies . . . all the visible surfaces seemed to have a vase sitting on it, with a different bunching of blooms inside. It created a pleasant, if slightly overwhelming, scent through the rooms, and visually, the different colors really gave the place a dynamic appeal.

Rey was sitting on one end of her sofa, dressed in a silky black robe (another gift), her loose hair swirled around her shoulders. On the other end of the couch, trying his hardest not to be uncomfortable with her lax manner of dress and the close intimacy of the situation, was Hux.

"It's lovely of you to come and check on me, Hux, but really, I'm fine. There's no need for you to be concerned."

It was at the end of a long day, and Hux had taken himself, along with a pot of tea, to Lady Rey's chambers. She had been recovering from her temporary coma for nearly a week, now, but, other than the flowers he had had his assistant send her in the very beginning, this was the first time he had personally interacted with her. He had debated with himself all day whether to go, as to whether or not such a thing would be appropriate. His reasoning that others had been to see her didn't ease his mind any. He finally internally justified it by telling himself that it was merited by a professional concern, rather than a personal one.

Even though that was a lie.

And even though she knew it was a lie.

But he pushed on with the lie, anyway.

"My concern isn't misplaced at all. You're the commander of a large section of my army. It's only prudent that I check in with you, to monitor your recovery progress."

Rey smiled at that. "Ah. I see. Very responsible of you, Hux. Well, in all honesty, the only health danger I can see for myself in the near future is perishing from boredom. I feel I'm more than ready to return to my command."
Hux just shook his head, and took another sip of his tea. "I'm afraid the physician is adamant you remain on bed rest for at least another week."

Rey sighed, and sipped at her own tea. "I know. I've tried to reason with Ben otherwise, but you know how he is once he gets something in his head."

Hux nodded, feeling very uncomfortable. He wanted to avoid speaking of Kylo unless absolutely necessary. He wasn't sure if he had told Rey what had happened between them, or how much she could sense.

As if to give life to his fears, she looked at him timidly from over the surface of her teacup, and said, quietly,

"Hux. You and I. We're Lady Rey, and Grand Marshall Hux. We -- I don't mean to sound so blunt, in asking, but I'm curious. Do you consider us--I mean, are we, friends?"

Hux sighed, setting down his teacup and looking out the window. When he finally answered, he spoke so quietly that Rey had to lean forward a bit, to hear him.

"What does that mean, friends? What do you, Rey, you, personally, define as friends, and friendship?"

Rey smiled. "A friend is someone who makes you happy to be alive. A person who makes you involuntarily smile, whenever you see them. A person who you'd do anything for, and would do anything for you in return. Things like, bringing you tea, himself, despite the plethora of servants that could have done it for him."

Hux smiled back. "Then, yes. We're friends."

"Okay. Good. Then I want to say something to you, Hux, as your friend. And I know it makes you uncomfortable, so, unless requested otherwise, it'll be the only time I speak of it. Okay?"

Hux sighed and nodded.

"Okay. As your friend, I'm here for you, should you want to talk. About anything. Or anyone. Or a very specific anyone. Even if you need somebody to just listen, and not say anything back. I won't judge you, or condemn you, or anything at all."

"Do you promise?", he asked in that same low voice, not looking up at her.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes. I do."

"Then yes. I promise."

"Rey, it just happened. And I don't know why. And my understanding, my acceptance of the issue would be vastly different, if HE had been the one to initiate it, not me. Because HE has always been the one to do the rash, the impulsive, the illogical things, NOT me. But this is something I did, on my own accord."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes."

"Do you feel like he did, as well?"
"I don't know, Rey. You know I'm not like the both of you; I can't use the Force. I can't hear what he's thinking. I can only imagine that, after what happened, what I did, his personal opinion of me is none too high."

"He thinks everything of you."

Hux's head snapped up, and he looked at Rey, sharply.

"Excuse me?"

"He, thinks **everything**, of you. He has for quite some time."

"How would you know that? This--this isn't something the two of you have actively discussed, is it?", he asked, finding himself mortified at the possibility.

"No."

"Then how--"

She smiled and lightly tapped her forehead with her finger.

"You know, Ben's mind is an astounding thing. I hope to one day have as much intelligence, to be able to compartmentalize so many different aspect of life, my duties, my EVERYTHING, the way he does. Whether you realize it or not, Ben is far more logically-minded than he portrays himself to be. You, have occupied a large area of his thoughts, and for a long time. But he's been keeping that area suppressed, separated from the rest of him. In a box, if you will. Your, ah, your shared moment, well, it blew the walls of that box in his brain wide open, and now you've tainted every other box, as well."

"Maker," Hux muttered, putting his head in his hands. "I hadn't realized . . .", he trailed off, not knowing how to finish.

But Rey knew what he meant, and she nodded.

"You know, Ben's mind is an astounding thing. I hope to one day have as much intelligence, to be able to compartmentalize so many different aspect of life, my duties, my EVERYTHING, the way he does. Whether you realize it or not, Ben is far more logically-minded than he portrays himself to be. You, have occupied a large area of his thoughts, and for a long time. But he's been keeping that area suppressed, separated from the rest of him. In a box, if you will. Your, ah, your shared moment, well, it blew the walls of that box in his brain wide open, and now you've tainted every other box, as well."

"Maker," Hux muttered, putting his head in his hands. "I hadn't realized . . .", he trailed off, not knowing how to finish.

But Rey knew what he meant, and she nodded.

"You're not the only exploded box, though. His parents are one. His uncle, another. Killing Snoke, another. Events that he had no definitive end to, no closure. You need to face him, and talk to him. He needs that, and whatever the outcome of that, good or bad, will give him the ability to close your box back up."

Hux shook his head. "I can't do that, Rey. I . . . I'm . . .", he struggled to bring the word out, feeling ashamed that such a weakness was even in his mind at all. "I'm scared," he finally admitted. No less scared to look up and into her eyes, scared of the disappointment he would surely find there.

But there was none.

She had scooted closer to him, and had timidly reached over, to take his hand in her own. Her hand was soft, and tiny -- and extraordinarily comforting.

"He's scared, too. Maybe even more than you. But do you know what the good thing about friendships are?"

Hux shook his head.

"It's that you have someone to face your fears with. At the very bottom of everything, you and he are friends. Maybe, if you talk to him, you'll find that you can be a little more than that. Or maybe not. But you won't know, until you face those possibilities, **together.**"
He closed his eyes, still holding her hand, saying nothing. After a few silent moments, she pressed on:

"When I first came here, Ben told me that my biggest challenge would be letting go. That the only thing that would hold me back, is holding on to the past. Holding on to what I was used to, even though that life was toxic to me, in every way possible. It's hard, and it's something I'm still working on, but I've learned to let the past go. To step forward, not look back. You want things to go back to the way they were between you and Ben before, but they can't. Accept that. And push forward. Talk to him."

"What would I even say? Where would I possibly begin?", Hux asked, quietly.

But for that, Rey had no answer.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

There was something about seeing the two of them together, radiating such warmth and happiness, that made Rey's heart squeeze with contentment.

"Is everybody alright? Does anyone want seconds?"

At least 5 pairs of hands shot up eagerly, and she smiled a little to herself, turning back to the fire.

She and a small squad of Stormtroopers had been on a 3 day long mission to one of their ally planets, to help negotiate a new trade route between two disputing tribes. Really this was more of a dull errand than a mission, but Rey was happy to have it nonetheless.

She had been cleared by the First Order doctors over two weeks ago to return to work, but neither Ben, nor Hux, seemed to receive that memo. Hux purposely assigned her the easiest, least stressful tasks around the base, and visibly cringed whenever she asked to be given anything harder. It was only after hours of pleading with Ben that she was allowed to go on this journey, and for that, she was grateful. She loved Ben, and Hux, she truly did; but they were equally annoying and overprotective on this matter. And of course she had to send 'official' holovids to the Grand Marshall, at least once a day, to inform him of mission status. Really just his way of checking up on her, and conveying that message back to Ben.

The dispute having been resolved, Rey and her men were camped outside the ship, Rey having made the decision not to return to base until the next day. It was beautiful here, so calm and quiet and peaceful. Rather than have the two chefs prepare food, Rey decided to cook herself. Her men had been taken by locals to successfully catch several large fish, and Rey was carefully roasting them over the large campfire.

Cooking for others was something that she missed, from her life on Jakku. The desolate planet didn't have much in the way of earning a living, other than scavenging parts for resale. So during months when the pickings were scarce, Rey would seek employment in one of the few cantinas that existed in what passed for a 'town'. Years of self-sufficiency had taught her to be a fairy good cook, and she employed this skill in the cantina, helping the chef to prepare the simple bar food that the patrons liked to order with their drinks. While she didn't miss the gritty, drunken wildlife of locals, she DID miss the sweat from standing in front of a stove, of hands raw from chopping and peeling, the smell of grease and spices clinging to her clothes.

She knew Hux would disapprove of such a thing, if he saw her cooking now; and she could just imagine the lectures she would receive on rank, and status, and professionalism. But in her opinion, she didn't see how forming a bond with those around her, even subordinates, wouldn't be highly beneficial in the long run. After all, these men were putting their lives on the line alongside with her. Well, maybe not in THIS particular mission, but plenty of other times. To form a camaraderie in the face of possible dangers was important. Her men knew, without a doubt, that she would fight just as hard for them, as they did for her.

And, in Rey's opinion, another area in which Hux failed was the ability to separate, to see events and people beyond a singular light. In their leisure time, Rey could cook dinner for her men. On the battlefield, she gave orders, with the full expectation of those orders being executed. There
was no confusion of rank, no balking at duties or expectations. It was clearly understood that one situation warranted one type of behavior, and another, a different set of rules by which to play.

This was a large part of why Rey felt Hux was having so much difficult with Ben. In Hux's mind, only one type of relationship should exist between the two men: Supreme Leader, and Grand Marshall. It was only in the past year that Hux had come, very slowly, to accept that a friendship had bloomed, as well. But to his credit, he was able to keep take in that reality fairly well, despite how uncomfortable it made him. But the kiss--the kiss had shattered what little peace of mind he'd had, and, as in most situations where he felt he had lost self-control, he backed away from it, denied it, pretended it didn't exist.

And doing so, was killing him.
And Ben.
And Rey.

It killed her to watch the two of them, at meetings, on board the ship, or in the throne room, talking but not really talking, refusing to even fully look at each other. The pain she could feel radiating from either man hit her in the chest like knives. Pain, confusion, loss . . .

And longing.

A longing so strong, so palpable, it may as well have been spoken out-loud.

Ben's mind was loud, and he daydreamed quite often. Apparently his favorite picture ((and Rey knew this, from hearing and seeing it repeatedly in his mind)) involved him sitting in his personal chambers, on his sofa, with Hux's head in his lap. Stroking his hair, talking, laughing, and occasionally bending down to kiss Hux's forehead. Ben would envision this every day, usually several times a day. Rey knew she shouldn't read his private thoughts, but it was difficult not to, when they were all but screaming at her.

And Hux, surprisingly, did the same thing.

He never had his daydreams in the presence of Ben; he was smart enough to know that if he did, Ben would likely pick up on them and confront him with it. So around him, he put up a mental wall that even Rey had a hard time cracking.

But away from him . . .

Rey was surprised, at the sweet tenderness of Hux's thoughts, regarding Kylo. Hux wanted to kiss Kylo, again. Wanted it so badly that he could cry for it. Which, Rey suspected he might already DO, when he was alone in his chambers in the far reaches of the night. He wanted to hold him, he wanted to press his lips against Ben's, to kiss him breathless. Like Ben with his, Hux had his own fascination with the Supreme Leader's dark tresses. He wanted his fingers in it, he constantly envisioned the smooth, soft way it would feel.

But this was another way that Ben and Hux differed. In his own mind, Ben saw nothing wrong with his thoughts of Hux, or his desires. Hux saw his own as being horrible weaknesses, and any time he felt he was thinking too much, imagining too much, he would cut himself off, and quite hard. And spend literally hours berating himself on what he considered his own foolishness. And then he'd have another daydream, and the cycle continued.

Rey was frustrated, as both men came to her, separately, and fairly frequently, to speak of this pain. But both were still too scared, too unsure, to try and speak to the other about it. Rey thought, more than once, that she should force them into a room, alone, together, lock the door, and not let
either out until they spoke to each other. She was fairly certain she could do it; whether he would admit this or not, Rey was just slightly stronger with the Force, than Ben. And Hux had no Force at all.

But no.

Whether they were friends or not, holding them hostage just wasn't something she could do. The guards would have had her restrained and in a holding cell before she drew in the breath to scream.

So she was forced to settle to sit back and wait, for either of them to make a move towards the other.

She may as well have waited for Hoth to melt, or Mustafar to freeze over.

Rey was led along the shining marble floors of the palace, her boots echoing against the high walls.

The palace was lovely, light and airy. Several gorgeous paintings, creations of art, hung in the hallway which she was walking down, and Rey had to stop several times to admire a piece of two. When they got to the ornate gold door in question, the guard escorting her quickly spoke to the other two guards, then pushed open the doors, with Rey hiding behind him.

Even more works of art along the walls. A small table, surrounded by several high-backed, plush chairs. A piano in the corner, with a man playing soft tunes that floated around the room. Windows spaced all around, letting in the bright sunshine from outside. Several bookcases, stuffed with assortment of reading materials.

"Your majesty? You have someone who seeks your council."

"Oh?", came a sweet, bubbly voice from within the room. "Who is it?"

Rey stepped out from behind the guard, a huge smile on her face. "Just a lowly scavenger, Princess."

Alayai, who had been sitting at the table and reading a book, had her jaw drop nearly to the floor. Then in the next instant she dropped the book to the floor, and flew across the room and into Rey's arms.

"Force, what a surprise!", the girl said, nearly crushing Rey with her enthusiasm. "I certainly wasn't expecting to see you, of all people, today!"

"Well, my men and I were on our way back from a mission, and you happened to be right on our route home. So I thought, why not come and pay my 'niece' a visit? Make sure she's still happy, or see if I need to kidnap her back home."

Alayai grinned. "I hate to disappoint you, 'auntie', but a kidnapping won't be necessary. I am happy, still. More so every day."

And clearly, she wasn't lying. She practically glowed with some inner radiance, giving her skin and her body a flawless appearance. Her dark chestnut hair hung in small curls over her shoulders, and on her head she bore a thin, delicate circle of gold and rubies, the crown of Zyla's people. Her dress was simple yet elegant, dark blue with ruffles along the sides and a small train in the back. And it seemed to Rey, hugging her, that the girl had become both softer, and MUCH curvier,
"Maker, look at you!", Rey exclaimed, holding the girl out from her. "Marriage must be doing you well; you look positively gorgeous."

Alayai blushed, throwing her own arms around Rey once more. "You don't look half-bad yourself," she mumbled against Rey's neck.

The two eventually stopped hugging long enough for Alayai to ask a servant to fetch them refreshments, as well as her husband. She also dismissed her piano player. He bowed and left, leaving the two alone once more. Alayai spoke to her a bit about her recovery, assuring herself that Rey was well again. She had of course heard from Ben of Rey's accident, but a vicious, days-long sandstorm at the time had made it impossible for her to leave, to come visit the recovering woman herself. But she (as well as her sister in law, Zyla) sent message quite frequently to check on her status, and both had been more than relived upon hearing she was well again. At least half of the flowers covering Rey's room had been sent from either Alayai and Milael, or Zyla.

In no time at all, Milael was entering the room, joining them. And he, too, had changed. He had a serious gravity about him now, an elegant maturity that hadn't been there before. Like Alayai, he had physically bulked up, making him appear less the thin, eager child teenager who had married Alayai, and more of a man.

"Lady Rey!", Milael exclaimed in his deep, booming voice. He kissed her hand and then put both arms around her, gently, in a hug. Rey kissed his cheek as he let her go.

Rey, like Ben, had been worked that the two kids had been rushing into marriage. Rey in particular worried that their ages had not yet merged with maturity, and they might get 'tired' of one another very quickly in. But looking at the two of them together, Rey was relieved to see that her fears were unfounded. There was a tangible sweetness that flowed between Milael and Alayai, a strong friendship mingled with an irrepressible love, and devotion. There was something about seeing the two of them together, radiating such warmth and happiness, that made Rey's heart squeeze with contentment.

They sat down around the small table, where the servants had brought in several sweet pastry dishes, a bottle of wine and a pitcher of water. Milael poured Rey and himself a glass of wine and asked, jokingly, "How is my 'father-in-law'?

"Yes," Alayai piped up, interested. She sipped at her sweetened water. "How is my father? Is he well?"

Rey nodded. "Ben is doing well. I know he misses you, though. Hells, we ALL do."

"All? Even the Grand Marshall?", Alayai asked. At the mention of Hux, she unconsciously touched the little bauble at her neck, the sun and moon pendant Hux had given her on her wedding day. She hadn't taken it off since.

"He does. I'm sure they both would have liked to have come on a visit, as well, but Ben, he has so many things he does on a daily basis. I honestly can't recall the last time he left the base for leisure purposes. And well, Hux is Hux. You know if Ben is busy, Hux is right there with him."

Milael nodded. "Well, then, Ally and I shall have to schedule a visit to see YOU all, then." Here he grabbed Alayai's hand, giving it a warm squeeze. "In truth, the three of you would have heard from us within a few weeks, regardless."

He stopped and looked at Alayai, still holding her hand. "Is it alright if we tell her?", he asked,
softly. She nodded, a lovely smile spreading over her face.

"Tell me, what?", Rey asked nervously.

"Well, like Milael says, we wished to tell all three of you at once, but you're HERE, so . . . Milael and I, are having a baby."

Rey's shriek of joy was so loud that the guards stationed outside the doors took a quick look inside the room, to be sure they weren't under attack. Rey hugged and kissed both Alayai and Milael repeatedly.

"I can believe it! A baby!", she said, softly this time. "I'm not going to tell Ben or Hux, though; when you're ready, I'm sure they'd love to hear it from you, yourself."

Alayai nodded. "Kylo, especially. This will, in effect, make him a grandfather."

Rey chuckled at that. "Perhaps the youngest this side of the galaxy. I'd wager the best-looking one, too."

"No argument here," Alayai responded, and the group broke into laughter once more.

They landed in the hangar bay, and Rey let out a small sigh. She wasn't so much sad to be home, as she was to leave the pleasant warmth of Alayai's planet, which had reminded her so much of Jakku. The winter months were starting here, and every day seemed just a bit colder than the one before. She looked out the viewport and saw Hux waiting for her, and the way the wind whipped around his face let her know that the cold was still present. She tightened her robes around herself, as she left the ship.

"Lady Rey," Hux said as she walked up to him, a bit sternly, "We expected you home over 4 hours ago. Another hour and Leader Ren would have a team out searching for you."

Rey couldn't help but smile. Hux's words were harsh, but his mind gave away his utter relief, at seeing that she was unharmed and well.

"Forgive me, Grand Marshall; my men and I encountered an unexpected stop along the way."

"What did you--"

"Now, I've been traveling for several days, and would like the chance to get properly cleaned up. After, I shall come to your office and give you my detailed report on the mission. Is that acceptable to you?"

Hux nodded, and Rey could sense he was struggling to keep the smile off of his face, as they walked along.

"Very well. Shall I expect you within the hour, then?"

"Yes."

Hux took a quick glance around, to ensure that it was just themselves and the guards present. When he was satisfied they were alone, he lowered his voice, and said in a more casual tone,

"Before you get cleaned up, please spare a moment to go and see Leader Ren. I'm afraid he's been flooding my Comm for the past few hours, asking whether you'd returned yet."
Rey sighed, smiling a little. "Of course." They were inside now, and more people were about. So she gave him a quick nod and said, "I'll report to you in an hour," before leaving him and making her way to Ben's chambers.
"If I said yes, and I meant it, everything changes. Not just one thing, but everything."

"What are you doing?"

Kylo looked up, surprised to see Hux standing in front of him. He was currently in what he referred to as his 'Leisure Room', at the end of the day.

Another week had passed, and the tension between the Supreme Leader and his Grand Marshall still existed. Kylo had more or less gotten used to the coldness, the closed-off attitude, as the new 'norm' for them. Used to it, yes, but nowhere near complacent with this unwanted reality.

"I'm sorry; do I have a conference that I'm due to attend? Or something of the like?" Kylo could see no other reason for Hux being there, if it wasn't to remind him of some obligation or other.

Hux shook his head as he stepped further into the room. He seemed unusually anxious, for him, and that in turn made Kylo anxious as well.

"No, no; nothing of the sort." His eyes were flickering rapidly back and forth between Kylo and the door, as if he were trying to convince himself to stay -- or to run.

"Then why are you here?", Kylo asked, somewhat defensively. He wasn't normally so blunt, but tonight he didn't feel like mincing words. The past month had left him emotionally taut, and he didn't feel able to handle any of Hux's negativity.

Naturally, he was more than a little surprised when Hux said "I'm done with my duties for the evening. I, er, that is, well--I thought I would come and see you."

Kylo's heart leapt at his words, and he sharply exhaled a breath he hadn't known he was holding in. But he quickly regained his composure; he didn't want to scare Hux off by appearing too over-eager.

Hux was too distracted by his own nerves to notice Kylo's, though. He looked at what Kylo was standing in front of, and asked, again, "What are you doing?"

Kylo had a soft cloth in one hand, and a special bottle of cleaning solvent in the other.

"I'm giving Grandfather a bit of a shine," Kylo answered, focusing once more on his task. He had to be careful; the rough edges and torn bits of metal splintering out from Darth Vader's helmet easily caught at the bits of cloth, and once they got stuck in the pieces, they were monstrous to try and remove.

He had winced a little, after he spoke. He waited for the lecture he knew he deserved, about how they had countless people employed on the cleaning staff that could be doing what Hux undoubtedly considered a menial task for him.

He waited, but no harsh words came. Instead, Hux stepped slightly closer, arms folded and head
tilted, watching him.

"Do you do this every day?"

Kylo shook his head. "Only when I feel he, er, it, needs a good cleaning." He turned it over and began polishing the helmets underside, carefully rubbing the cloth along the metal. Hux didn't respond, and a silence spun out between them. But Kylo didn't rush to fill that quiet with words.

"I know you've told me in the past, that sometimes you engage in meditational communion with Lord Vader," Hux said after awhile. "You speak to him. Does he answer you back?"

Kylo straightened up a bit, thinking about his answer.

"Yes, and no," he said, slowly. "He responds, or at least I feel he does, but not verbally. It's more, oh, I don't know, feelings. I'll ask him something, or tell him something, and I'll be met with very strong feeling in regards to what I've said. Feelings or thoughts, that aren't originating from my own mind."

A pause, and then, hesitantly, "Forgive my saying so, but that sounds extremely frightening."

Kylo shrugged. "No more frightening than anything else in life." He was done polishing, and he put his cleaning supplies back in their place. He moved to sit at his little table, where a small pitcher of jogan fruit-juice sat, along with a plate of dewberry tarts.

"Join me?", he asked, hopeful but scared.

Hux simply nodded, and took the seat next to Kylo. Kylo poured them each juice, and moved up the plate so that it was between them. Although Kylo wasn't consciously aware of this, the type of snack he had out was the sort his mother would put out for him after a bad day, when he was younger. Not surprising, really, that he would choose this for himself; the past few weeks had left him with an almost-overwhelming desire for comfort, and familiarity.

They ate quietly for a while, both wrapped in their own thoughts. Kylo was in the middle of grabbing a fourth tart, when Hux said, abruptly, "Ren."

"Yes?"

Kylo could hear Hux take a deep breath inside of his mind, and then, his voice, somewhat rough, and low:

"I'm sorry."

It was such a surprise to hear those words. More of a surprise to hear the unspoken sincerity behind them. Kylo took a few moments to gather himself, to think of what his response should be. But really, there was only one thing he could say.

"I'm sorry, too."

"You have nothing to be sorry for."

"I started it; I hugged you."

"I kissed you."

"It scared me."

"It scared me, too," Hux admitted, relieved that Kylo had said it first. "More than anything ever
Another pause. Kylo could feel his pulse pick up, a panicky bird-wing flutter in his veins. Eventually he brought out, timidly, and unable to meet Hux's eyes: "It scared me, but Maker help me, Hux, I liked it."

Hux looked down at the table. "You and I have an important working relationship that I don't want compromised."

"I agree with that."

"You and I also have a -- a friendship, that I both value, and don't want to compromise, either."

"I agree with that, as well."

Hux still didn't look up, at Kylo. His heart was beating just a little too hard for this, his emotions just a little too wild for somebody of his age, his position. Now Kylo was speaking again, and his words caused Hux's heart to come quite close to exploding in his chest.

"I think, no, I know, that I have feelings for you, Hux. And I think, I hope, that you do for me, as well."

"If I said yes," Hux began, slowly, "If I said yes, and I meant it, everything changes. Not just one thing, but everything."

Kylo's hand slid into Hux's field of vision, and slowly, gently laced its fingers together with Hux's own. Kylo's hand was unexpectedly soft, and pleasantly warm.

Kylo was leaning so close to him, then closer. It seemed as though he would attempt to kiss Hux again, and that prospect both terrified, and thrilled, Hux.

And he was still holding his hand.

Leaning as close as he possibly could, Kylo opened his mouth, and whispered: "Fear is the path to the dark side. If you don't control it, you'll end up as awful as ME."

A beat of silence, and then Hux burst out laughing. So did Kylo. It was a deep, rib-scraping laugh that hurt, but felt glorious all the same. Tears spilled from both of their eyes, but they couldn't stop.

And Kylo was still holding his hand.

"A little trick I learned from Han Solo," Kylo said, using his sleeve to wipe tears from his eyes. His fingers were still laced with Hux's. "In a serious moment, make a joke. It alleviates pressure and makes it easier to talk."

Hux used his sleeve to wipe away tears as well. His fingers were still laced with Kylo's. "That's actually quite brilliant."

"I was visiting home once, when I was 12 or 13, from Luke's temple. Han's friend Lando was there, he asked if I had a girlfriend yet. Do you know what Han said?"

Hux shook his head.

"He said, 'Of course not, the kid's always Ben Solo."

Hux laughed again, quite hard, at that. Some dim part of him was amazed and scared, at how easy
it was to let down his guard, to simply let go, in Kylo's presence. Had the ability to do so been there all along? Waiting for Hux to be brave enough to utilize it?

And, they were still holding hands.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Well. Ever since--you know, I've been thinking about your hair. I realize how odd it sounds to ask, but please, may I touch it?"

"You want to touch my hair?", Kylo repeated, staring at Hux as if the latter had a space worm growing from his ear.

Hux blushed and looked down. "I know, that was --"

Kylo tilted his head so that his hair was hanging halfway in his face. "Go ahead."

So Hux very timidly put first one hand, then the other, in Kylo's luxuriant locks. It was smooth, and soft as the wings of a bird. Hux closed his eyes and leaned closer, inhaling deeply. It had a wonderful scent to it, like circaberries, or nectar.

Now Hux had Kylo's entire face between both hands, and he gently tilted his head up, so that he was looking Kylo in the eyes. Warm, brown-green, full of so much wisdom, such depth and emotion. His pointed nose. The scar that ran diagonally across the right side, from forehead to cheek. The stardrop scatter of moles. And his lips. So thick, so red.

Again, Hux had that out of body experience, where he could see his own face, and Kylo's. Could see how close they were getting to each other. But this time, unlike the last, there was a complete absence of fear. It had been replaced by desire, so strong and so consuming that Hux knew, without a doubt, that it would crush him unless he could pull away from Ren now.

But he couldn't.
And he didn't want to.

Closer and closer, his lips parting slightly in anticipation . . .

. . . when a large, rolling boom nearly knocked him to the floor. It was so sudden that at first Hux wasn't sure he hadn't imagined it.

He looked at Kylo. "Did you--"

Another crash, followed by the distinctive hollow sound of an explosion. Before either man could make sense of what was happening, Kylo's guards and Hux's bridge commander burst into the room, all in a panic.

"Sir!", he cried out frantically, rushing over to them,"Enemy airships reported in our vicinity. We're under attack!"
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

She was surrounded by glass, and she was in such shock that she barely heard Hux's "Don't move!"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The attack was small, to be sure, yet quite impactful.

When Kylo had heard they were under attack, his immediate thought was that it was the Resistance. But that didn't appear to be the case. An older-model single-person bomber was speeding through their airspace, dropping its payload sporadically and indiscriminately on whatever targets it came across.

The lone pilot, in his pathetically small ship, had managed to blow through their shield (which had been built to keep out LARGE objects), taken out at least 20 ties that were sitting inactive in the open field, waiting for commanders to practice drills in, and he had taken out the roof of the easternmost part of the base (which attributed to the rolling shock that Kylo and Hux had felt in the throne room) before finally shot down. The bombs dropping in the field had critically injured several squads who had been out marching, but so far, no deaths had been reported.

Hux had, impressively, sprung into action. He immediately had sensors running to evaluate whether more attackers would be coming to join this line wolf (there weren't; either the man was on a suicide mission, or he had some grudge against them); he had activated the emergency shields (which protected the rest of the building from damage), and he had sent out the team of Ties that shot the man down. Rey was, thankfully, off-planet at the time, and for this Hux was grateful. With everything going on, it would have been difficult to also deal with Kylo's undoubted hysteria concerning Rey's safety.

But Kylo had taken charge, as well. He had initiated a lockdown of the base, and personally went from squad to squad, checking the ledgers making sure that everyone was accounted for. He had also notified Med Bay to be on the alert for an influx of arrivals. Towards the end, he greeted the pilots who had shot the intruder down, shaking each of their hands and conveying his approval and gratitude.

When the attack was over, and everyone had been sent to their assigned tasks, Kylo and Hux were left alone in the command room.

"Well," Hux said, rapidly switching gears. "I have to get out outside with a team to assess the physical and monetary damage to the eastern side. The ships that were hit need to be tested in regards to replacement or salvageable means. We have to take account of equipment casualties, as well as those who need the medical bay infirmary. Injuries have to be evaluated in terms of level of severity, in order to prioritize --"

Kylo cut him off, taking his face between his hands and sinking them into slow, deep kiss. Hux was startled, and his first instinct was telling himself to pull away. And he tried, he truly did; but thankfully the instinct guided solely by his heart held him in place.
"You're okay?", Kylo murmured when they separated.

Hux nodded, giving Kylo a small smile. "I'm okay. Are YOU?"

Kylo answered by pulling him into another kiss. Hux was floored; it seemed like the more they did this, the easier it became. He hadn't had much experience with kissing in his life, and now, the vast majority of lip contact had been with Kylo Ren.

It was wonderful.

This time when their lips parted, instead of letting go, Kylo circled both arms around Hux's thin waist and held him, squeezing gently, resting his chin on the redhead's shoulder. He breathed in Hux's clean, sweet scent, closing his eyes and succumbing to his feelings.

Soft, non-threatening skin-on-skin contact was something that both men were even more unfamiliar with than the kissing. But something about being in each other's arms felt soothing. Natural. Kylo was slightly taller than Hux, and weighed more, but Hux didn't feel intimidated by that, as he could have been, in this situation. Rather, he was flooded with a strong feeling of safety, of protection. Of unspoken affection.

But the part of Hux that had been groomed and cosseted by his father spoke up, and quite loudly. Hugging and kissing wasn't productive, was what it said. Your titles don't allow for such ridiculous displays, it bellowed. But Hux's own voice, the part of him attached to whatever it was inside of him that NEEDED what was happening between him and Kylo, rose up and began beating his father's voice into the ground. But it was hard; a veritable war being fought inside his own brain.

Eventually, somewhat reluctantly, Kylo took his arms from around him. He could feel Hux's inner conflict, and he knew that if he wanted to keep on with this, he'd have to show him that balance was possible. Attempting a businesslike tone of voice, he said, gruffly,

"You have several things to attend to, Grand Marshall, as do I. Damage today was minimal, and for that we should be grateful. Yet it wouldn't be prudent to lower our defenses after such an assault, nor assume that it will be a solitary affair. Tomorrow we need to plan a meeting with the security council. I wish to implement more testing of our ship scanner equipment, as well as possible upgrades to the planetary shield."

Hux had pulled out his datapad while Kylo was talking, taking notes of what he had said. His mind was put at ease, hearing some semblance of order come back into the fray.

"Very well, Supreme Leader. After I've finished with the contractors and the infirmary I'll begin preparing notes for this meeting. Shall we reconvene in the conference room, at say, 2200, for discussion?"

Kylo nodded.

And he kissed him, again.

And they walked away from each other, to their separate tasks.

Both were smiling.

... 

Several days later, after the aftermath of everything had cooled down, Rey was in her chambers,
cooking dinner. She had invited Ben over, and like always, he was late. But in this case, it was okay. She was working on a dish called Alderaani stew, something that Ben had said his mother made when he was a boy, that he missed very much. The ingredients of the dish were fairly common, except for one thing: the spiced dewback meat. Such a thing was a rarity where they were, but a few days ago Rey had had luck, when one of the captains was able to procure a large side of it on a mission. Rey had studied the recipe carefully, and she hoped that this creation had turned out alright.

Finally, a low knock on the door sounded, and she went to open it.

Ben lifted her off her feet, nearly crushing her in a hug.

"I've been following my nose for three floors. You're not . . . am I smelling dewback?", he asked, sniffing the air excitedly.

"Maybe," she answered with a sly smile.

"I smell dewback, and carrots, balka-beans, peppers . . . oh dear holy hells, are you making --"

"If you say it out-loud and ruin the surprise, Ben, you won't get any."

He grinned and hugged her again, before coming all the way into the room.

And then Rey looked at the door, feeling a bit of surprise.

Hux was there, standing quietly in the doorway.

It wasn't unusual seeing him at her door in and of itself; but it WAS odd seeing him at the same time as Ben. As far as she could remember, they had never come here together, before.

Did this mean they had made up, had talked and were friends again?

Rey hoped so.

"I hope you don't mind, my coming, but Ren insisted that --"

"Of course I don't mind!", she exclaimed, pulling him by the arm into the room. "I've made more than enough. You and Ben go sit on the couch; I'll get you some wine while I finish up."

She went into her kitchen and lifted the lid on the pot, stirring. It shouldn't be much longer.

She grabbed the wine bottle and put two glasses into the crook of her arm, levitating the third out in front of her. She rounded the corner back into the living room --

-- and what she saw caused her to drop the bottle, and all three glasses to the ground.

Ben and Hux.

They were . . .
They were . . .

Were . . .

Hux looked up when he heard the crash, and he hastily separated himself from Ben's lips, blushing.

"Maker, are you okay?", he asked, as the wine splashed over her bare feet. She was surrounded
by glass, and she was in such shock that she barely heard Hux's "Don't move!" as he went into the kitchen to retrieve a broom.

"Well, it looks like I'm going to have to get you a new carpet," Ben said, from where he was still sitting on the couch. He was smirking. "That stain likely won't come out anytime soon."

Hux was back now, and was carefully sweeping up the remains of the bottle and the glasses from around her feet.

By now Rey had found her voice, and she said, slowly, "So, I don't presume to pry into the personal affairs of either of you, BUT . . ."

"I decided that his loutish charm and sloppy manners were too much for me to resist anymore," Hux said from below her. And that was ANOTHER shock; Hux, making a joke?

"And I decided that he's what I want, deserve, and most importantly, NEED, in my life," Ben said, sounding very serious.

Hux was done with the floor, having gotten all the glass and taken it to the trash in the kitchen. He came back out and Rey threw both arms around him, hard enough to drive him back into the wall.

"Please be careful," Hux said, attempting to sound stern, but Rey could hear the smile in his voice. "As I've explained to Kylo multiple times, your Force sensitivity gives you both enhanced strength. You run the risk of breaking me, with your enthusiasm."

Kylo had gotten up and he put his arms around the both of them, squeezing hard. "Too bad, Hux."

When he met them go, Rey said, holding back tears, "Have you ever had those moments where you're so happy that you don't have the words for it?"

"Only recently," Hux said, giving her a real smile.

"Well, I know exactly what you can say: dinner's ready."

They all laughed at Ben's comment, and Rey walked ahead of them into the kitchen, beginning to set the table. She put out tall glasses besides the plates, explaining, "I'm afraid that was my last bottle of wine; we'll all have to settle for drinking blue milk."

"Blue milk and stew; now it really IS like my mother used to make," Ben said with a grin, and all three laughed again.

. . .

Hux wished, sometimes, that he had been more like others his age, when he was younger. That he had spent less time with his head in a book, and more time interacting with others. If he had, his social skills might be a bit better--and perhaps his romantic ones, as well.

He hadn't known that at 33, the Grand Marshall of a large army, imbued with the experience and wisdom of a man at least twice as old--he hadn't known that shyness would still exist. He hadn't known that he would be able to identify a dozen different kinds of weapons blindfolded, but that he wouldn't know what to do with his hands, during a kiss.

And kiss, he and Kylo did. A lot.

They had yet to move, physically, beyond hugging and kissing; but that was fine with both of
them. They would take their time, and get there naturally. For right now, what they did have, was wonderful, and sweet.

But Hux, being Hux, had so many questions about their relationship.

Was it supposed to feel like this?

Was his heart supposed to pound every time he knocked on Kylo’s chamber doors?

Was every kiss, every hug, every casual touch or glance or words passed between them, supposed to feel so -- so important? So strong?

Was it normal, that time he had been reading a book, and Kylo had fallen asleep leaning on him, breathing softly against his neck; was it normal that that moment had made Hux want to burst into tears? Tears not because it made him SAD, but because the weight of Kylo against his body was so overwhelming and solid and REAL that Hux wasn’t able to fully process it?

Was it normal, that time Kylo pressed his lips to Hux’s cheek, and made a comment about liking Hux’s freckles; was it normal that those five or ten seconds of something so arbitrary had given him more satisfaction than the day Snoke had promoted him to General?

Was he too old, to be having such scattered emotions? Was this something that would have been better handled had he been in his 20’s, or even his teens, again; or was this free-fall just a common effect of being in love?

Hux had no point of reference to go off of, and really nobody that he could ask for clarification. Any other time in his life that he had a question, or needed reassurance or validation on an issue, he had been able to easily find it. Manuals, guides, books, data modules, charts, maps, computers, his superiors--these things had once held all the answers for him. But this, was different. It wasn’t logical, it wasn’t quantifiable. It couldn’t be measured or counted, or even really seen. No book would give him the answers he sought, no manual would tell him what his next steps should be. It was an odd, dual sensation for him: both the feeling of not being in control, and the feeling of not caring that he was not in control.

What made it easier to accept, and to cope with, was the fact that Kylo was just as unsure, and just as new to this experience as Hux was. They were navigating this surreal, this terrifying, this astoundingly beautiful time in their lives, together.

And, for as many unknowns that still lay between them, Hux was decidedly, unequivocally SURE, when he held Kylo’s hand in his own, that he had found his place, in the galaxy.

It was a lovely thing entirely, to finally be sure of something. To know, with no doubts, that Kylo loved him, was life-altering. Even more so to know that Hux felt the same for Kylo. And that their love was okay, that it was real. That it could coexist with all the other aspects of Hux’s life and his personality.

That he could successfully discuss the allocation of funds to their military with Kylo and his advisers in the conference room, and read a book while Kylo’s head was in his lap, sleeping, in his chambers; and neither situation compromised each other.

But Hux had to acknowledge that, although he felt HE was having a difficult time processing his feelings and emotions, Kylo had it worse.

He had been taught by his uncle Luke the ways of the Jedi for a good chunk of his life, and the Jedi were strictly against forming romantic attachments to others. And when Kylo went to Snoke,
the message remained much the same. Kylo's formation of a friendship with Rey had been the first time he had broken away from that, and made a conscious decision to form an attachment to another human being, that wasn't family. And even then, he had been able to live easily with that, because it hadn't been romantic.

With Hux, he had struggled for a long time, with acknowledging that his feelings went past the realm of friendship, and to ACCEPT his feelings as being okay, and natural.

So he and Hux, they worked with each other. They talked for hours, getting to know one another on different levels, helping to tear away discomfort and break down boundaries.

And the more they were together, the happier they felt.

Which sounded like such an insignificant thing: happiness.

But to them, it was the difference between living, and being alive.

...  

Princess Zyla was holding a formal celebration, to honor the birth announcement of Alayai and Milael. It seemed a bit late, considering that Alayai was a mere two months from her due date, but this was the way it was done, with Zyla's family's customs. There would be food, dancing, and, later, an exchange of gifts to the parents-to-be. Kylo, Hux, and Rey had, naturally, been invited. It was a bit hard, picking a suitable, gender-neutral gift (this was another custom of Zyla's people; to not be made aware of the baby's sex until after it was born), but Kylo and Hux had each chosen several large, custom-built toys that they felt would be appropriate. Rey had gotten the child an absolutely lovely, charmingly small set of clothing, in the soft purple-blue of Zyla's family crest, with the royal family name stitched in gold across the pockets. It was harder for Rey to pick out something neutral, because Alayai had confessed to her alone what the baby's gender was. So she compensated by buying what seemed like mountains of rosy pink clothes, shoes, and accessories, and had them hidden away in her quarters, waiting.

When the day came, Rey left several hours before Kylo and Hux, to help Zyla and Alayai prepare for the event. Kylo got ready fairly quickly, for once, but Hux was slower than ever.

While he wanted to go to the event, he was also scared to.

Scared because, this was the first time, on their own base or off, that he and Kylo would appear in public, together, as a couple.

He was silent in the ship, on the way there, and quiet as they walked up to the doors of the grand hall.

This was it.

How would others react, seeing them with each other? Holding hands, dancing, kissing? Would they think it natural? Would people look at them and assume that Hux was simply trying to climb his way up the chain of command of the First Order? Would people think it odd, that they had chosen each other, rather than the multitude of women that either (in particular, that KYLO) could have picked for mates?

At least, Hux thought, smiling to himself, Zyla won't be all that surprised. After all, she had told him over a year ago that he and Kylo should be with each other. And if Zyla thought that, all the way back then, had others thought it, too? The chemistry that was so plain to her, even after spending a mere half-day in their combined presence; had others been able to see it, too? Rey certainly had. Had Alayai? Had Milael?
Kylo's voice floated through the fog of Hux's brain.

"You look really handsome tonight."

Hux smiled, blushing a little.

"Thank you; you don't look half-bad yourself."

Kylo lifted up Hux's hand, holding it against his lips, gently kissing.

"Are you ready?"

Hux nodded, feeling all the tension drain from his body, at the comforting pressure of Kylo's fingers on his own.

"I'm ready."

So they took a deep breath, and walked through the door together.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone that took the time to read/like/comment on this story. I hope you all enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it. :-)