SKYWALKERS

by Wissixwe

Summary

This is the SEQUEL to "Strategic Alliances," my first story on Ao3, which I suggest you read first for the backstory and to avoid SPOILERS. "Skywalkers" takes up immediately where "Strategic Alliances" left off.

The galaxy has been saved, but it's not grateful...

Forced to choose between loyalty and love, Leia Organa has fled the Resistance. Finding an isolated world out on the Edge, Leia and Dar Noaa hope to make a home there for their extended 'family'; but the refugees have a serious problem, supplies are running out; someone must risk a return to the Outer Rim to trade if they are to survive. Luke Skywalker and Chewbacca head back into danger aboard the Millennium Falcon, taking Finn, Poe and Dar Na with them; the mission is get in, get what they need, get out - but a terrible discovery there will change *everything* for Luke. And back at the Edge, Ren and Rey learn that they are not as alone as they think, but their 'neighbor' may not be what it seems and the refugees might be pawns in a game of galactic importance.

Love and loyalty will be tested again and again as the Republic and the First Order race toward the ultimate confrontation...
***Officially AU 12/15/17***

*For Mark*
Chapter 1

SKYWALKERS

The galaxy has been saved, but it’s not grateful.

Billions of beings on millions of worlds have absolutely no idea they were in danger of oblivion to begin with, and anybeing who knows the details of what happened is either dead or missing.

Or both.

And everyone else is at war.

In the end, it was not the destruction of the Hosnian system that made the Republic formally declare war on the First Order, it was the sabotage of the Holonet. The entire galaxy was addicted to fast, easy information access, so the loss of holo-visits home, news, gossip, and programming that occupied most of their time was quickly named the most evil attack in galactic history. There was little discussion and no debate; concordance throughout Republic territory was reduced to a simple carrier frequency announcement sent out by the Emergency Council on Coruscant that proclaimed:

“We are at war”.

A frenzied campaign to build a new armada of warships to penetrate the Unknown Regions and attack the First Order in its own space has begun, but the Concordance is a facade; behind the illusion of unity, fierce competition for power and profit is already causing cracks in the fragile alliances holding the surviving Republic together. But even the most ruthless and powerful competitors agree on one thing – the greatest threat to their ambitions is not the First Order.

Meanwhile, far away, the most dysfunctional extended family in the galaxy has found a place to hide; a nice, nameless world out on the Edge that holds promise, but little else. For the time being, it will do, but only if some of the family risks returning to ‘civilized’ space to barter for food and supplies that they desperately need to survive.

And Luke Skywalker thinks that his fight is over, but it’s not...

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Coruscant.

The Emergency Council was in uproar.

The report from the Tactical ship Tanxine split its members into two categorically opposed camps: those who believed that Leia Organa had been kidnapped and those who believed she was a traitor.
The split grew worse when the report revealed that Luke Skywalker was also involved, but the
details were sketchy at best; how Skywalker might have aided the escape of the only witness to his
sister’s kidnapping was still being investigated. That the Jedi had been informed that the Council had
summoned him to Coruscant, but chose to ignore it, was fact.

The Council was dismissed for the day so everybeing could calm down and study the reports; the
chamber emptied quickly, but one member lingered until the others had gone before rising from his
seat to leave.

Gial Ackbar was feeling tired and old and so very, very weary of it all.

This was one of those times when he was grateful to his benthic ancestors for a face that was
incapable of showing emotion. Hearing that General Organa was lost, taken by a Sith, was deeply
distressing, but there was nothing he could do to help her now. Her brother would be in pursuit; that
would keep him away from Coruscant, and Ackbar had no way to know if his warning to stay away
had reached the Jedi, so that was a good thing.

He’d hoped that lagging behind would spare him from further discussion in the hallways, but when
he stepped through the exit, he found someone there waiting for him.

It was Likit. Ackbar detested him.

Likit was human, Coruscanti aristocracy by heritage and First Seat of the Technology Guild, so the
offer of a seat on the Emergency Council was automatic. Ackbar was aware that Likit’s position
gave him ‘special access’ to some of the Republic’s most guarded secrets; if it involved technology, it
involved Likit.

“Admiral,” Likit stepped into Ackbar’s path, stopping him, “can I have a moment?”

“Of course.”

“I noticed that you remained silent in there,” Likit offered him a slick, well-practiced smile, “but I
hope you will share your thoughts with me now that we have some privacy.”

“My thoughts on what?”

“The General, of course,” Likit moved closer as he spoke, “Was she taken by the Sith or did she run
away with him?”

“The report says ‘taken’.”

“Are you aware that she and the Sith were not strangers?”

“No. How do you know that?”

“The Sith was, how should I put this? One of ours.”

“One of our what?”

“An operative for Acquisition and Analysis.”

“A Sith? Working for A and A?”

“Leia Organa put him there.”

“I know nothing of this; is there a point to it?”
“Look at the facts, Ackbar; she brought the Sith here; she put him where he had access to highly sensitive information and technology, which he stole from us and then disappeared, only to resurface after Hosnian Prime had been destroyed, as did her brother. Then all three of them disappear into the Unknown Regions right after the Holonet attack.”

“Are you suggesting that Leia Organa and Luke Skywalker could be agents of the First Order?”

“I’m suggesting nothing, just listing the facts. ‘Agents of the First Order’ are your words.”

“The facts are that neither of them would ever turn against us.”

Likit’s smile began to fade; his eyes narrowed as he considered his next words. Deciding that he’d already heard enough, Akbar brushed past him, heading for the lift.

“Surely you can see our concern,” Likit called after him, “only when we have Leia Organa and Luke Skywalker safely in our hands again can we be sure of that.”

Akbar stopped, but didn’t turn around.

“And I assure, you, Admiral,” Likit added, “we will have them; both of them...”

Ackbar waited.

*Here it comes...*

“...and you, too, if you get in our way.”

Ackbar didn’t react; the lift door opened and he stepped inside, then let the door slide closed behind him.

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The Edge.

In another part of the galaxy, far away from the madness of war, the crew of the Visitor was waiting impatiently for the Millennium Falcon to arrive. The carrier wave message said they expected to be in the system by morning, and almost everyone aboard was awake long before daylight. As soon as it was light enough outside to see, the entry was opened and one by one, they found an excuse to go outside.

It was a very pretty world.

They’d set down in open space among rolling hills of grassy meadows and forest that were littered with stretches of huge boulders deposited by long-gone glaciers. Numerous streams of cold, clear water snaked down the hills toward a central stream that was almost, but not quite, a river. And beyond the hills, ice-capped mountains flirted with storm clouds and fog, giving the morning air a damp coolness and the ground a sweet, fertile, smell.

In the few days since they landed, no one had ventured far from the ship, so beyond the reach of the perimeter motion sensors, this world was a mystery. There was so much to do that exploration had
fallen to the bottom of the list, and nobody really noticed when Ren and Rey would walk out past the sensors, then around the perimeter; he was recovering quickly and she was keeping him out the way while the others worked.

Or so it seemed.

No one wanted to look past appearances anyway; everyone knew that something unimaginable had happened to Ren in the Goazon, but how that event might have changed him was still a complete unknown; not even Dar Noaa had anything to say about him.

But this morning, Ren was not out walking.

Late the night before, they received a carrier message from the Falcon that came directly from Luke Skywalker. He made the very specific request that Ren be inside, in his quarters, when they arrived and not come outside unless Luke requested his presence personally.

Leia relayed the message, and Ren agreed without comment. No one had seen him outside his quarters since.

In the morning, Poe Dameron was first to venture outside; he was sitting on a small boulder with his eyes on the sky, which was unusual because normally he would have been lounging in the pilot’s seat waiting for the ship to report the Falcon’s approach. He’d been quieter than usual since the news came that Finn had been rescued by Luke Skywalker, but whatever he was thinking, he chose to keep it to himself.

Everyone else kept themselves busy with routine; Dar Na took over for Poe in the cockpit for watch; Leia and Dar Noaa continued to review the constant stream of incoming data from the ship’s sensors; Rey made sure that Ren actually ate all the food she’d brought him before leaving him to join Poe outside.

Ren ate quickly, thanked her, then told her go on, he would be fine on his own for awhile, giving her the reassurance she needed because he could sense how anxious she was. For Rey, impending arrivals were as stressful as departures, and until the Falcon was on the ground with its entry open, she would be a bundle of nervous energy. The girl who thought everyone left her was now the woman who couldn’t stand waiting for someone to come back; the darkness inside her fed on her fears, growing, making her edgy and short-tempered. It was better for them both if she waited outside.

As quick kiss on his forehead later, she was out the door and gone.

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It was a beautiful morning; the sky was rich blue with only a few thin clouds.

Rey took her time walking to the boulder where Poe was sitting; when she climbed onto the boulder to join him, he acknowledged her with a glance and a nod, then turned his eyes to the sky again.

“I hate this part,” he said quietly. “Waiting.”

Rey sighed in agreement.

They didn’t say anything else; each of them was lost in their own thoughts. They silently divided the sky between them, and watched and waited.
An eternity later, Poe heard her catch her breath.

“They’re here,” she said.

Poe looked, but saw nothing, then he realized that Rey was sensing Finn, not seeing the ship. A few seconds later, he heard Dar Na shouting from inside the ship that the Millennium Falcon was in sensor range and descending, then he saw Dar Na step out the entry, followed by the General and Dar Noaa. He looked back at the sky and saw a small bright object passing over the mountains, descending, growing larger, in fact, it was about to land much too close to the boulder he and Rey were sitting on, so he pushed her off, then followed, so they could get to a safe distance.

The Falcon made a sudden turn, then spiraled down to land with a surprisingly delicate thump; exhaust was still pouring from its thrusters as the ramp descended and the entry opened.

Finn emerged first; walking fast and purposefully, he crossed the ground quickly, coming first to Poe, who hugged him fiercely. When the hug ended, Poe grabbed hold of Finn’s shoulders and shook him hard.

“Don’t *ever* do that again!”

Finn was confused, but it was good confusion; in his whole life, no one had ever sounded so glad to see him. He might have questioned Poe about it, but had no time because the rest of the Visitor’s crew suddenly swarmed around, greeting him, patting him, petting him. The General and Rey, even Dar Na was there; almost everyone…

He looked past the happy mob and saw that Dar Noaa had not come all the way, but was standing alone some distance behind them.

“Excuse me.” Finn spread his hands; they all stepped aside to clear the way because they knew it was on Finn to go to the waiting Sith.

Finn had no idea what he should say to Dar Noaa; none of the words in his head seemed right. Some sounded flat, some sounded arrogant, some sounded really stupid, and when he found himself face to face with Dar Noaa, he had no words at all. The Sith studied him in silence for several long seconds, perhaps because he, too, had no words.

“You...” Dar Noaa made it sound like so much more than simple recognition. “… did well.”

Taking the Sith by complete surprise for a second time, Finn threw his arms around Dar Noaa and hugged him tightly. It was an awkward moment; neither of them was any good at this kind of thing at all, but somehow Dar Noaa found two words that covered it.

“Welcome home,” he said.

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Inside the Visitor, Ren was trying not to listen.

It was difficult because he knew them all and he could sense them out there, caught up in a celebration that would end all too soon; once the rush of greetings was over, the conversations would quickly turn to immediate problems and what to do about them. He would not be part of that because
he was one of the problems; sooner or later someone would ask ‘what about him’. His mother would say something overly optimistic, and the Sith would back her up. No one, not even Luke, would openly disagree with her, so that would be the end of it, except for the unspoken resentment everyone would feel towards his mother because of him.

But for the moment, all Ren felt was the joy in his mother’s heart as she greeted her brother; at least there was that.

The happy voices grew fainter; Ren sensed the group moving away from him, toward the Falcon, up its ramp and inside. Unlike the Visitor, which had no space for ‘group’ meetings, the Falcon’s communal room was just big enough to cram them all in. Ren remembered how huge that room seemed when he was a child; it served as his playground during long space journeys. He’d be noisy and get on his father’s nerves, but Chewbacca would always find time to sit and play games with him.

Chewbacca.

Right now, the Wookie was sitting in the Falcon’s cockpit in self-imposed isolation. Frustration and conflict marked his location like a warning beacon; fragments of memories and bursts of rage came rapid-fire, slamming into Ren’s mind one after another.

And as always, Chewbacca’s aim was true; every memory hurt.

Ren could bear it; he deserved it. Han Solo had not been much of a father, but to Chewbacca, he’d been a true friend, a brother in every way that really mattered; the Wookie’s rage, his need for revenge, was entirely justified. Luke must have foreseen it; one glimpse of Ren was all it would take to unleash Chewbacca’s instinctual fury, so came the request that Ren stay out of sight.

Luke wasn’t protecting Ren, though; he was protecting Chewbacca.

Ren leaned back against the wall of the sleep platform and closed his eyes; perhaps it would be best if he went to sleep for awhile. He was considering whether he should just get on the floor now and skip the falling off the platform later..

“Kylo Ren.”

He opened his eyes, looked around the room, saw no one.

“Yes?” he replied to the empty air.

“Kylo Ren.”

This time, Ren recognized the voice and knew where to look - the room’s workstation waveform. It was active; it was scrolling line after line of red code. He got up, went to the workstation and sat down down, then put his hand on the waveform, and to his surprise, it accepted him immediately, presenting him with the personal display he’d used aboard the Ren Transport.

“Kylo Ren.” the ship said.

“Yes?”

“A status report is required.”

“Status report? On what?”
“On you. How are you?”

For a moment, Ren was confused; who was asking? He was the only one still on board; everyone else had gone to the Falcon. Was it possible that the ship itself was asking? Ren knew all too well how unpredictable, even quirky, Kourin technology could be, but this was something new.

“I am...” Ren hesitated; how was he? Physically, much better, and mentally, he was... “*different*.”

“Yes,” the ship replied.

“Is that what you wanted to know?”

Silence. Ren waited impatiently.

A holographic display emerged from the waveform, swiftly building an image of a map of the region where they’d landed. Complied from continuous scans, it placed the Visitor in the center, then showed the topography surrounding it.

“Sensor data,” a flashing dot appeared in the display, “for the source of this stream is insufficient.” The flashing dot moved up the stream bed towards the highlands and the mountain beyond. “It requires on-site inspection to complete the survey.”

This made some sense; the ship’s programming permitted independent action; the ship was dealing with serious resource limitations and was unwilling to spend any of it on a task that could be performed by something – or someone – else, especially when that someone was doing nothing at all beyond depleting the food supply.

“Are you recovered enough,” the ship asked, “to perform this task?”

Ren studied the image for a second; the destination didn’t seem too far, a day’s walk out, another day back; light duty, a chance to get out and away and test himself.

“Mission accepted.”

Saying that was the easy part; now he’d have to convince his mother – and Rey – to let him go.

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The day flew by much too fast for Leia.

All the discussion was over by noon; it was decided. First, they would transfer all the supplies the Falcon could spare to the Visitor, then they would transfer anything the Visitor could spare for barter or sale to the Falcon. They’d eat and get some sleep, and the next morning, the Falcon would be leaving in search of supplies, using the navigation charts taken from the Finalizer to avoid the First Order and the Unknown Regions infamous “death zones”.

There were a number of candidate worlds where they might try their luck; most of which were located near or within the Outer Rim, meaning they would probably have connections inside Republic space. That was important to Leia because it meant there might be a way to contact the Resistance and get the modified charts to Rolan Lexde; those charts could mean the difference between life and death for them.
It was a risky adventure, so Leia was quietly distressed when both Finn *and* Poe asked to go with Luke – and then Dar Na surprised her by doing the same. She was even more surprised when Luke said yes and Dar Noaa agreed without one word of protest. Dar Noaa saw it in her face, and explained as they walked back to the Visitor together.

“The vessel is secure,” he told her, “but there’s nothing to do right now except sleep and eat. Sending the young ones off with Luke will extend our supplies and give them something important to do. And if they… don’t… come back, the fewer here, the better the odds of survival.”

Leia sighed; there was something oddly comforting about his unfiltered honesty. No matter how bad things got, she could always depend on him to tell her the truth.

The rest of the day was a blur; they hurried from ship to ship like ants, transferring this there and that here until they’d exhausted all the possibilities and themselves. The evening meal in the Falcon communal room was quiet; the conversation was subdued because no one wanted to be responsible for accidentally bringing up any carefully avoided subjects.

After that, Rey disappeared; everyone knew where she went.

Chewbacca mewed something and went back to the cockpit.

Then Luke and Dar Noaa went for one of their long private walks in the dark.

Poe, Finn and Dar Na excused themselves to go pack for the trip.

As soon as they had gone, Leia went to the cockpit to see Chewbacca. He was in the pilot seat, gazing out into the dark, and didn’t look or greet her when she sat down in the copilot seat. They sat there in silence for a long time, then the Wookie extended a long hairy arm; Leia put her hand in his.

There was nothing more to do; circumstance had condemned them to opposite sides over what to do about Kylo Ren. For the moment, that didn’t matter; they sat together, holding hands, remembering.

Han Solo was gone. Nothing either of them did now could bring him back.

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It was late; only the slow movement of the sparse stellar population that was the Edge shining above the mountains marked the passage of time. The air was cool, but tolerable, and alive; little rustling sounds rose from the undergrowth as the world’s night creatures moved in the dark.

Leia was waiting. Again.

She could hear them out there in the dark, talking their way back to the ships. She didn’t resent being excluded from their walks; she was glad that they were becoming friends; friends were a luxury neither of them had permitted themselves in the past. Han would say that seeing Luke living a solitary life made him feel so grateful to have her and Chewy.

Then Han would say goodbye.

Leia wondered what Han would have said about about Dar Noaa…
She was in that thought when Luke and Dar Noaa stepped into the light of the Visitor’s open entry.

“Good,” Dar Noaa greeted her, “you’re still up.” He waved the data cartridge in front of her. “I have to make a few more modifications to this for your brother.”

He disappeared into the ship, leaving Luke and Leia alone.

“I’m not going to say it, you know.” she told him, “No more goodbyes. Ever.”


“And no more ‘may the Force be with you’s’, either. It *is*.”

Luke laughed a bit more.

“I have a good feeling about this place,” she looked around, at nothing in particular. “It’s a lot like Alderaan. Maybe we’ll call it that.”

“Alderaan. I like it.”


They said their goodbyes before sunrise.

Dar Noaa spent several minutes talking privately with Dar Na, then walked with him the Falcon. Once there, he regarded the young ones sternly.

“You three be careful out there,” he lectured them, “Listen to Luke; let him guide you. And stay quiet; remain unnoticed, and you remain *alive*.”

Rey stepped up and gave each of them a hug; first Dar Na, then Poe and finally, Finn, who didn’t let go when she did.

“Come with us,” he urged her.

“I belong here,” she replied. “You come back.” Then she looked over at Dar Na and added, “Look after these two for us, Dar Na.”

Dar Na nodded.

Leia was last. Leia the General shook Poe and Finn’s hands; they saluted. Lady Vader reached out and touched Dar Na on the chest; he lowered his head in respect. The goodbyes finished, the three turned away and headed for the Falcon’s entry ramp.

Luke and Leia grabbed each other’s hands.

“We’ll be here,” she whispered, letting go, “when you get back.”

Luke smiled, gave a short wave to Dar Noaa and Rey, then turned away, following the others.

Moments later, the Falcon was gone.
Inside the Visitor, Ren felt them leave.

He was almost finished his preparations; everything he needed was already inside one of the ship’s excursion packs. The packs were virtually identical to those on the Ren Transport, with one significant difference; the Visitor’s packs held no weapons. Ren knew where Rey had secured his lightsaber; it was tucked in the back of one of the drawers under the platform. He pulled the drawer out as far as it would come, pushed the blanket aside and reached for it, but his hand stopped short.

He was afraid of it.

It was the only thing left from his time with the Knights; it was cold and uncaring and unrepentant for the terrible things Kylo Ren had done. Like him, it felt nothing as it pierced Han Solo’s heart, then let him fall away into the abyss. And it was totally indifferent to who Ren was now; it didn't share his remorse.

It was a weapon; a tool, nothing more. Rey fixed it.

He closed his fingers around it and lifted it out, instantly feeling the difference; the only darkness there now was what he brought with him, and he could bear it.

He added it to the pack, then threw the pack over his shoulder and went to tell his mother where he was going.

It was a short, but heated, discussion; Dar Noaa listened with interest, but his mother’s face said no before he even got the first sentence out. As soon as he finished, she verified it.

“No.”

For Leia, it was simple enough. She’d just gotten him back.

Dar Noaa, however, found it curious that the vessel hadn’t reported the problem as soon as it was detected. Instead, it waited until everyone was preoccupied, and then it chose to tell Ren. There had to be purpose in that.

“Perhaps,” he offered, despite the look on Leia’s face as he said it. “Let me look at the request.”

A few minutes later, all them, including Rey now, were staring into the waveform holographic display, watching the same animation that Ren had been shown.

“It’s not far,” Ren argued his case calmly, “Today to get there, tomorrow to get back.”

“Are you sure?” Dar Noaa asked.

“Yes.”

There was confidence in Ren’s answer; everyone noticed it. Except Leia.

“No.” she said.

Dar Noaa saw the problem: the Kylo of Ren was unaccustomed to being idle; he was conditioned to despise being useless, so the vessel was giving him something to do. It really wasn’t very far at all, and the risk was minimal. They’d detected nothing dangerous out there so far, and even if something
dangerous did show up, it would get the surprise of its about-to-be-over life if it took on Kylo Ren.

None of that would matter to Leia, though, but then Dar Noaa saw the solution to the problem standing next to her.

“What if he takes Rey along?” he asked. The girl’s reaction assured him that he was right in suggesting it. “She can look after him. And they do work well together.”

Leia put a fist to her mouth and considered; Dar Noaa had her cornered. She’d been trusting Rey with her son since they left the Goazon, so there was no arguing it now. She looked at Ren; he met her gaze without any trace of fear, another small victory and a giant step forward for him.

“All right,” she surrendered, “I give up… but you turn back at the first sign of trouble.”

“I will.”

Standing just out of Leia’s line of sight, Rey gave Ren a silent ‘whoop’, then ran to get a pack and her staff. Ren excused himself to go make sure she didn’t forget anything important, leaving Dar Noaa to deal with his mother all alone.

“They saved the *galaxy*, Leia,” he told her, “I think they can handle a few days outside.”


To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

I can’t believe it - I’m running out of time! When this exercise in masochism started, I had no idea it would make the long wait for Episode 8 fly by. And now, it's a race against the calendar...
By early afternoon, the morning’s excitement had worn off for Rey.

At first, the idea of heading out into the unknown with Ren sounded like the first page of a great adventure story; they hadn’t spent any time alone since Dagobah, and Dagobah didn’t count because they didn’t love each other yet. But with every kilometer, she realized more and more that to Ren, this was a *mission*; he had exactly one thing in his mind, to get there and get on with it. She’d totally forgotten about the Knights and their Code, and how it affected Ren’s thinking.

He wasn’t even interested in talking, and she had a lot she wanted to talk about. Like Finn.

They were working their way through some tall grass that crowded the banks of the stream they’d been following. They could hear rapids upstream, but they couldn’t see them yet. He was going slow, leading the way, being careful that they were stepping into solid ground and not muck when she decided to bring the subject up.

“Finn asked me to go with him.”

“Mmm.”

“Don’t you want to know what I said?”

“Mmmm.”

“I said that I belonged here.”

“Mmm.”

“Is that it? Is that *all* you’re going to say? Not ‘Good’ or ‘That’s nice’ or *anything*?”

He stopped, but didn’t turn around.

“You could have gone if you wanted.”

“Maybe I should have.”

He turned around.

“If you wanted to, yes.”

“You wouldn’t *care*?”

“Of course, I’d care,” he seemed puzzled by the question.

“Oh.”

That settled it; he went back to work.

As she followed, Rey started to resent his disinterest; he was only out here because she’d come
along; he had his mission to occupy his thoughts, so he wasn’t troubled at all because somebody left.

*Everyone leaves me.*

She didn’t know that he was paying attention; her thoughts had been slipping into his all morning.

He understood her darkness; she knew why they left, she knew they were coming back, but that wasn’t enough. Every time she said the word goodbye, she heard echoes of her lost family calling to her, haunting her with the fear, the loneliness, the horrible feeling of being discarded. She’d been dealing with the fear since the Falcon left; but it would not leave her alone.

It made her angry; it made her *aggressive*.

It made her a force of nature.

She needed the comfort of having control, and soon she would test him to get it.

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They emerged from the tall grass onto a natural stairway of rock; the climb was harder, but easy to see, so they were making good time by the time the sun had moved far enough into afternoon to bring shadows back.

The stream’s course narrowed and steepened, the rapids became cascades.

Another hour’s climb brought them to their destination; a sheer wall of curving rock the water had yet to wear down stood before before them. Dozens of waterfalls spilled down from above; some were wide and thunderous; others were slim and delicate.

All of them were beautiful.

They saw no way to climb higher, but they did discover an enormous boulder nestled among the falls. Except for a slight curve that made it higher in the center, it was almost flat; and fully exposed to the afternoon sun, it was warm and dry.

Ren and Rey climbed onto it, removed their packs and set them aside, then collapsed on their backs to rest. After a few minutes, the fresh, clean smell of the rock beneath them was replaced by another smell that was not so pleasant. Half a day’s climbing through native terrain had spattered them well, and the heat of sun on rock was baking the mess, making it – and them - stink.

Ren considered the problem.

“That little fall looks good,” he said, “Easy to get to, not strong enough to knock us down. Take off your boots.”

Leaving the boots safely back on the boulder with their packs, they stepped carefully on bare feet, first to the edge of the flat boulder, then onto the rocky shelf beyond, where they found wide and level footing; it was wet and just a bit slimy, but it led directly to the little fall and a good rinsing off.

The water was cold, so they worked their way into the fall slowly, then leaned against the rocks behind it to let the water rinse and massage their hair and clothes clean.

It was something totally new to Rey; it was paradise. Life on Jakku was the village bathhouse steam-room and a ladle of dirty hot water to rinse off with; the night rains on Dagobah were better, but clean only lasted for a few minutes because the jungle floor was always wet and splatters were
unavoidable. And washing aboard a starship was more symbolic than practical; strictly budgeted water required one to work fast.

Alone here with Ren, there were no restrictions, she could stay as long as she wished.

But it wasn’t enough just to be rinsed; after a few minutes of savoring the luxury of no restrictions, Rey pulled off her tunic and tossed it out of the flow, onto the big boulder, then she stepped out of her pants and tossed them, too. She wore nothing underneath, so, naked now, she used her hands to scrub her face, then arms, then she bent over to work on her legs.

Standing right beside her, Ren watched with interest as she undressed, but it quickly turned into something more than interest as he saw how she moved, how the water splashed over her in little rivers that coursed down over her breasts, belly and hips, then flowed between her legs.

He wanted to follow it.

They’d made love several times already; but the ship was small, the quarters cramped, the walls were thin; worst of all, they could be interrupted at any time, so they’d had to be quick and quiet about it. The pleasure, the release, all of it, had to be controlled in there, but out here in the open, they were completely alone…

A moment later, his clothes were lying next to hers on the boulder.

Rey was aware before his clothes came off; she’d seen his eyes following the water. Thinking he would reach for her, she stepped closer to him, but he didn’t do it; instead, he leaned against the rocky wall, inserting himself completely into the strongest cascade of water. She saw invitation in it; she stepped close beside him and began to scrub his shoulders, then his back, with her hands, working her way down his body. Her touch was smooth and sensuous, sliding from side to side, wandering, teasing, following the water...

He was standing there, passive, eyes closed, enjoying it, when her fingers crossed into interested territory. It was almost a reflex to look at her; her eyes were wide with expectation, but her teeth were chattering from the cold.

“Are you cold?” he asked.

“A Little bit.” she lied.

Without another word, he reached down, took hold of her hand and then led her out from under the water, across the rocks, back to the sunny warmth of the boulder. He sat first, then she sat beside him, and they both lay on their backs, then stretched out on the warm rock and basked quietly in the sunshine. A short time passed, then Rey turned over onto her stomach, moving close enough that her shoulder and arm was touching his.

“Ren?”

“What?”

Using one elbow to support herself, she rolled onto her side to look at him, adjusting her legs to keep herself steady. He watched.

“It’s nice here,” she stretched her other arm across his chest, her fingers skimming over his skin delicately as she traced an invisible trail that wandered down toward his waist, “isn’t it?”

“Yes.”
“Are you still cold?” her hand came to rest just below his navel, but her fingers kept curling and straightening, stroking his skin.

“No.”

“Are you... tired?”

“Not. At. All."

“Are you going to make me do all the work?”

“Do you *want* to?”

The question made her stop and think; he wanted her, she could feel it, she could see it. He wasn’t putting her off, either; his question was sincere. And he was lying there, watching her; giving her that little crooked grin...

And to her own surprise, the answer was yes!

Ren closed his eyes; he’d been feeling it building up inside her since they’d started out and by now, he was starving for it. Rey was a force of nature; an intoxicating blend of desire and aggression for which there was no antidote. Not that he wanted one; she could take him any way she pleased.

It pleased her to take him from the top down; kissing and caressing, fingers in motion, seeking out his most sensitive places. The freshly-healed wound on his left side was still too fragile to touch, but sliding her fingers past it, over his hip and onto the pale and perfect skin of his groin, made him catch his breath in anticipation. She wanted to grant his wish, but she was kneeling a bit too far up; lying here on the boulder beside her, his height became length, and she’d have to move to do it. Pushing up on one knee, she stretched herself over his abdomen with one hand extended, reaching.

He’d been lying there, enjoying every second of it, submitting, watching her in excited fascination. His arms had been lying idle at his sides, but one of them, and the hand attached to it, was in that little open space between her legs and he just couldn’t help it; he had to touch her there. His long fingers found slippery welcome and went deep; she let out a delicious little sound, pressing against them, asking for more...

Then suddenly, playtime was over; pleasure became urgency for them both.

She made herself push his hand away, then she shifted her weight, put a leg up and over, then climbed onto him with surprising grace. Now she had control again; looking straight into his eyes as she straddled him, she wiggled gently into position and then, using a hand to guide him inside; she lowered herself slowly, taking him in. The slick resistance as he filled her was exquisite for them both; he grabbed her hips, steadying her, holding himself back, wanting every second of pleasure she was giving. And she gave it; holding him tightly inside, she rocked, gliding down, then up; he answered every movement, matching her power, then adding his own. Fevered breath, pounding hearts, something powerful flowing between them…

He sensed it before it began; her mind went empty at the instant of release. He could feel it surging through her body, and he wanted it; he needed it...

*Wait for me.*

Caught at the very first pulse of orgasm, Rey felt as if he’d suspended time itself to keep her there; it was pure ecstasy as he came deep inside her, his body, his feelings, merging with hers until they were one mind, one soul.
Time resumed; they shared wave after wave of pleasure and joy.

When it started to subside, Rey felt him relax, then soften, so she eased him out. His hands were still resting on her hips as she leaned forward, putting her hands down on the rock on either side of him to hold herself up. Then she shifted her weight, ending up on all fours, hovering over him.

Another lean forward put her face to his.

“That,” she whispered, “was...”

He quieted her with a kiss.

......

Six hours’ walk and a generation away, Leia Organa was lying among the tattered remnants of her clothing on the floor, trying to understand what the hell had just happened.

She’d been sitting at the workstation in the Sith quarters going over the ship’s supply data for hours in an attempt to not worry about her son, but she was failing miserably at it. She’d only just gotten him back, and while Leia the General accepted Dar Noaa’s rationale for letting him go, Leia the mother did not.

Noah...

No matter how hard she tried to concentrate, her thoughts kept coming back to Dar Noaa. He was in the cockpit doing some small maintenance task in the circuitry at the ship’s request. It was probably nothing important, just the ship’s way of keeping him occupied, but for some reason, that thought irritated Leia because sometimes it felt as if the ship was actively competing with her for his attention. It was was ridiculous, of course, to be jealous of the ship just because, unlike Leia, it never hesitated to ask for what it wanted.

Noah...

She felt it again; sexual desire starting as a tiny flutter deep inside that became awareness that quickly became a conspiracy between her mind and her body. Memories flashed, her body responded; the flutter became an urge, first suggesting, then demanding, action.

Noah...

It kept happening, over and over, each time stronger than the time before, until Leia simply couldn’t fight it any more. She didn’t decide; she didn’t think about it at all; she just got up from the workstation, walked to the door, then through it, then walked down the corridor to the cockpit.

He was standing at the workstation with his back to her when she entered, but sensing her presence, he turned around to face her.

His eyes were glowing.

*He feels it, too.*

She walked up to him, put her hands to his face and traced the contours there; his chin, his cheeks, his ears and then down the sides of his neck. His body instantly reacted to her touch, but he didn’t...
move; he kept still, watching her with curious fascination.

Her hands went to his chest; his shirt was in the way. She tore it open.

Her intentions were clear to him now; he fumbled with her belt until it surrendered and dropped to
the floor, then he freed her from her shirt as she had done for him. There was still so much in the
way; pants came down easily; a few awkward seconds to step out of them, then he took her to the
floor.

And there, things took a turn to the Sith...

The more she wanted him, the more she resisted; making him fight for what she’d come here to give
him. Every kiss, every touch, came at the cost of a push back or slap; after one particularly delightful
caress, she bit him.

She *bit* him.

He loved it.

The struggle was fierce; she fought him savagely, driving him wild, until he couldn’t hold back any
longer. Grabbing her by the wrists, he pinned her arms to the floor, spread her legs with his own,
then mounted her.

She hissed at him. *Hissed*.

But it wasn’t a hateful hiss; it was soft, musical, like the word ‘yes’.

He claimed her forcefully, pushing in deep again and again until he sensed that she was ready, then
he gave her one more powerful stroke accompanied by a deep, resonant growl. There was magic in
the sound; like the final chords of an overture, it brought everything together. It swept her up like a
tidal wave; she plunged into the most perfect moments she’d ever known. The conquest was over;
she went limp beneath him, trembling, whimpering, breathless...

Utterly exhausted, he slumped down onto her and stayed that way for quite awhile.

Actually, he was still there, dozing contently on top of her.

“Noah?”

“Hmmm?”

“Are you all right?”

“Mmmm… yes.”

“That was...”

“Yes, it was,” he said dreamily. “If they don’t stop soon, they just might kill us...”

“What?”

“Oh, nothing...”

Leia was sure it was not nothing; she’d make him explain what he meant by it.

Later.
Six hours’ walk away, up in the highlands, the afternoon was quietly slipping into evening; even after the sun-baked boulder they’d been playing on fell into shadow, the heat rising from it kept the lovers warm and comfortable. Their conversation had a curious, childlike tone to it; simple subjects for which they’d had no time before dominated it.

“Favorite color,” she said.

“Green.”

“Me, too.”

“Favorite food,” she said.

“Simyrol, when I can get it.”

“Simyrol?” she asked. “What is it?”

“Powerful stuff,” Ren smiled just to think about it, “made by fermenting syrchi spit in sugar for about ten years. Absolutely *disgusting*, but it makes the pain go away. What about you?”

“Anything that isn’t labeled ‘portion’,” Rey replied.

“Best scar story,” he said.

“*Here*,” she pointed to a thin white line under her chin. “I was climbing down from picking a really nice little transmission switch and my line snapped and cut me. I grabbed a cable pipe, so I didn’t fall, but I lost the switch.”

He ran his fingers along the scar, wondering if she knew how lucky she’d been; a centimeter down and it might haven been fatal.

“And yours?” she asked.

“I don’t have a best scar story.”

“What about the circles on your back?”

“Those?” Ren had forgotten them; they were a part of his training as a Knight of Ren, and painful to remember now. “They’re something I needed to… test myself. Not much story there.” Her expression said she felt his pain, and he didn’t want that. “I do have some favorite scars, though.”

“Which ones? Show me.”

“This one,” he tapped where he’d burnt his hand wrestling Vader’s lightsaber out of her hands on Dagobah. Rey leaned over and kissed it.

“And his one,” He tapped the shoulder where she’d stuck him with Vader’s lightsaber. She kissed it, too.

“And,” he pointed to his face, “this one.” **
He’d saved it to last because she’d have to stretch over him to kiss it, and he could enjoy feeling her breasts sliding against his chest. And before she finished kissing the scar, he turned his face to catch her mouth with his; a long, deep kiss that asked her if she wanted to do more...

“No! No! NO!”

They *froze* - the voice came from above their heads, but behind them on the boulder.

“Stop that! Right now!”

They looked.

A short, grey-faced being was standing there. Dressed in a simple, dark gray frock that made it almost indistinguishable from the boulder it was standing on, the face was glaring down at them with large, but narrowed eyes and a tight, disapproving frown.

Ren recognized the face; he’d seen many faces like this one, but always from a distance; it was a Kourin! They were part of his life in the First Order, but only in a tangential way; wherever he was, they always seemed to be close by, moving like shadows, silent, busy, just out of reach. Sometimes he felt them watching him, and that made him curious about them; but whenever he tried to investigate, something would get in his way, and in the end, he had to settle for a few insufferably incomplete reports from Central Command that told him little about them.

But the Kourin were all supposed to be either at work for the First Order or dead; there was absolutely no reason for one to be here, yet, here it was.

*The Code says ‘always start from fact’...*

“You’re Kourin.”

“Yes, I am,” the grey-face answered, “and you’re mating on *my* roof!”

……...

To Be Continued...

**Chapter End Notes**

**Shameless shout-out to Harrison Ford in "Raiders of the Lost Ark"!!!**
Chapter 3

It had been an eventful day, filled with moments of discovery and delight; but not everything was as it seemed.

The late afternoon sun had abandoned the boulder by the waterfalls; as it fell deeper and deeper into shadow, it was cooling rapidly and no longer offering warmth. The last of that was already radiating upward into the atmosphere, carrying with it the last of day’s moisture, adding volume to the clouds and silently suggesting that there could be a stormy night ahead.

Ren and Rey realized that as soon as they sat up to face the creature that had just shouted at them. They’d been having so much fun on the boulder that they’d lost all track of time; their clothes were still in a wet pile where they’d tossed them earlier and their boots and packs – and weapons – were sitting out of reach.

“Your roof?” Ren asked.

“My *roof*,” the grey face replied.

Ren looked down, then ran his hands over the boulder’s surface, and noticed something he’d missed before; the curious texture of the rock felt the same as the coatings on the Ren Transport and the ship that Rey and the others called the Visitor. It explained why the ship had difficulty scanning it, but not why the ship failed to determine why. That question would have to wait until they got back.

“You live here?” Ren asked.

“Yes, I live here,” the grey face scowled. “Yes, I am Kourin.” It spoke slowly, stressing each word individually. “And yes! This is my roof. What part did you not understand?”

Rey, who unlike Ren, was acutely aware that she was totally exposed, shifted on her buttocks and managed to ‘walk’ back on them far enough to scoot over and take refuge behind Ren’s back. For a Jakkun to be caught naked outdoors was embarrassing; not because it lacked modesty, but because it lacked common sense. Water in any form was precious there, so exposing one’s body to the air was considered an act of stupidity. And it didn’t help that Ren seemed unconcerned about it.

“We didn’t know,” she offered meekly from behind him. “It’s a very nice... roof.”

The Kourin was not amused.

“We meant no offense,” Ren apologized, “we will leave immediately.”

He got to his knees, then pushed off with his hands and stood up, then looked down at the Kourin, who was now inspecting him from a new perspective. Then he turned, took Rey’s hand and helped her to stand up, too. For a moment the grey face moved back and forth, doing a quick comparison, then satisfied that it had seen enough, it finally looked up at their faces.

Still holding Rey’s hand, Ren turned away and started to walk, leading her toward their clothes.

“*Wait*,” the Kourin called after them.

Ren and Rey stopped and looked back at it.
“It’s late,” the Kourin said, more to itself than to them, “it will be dark soon...” It snorted softly, as if resisting an idea, but then it sighed and relented, “Your things are wet…. come with me.”

It walked past them, toward the far edge of the boulder, stepped down into a narrow channel between it and the rock wall behind, then paused half-hidden and looked back at them expectantly.

Rey grabbed up the wet clothes, Ren got the boots and packs, and they followed.

The Kourin led the way; the rock channel widened as they descended, following the curve of the boulder’s edge in a series of low steps and angled walks that quickly took them into deep shadow. When they came to its end, they were quite far down, well below the waterline of the stream they’d left behind; the sound of the falls became a muffled echo in the shadows above.

The Kourin stopped and put its hands against the boulder wall. A soft glow appeared where it touched, illuminating both hands, revealing that the right hand had three fingers, but the left one had six. Then a door opened in the space immediately in front of it and the glow vanished.

As the Kourin led them inside, the interior light came up automatically, revealing that the boulder was hollow; standing beneath the high dome that was its roof, Ren and Rey could see where they’d been on the boulder because up there, the last of their body heat was still on display as a blob of dim yellow light against the dark.

“Come, come,” the Kourin said; there was a new tone to its voice now, that of a nervous, but welcoming host. “Give me those wet things; I will dry them for you.”

Rey handed the damp bundle to it; their hands touched momentarily in the act and the Kourin jerked his away quickly, stared at her for a second, then pulled the clothes away from her.

“Would you like to warm and clean yourself?” it asked her with surprising pleasantness.

“I would,” Rey replied, adding a smile, working the problem. “We would, very much.”

“Follow me.”

The Kourin led them right through the chamber; the hemisphere was open but divided into three sections by carefully placed furniture. There was a simple platform that could have been a bench or a bed, a table and several stools that stood before a compact cooking area, and an additional table that was covered with bits and pieces of small electronics and tools.

Just behind that, near the curved wall of the dome, the Kourin stopped at a railing.

“There,” It gestured down into a pit of darkness, but then realized it, tapped something on the railing and the pit filled with light. Stone steps led down into a misty pool of water below. “Wash and warm yourselves.”

Rey looked at Ren. He peered into the water below, felt warm moisture rising from it, but nothing else, so he went first, leading her down the steps and then then stepping off into the water with a quiet splash. It wasn’t very deep, and it was delightfully warm; Ren looked up and saw that the dome ceiling was criss-crossed with tubes that converged at the wall behind the pool, evidence that the boulder wasn’t just a roof, it was a heat exchanger and probably an energy collector, too.

Very efficient, very discrete. Very Kourin.

A splash beside him brought his attention back from the ceiling; Rey had followed him into the pool. The look on her face as she wiped the water from her hair was enticing; he put his arms around her
and pulled her close and was just about to kiss her when the Kourin’s voice drifted down from above.

“And,” it called down to them, “no mating in my pool.”


Six hours’ walk away, Leia was outside the ship, sitting on a nearby rock, wrapped in a blanket, waiting.

She and Dar Noaa had just finished putting what was left of their clothes back on when he took hold of her hand and said “we have to talk”. Then he led her to the entry to take her outside, only to stop, say “I’ll be right back” and return to the Sith quarters. Leia waited for a few minutes, but when he didn’t reappear right away, she decided to head outside and spend a few minutes getting her head clear.

The madness of the afternoon was gone; she was confused and tired, but totally satisfied.

And embarrassed.

She’d never done anything like that before; never even imaged doing anything like that, not even in fantasy. And that *growl*; even now, just thinking about it had an effect. It made her look at the entry and feel impatient at not seeing him there.

But then he appeared, carrying a small bottle and two cups. He came directly to where she was and put the cups into her hands.

“Hold these.”

Leia did as he asked. He opened the bottle and poured a deep red liquid into each cup, then put the stopper back on the bottle and set it carefully down beside the rock.

“This,” he took one of the cups from her, “is something I’ve been saving for a long time. Try it.”

She lifted the cup slowly and sniffed it; fruity with a hint of spice. Since it came from him, there was no telling how it was going to taste or how strong it might be, but his face was full of anticipation and she didn’t want to disappoint him, especially now. She put it to her lips and tipped it just enough to take a small sip.

It was deliciously sweet, followed by a serious kick. She swallowed hard.

He seemed pleased; he drank his down in one gulp, then looked at her encouragingly.

Leia took a breath, then drained her cup.

A warm rush spread throughout her body, and everything around her seemed to become a little bit fuzzy. Dar Noaa was watching her as if he expected to see something; she wondered what...

A minute later, she felt… she wasn’t sure how she felt. Happy? Content? The word for how she felt simply wouldn’t come. Dar Noaa was still watching her intently; he was looking right into her eyes and she just had to tell him...
“I love the color of your eyes.”

He laughed and took the cup from her.

“Now that you’ve had something to relax you,” Dar Noaa began, “I must ask you a question.”

“Yes!” she answered enthusiastically.

“I haven’t asked you yet.”

“Oh,” Leia giggled and gave him a little poke, “Ask me.”

“How did you know that word?”

“What word?”

“Hissthyeh.”

“That was a *word*?” Leia asked, then giggled harder. “I know it came out of me, but I wasn’t thinking it; it just came out.”

He sat beside her, nudging her to make room, then put an arm around her back.

“It’s an ancient word,” he put his other around her front, embracing her. “from long ago; only spoken by pureblood Sith females and then only for one purpose.”

“Which was?” Leia asked playfully.

“Permission*,” he told her. “She would only accept a mate who proved himself by taking her, and when she was ready, she let him know by saying it. But it isn’t *just* a word, the sound triggers a response in the male…”

“I noticed.” Leia snaked her arms under his to snuggle.

“…then he completes the ritual with a growl that triggers a response in her.”

“I noticed that, too.”

“The thing is, Leia…” He wasn’t sure how she was going to take what he was about to say. “…the sounds… they stimulate the nervous system in a *very* specific way, and…”

“I noticed.”

“Yes, you did, but…”

“But what? Did I do it right?”

“Yes, very, very yes,” he assured her.

She sighed a deep, happy sigh and then yawned.

“We should go inside now,” he said quietly, confessing. “I put a sedative in our drinks; in about thirty minutes, we’re both going to be sound asleep.”

“Mmmmmm?”

“Or, maybe sooner than that,” he shook her a little to keep her awake. “Leia? Did you hear what I
“Mmmm… sedative… why’d you do that?”

“Because they’re young and we’re *not*,” he started to explain even though he knew she wasn’t really listening. “They can go at it all night, but we…”

“All night…” she sang back to him, “all night…”

It was pointless to say more; he’d just have to explain it all again in the morning anyway.

It could wait.

“Come on,” he pulled her to her feet, “I’m putting us to bed.”

“Oh… good…”

It took some maneuvering to keep her moving, and when he finally eased her onto the sleep platform in their quarters, she held on and pulled him down beside her even though she was already asleep.

Comfortable there, Dar Noaa knew she’d be angry with him in the morning, but until Ren and Rey returned and he had a chance to advise them about using some Force discretion in the future, this was the easiest way to make sure he and Leia didn’t overdo and hurt themselves. As he drifted off to sleep, he thought about what a savagely satisfying afternoon it had been...

…and they were really going to pay for that in the morning.

…………..

Six hour’s walk away; it was long past sunset; the waterfalls and the boulder disappeared into total darkness for the night. Only the sound of relentless pounding of water on rock marked its location, and even that gave no clue about what was where. There was danger in the dark; hazards easily seen and avoided by day were deathtraps now and what was sanctuary had become a cage; there would be no way out until dawn.

Inside the perfectly disguised Kourin home, in the pool, Ren and Rey were quietly enjoying the warm water when they heard the voice call from above.

“Your clothes are ready.”

They climbed up stone steps that led out of the water, stopped for a minute to let the water drip, then stayed where they were because a hot breeze of air came from hidden vents in the rock wall. In minutes, they were dry enough to climb up to the residence, where they found their clothing piled neatly on the platform.

The Kourin, however, was not there.

They were sitting beside one another, stepping into boots, when the grey face appeared again in front of them. This time, its large grey eyes were wide and it was almost smiling as it shoved a bowl of familiar looking little clear cubes their way.

“Eat?” It asked cheerily.
Rey looked at the cubes, then at Ren. He examined the bowl for a second, then reached over, took
one and put it into his mouth. Rey waited, expecting him to pass judgment before she should take
any; he let her know by reaching for another, then another after that. She took one; it was exactly
what it looked like, and utterly flavorless, just like the ones in Ren’s Transport.

Watching them with interest, the Kourin helped itself to a cube using two of the fingers on its six-
fingered hand to separate one from the pile then lift while the other four fingers tapped idly in pairs. It
noticed that Rey was looking at the hand and curled the fingers up tightly.

“This,” it raised the fist, then turned it at the wrist, demonstrating how it could twist around itself
completely, “is my tech hand,” it raised its other hand, spreading the three fingers there wide,” and
this is my grip hand. I need them for my work.” It saw that Rey was interested, quickly popped the
cube into its mouth, and then offered her both hands for her inspection. “Grip for strength and
stability; tech for putting things together.”

Rey smiled, then pointed to the table covered with electronics and tools.

“What do you put together?” she asked.

“Would you like to see?”

Rey gave Ren a quick side glance; he nodded his approval.

“We would.”

The Kourin hurried to the table, selected a small metal container from the clutter there, and returned.

“This is what I do,” it opened the container carefully; something tiny flew up and out of it. “I make
little things.”

The little thing hovered just above the container for a few seconds, then it flew straight at Ren,
stopping fifty, maybe sixty, centimeters from his face, hovered there for a few seconds, then moved
on to Rey. She reached out and offered it her index finger; it accepted the invitation, landing on her
finger tip so delicately that she didn’t even feel it.

Totally enchanted, she drew her hand back and up so she could see it better; the motion made it
buzz, but then it settled down again. It had the look of an insect; wings and feet and multiple tiny
black spots on its ‘head’.

“It’s amazing,” she said, “What does it do?”

The Kourin stepped closer and extended its tech hand, pointing at his tiny product, but before it
could begin its description, Ren spoke out.

“It’s a spy,” he said.

The tiny thing buzzed as if offended, lifted off Rey’s finger, flew back to Ren and then hovered there
at face level. The Kourin seemed surprised and disturbed by what was happening.

“Who are you?” it asked, its tone was suddenly stiffly formal.

“Who’s asking?” Ren asked back, staring directly at the tiny thing in front of his face.

The Kourin leaned forward and snatched the tiny thing from the air; it buzzed loudly in protest as it
was jammed back into the container and the lid tapped down hard to keep it there.
“I am,” the Kourin said. “My ID is KT1097M; but my name is Irno… and you are?”

“Ren; and this is Rey.”

“Oh, stars… you’re *him*!” Irno said excitedly. “I know all about you! And your Transport! And the survey vessel, and… oh! Tell me, how did you get here? How did you find me?”

Ren considered what to say; it was obvious now that the ship had sent him here not to explore, but to confirm; the actual objective of the mission was the grey face standing in front him with a look of anticipation. He wanted to know why.

“You first,” he raised his hand slightly as he spoke; the Kourin showed no resistance. “How did *you* get here?”

Irno began to talk. Ren listened.

Rey strained to pay attention as the Kourin told its story; its words came out in a steady stream of ‘TPs’ and ‘KTs’ and bursts of ‘First Order’ this or that. It was meaningless to her, but she could see that Ren understood every word, every reference.

It was going to be a long night.


In another part of the galaxy, far from the Edge, it was just past midday...

Coruscant.

“It’s going to be expensive,” the counselor said.

Likit was not surprised by the muffled grumbling among those seated at the coldly beautifully polished stone table; it was the way Technology Guild directors usually took news that involved spending money. The meeting was mere formality, anyway; he’d already secured the votes of the most influential members, so the project was certain to be approved and funded.

“How long,” one brave, but subordinate, member asked, “will start up take? And then how long until we can expect results?”

“It’s already underway,” the counselor replied. “As I’m telling you this, our agents are traveling from system to system, spreading the word…”

“They need someone to blame,” Likit interrupted him, smiling disdainfully as he surveyed his directors, “so we’re giving them someone.”

“And you’re sure,” another director asked, “this will bring the Jedi back to us?”
“I guarantee it.”

Likit leaned against the back of his seat, pressed his hands together, then slid them up and down quickly, making a sound the others knew well; the whisk of symbolic friction, Likit’s trademark gesture when he was absolutely sure. The sound made them uneasy because his ‘guarantees’ were always the three C’s:

Cost, Crises and Casualties.

This one would be no different.

…………...

To be continued...
Chapter 4

His name was “Irno”. He made the name up one day, just to spite them.

He never knew his parents; his parents never even met. He was one of a hundred batched out at the Custom Division where they mixed and matched genetic strains to create special purpose Kourin technicians like him. The contractor wanted intelligence and something called ‘fine motor skills’, so while he was still just a clump of dividing cells, they diced and spliced his genes, making an artificial mutation that resulted in one hand having twice as many fingers as the other. He had extra toes on one foot, too, but they cut them off when he was extracted from the brooding gel.

There were ninety-nine others in the batch, just like him. All were assigned an ID number, which was stamped on their torso. His was KT1097M; which identified him as Kourin Technician, ninety-seven of the batch, Mutated.

The M could also stand for male, which he was, but nobody cared about that.

As soon as the batch brood was old enough, it was separated; first into pods of twenty, then into sets of ten and finally into individual units of one. Since they were bred to a purpose, no time was wasted socializing them beyond what was necessary for work; each one went to training, then back to its private room to study. There would be periodic physicals and examinations performed and afterwards, fewer of them would appear for class.

They were not told where the missing went, but they didn’t care. It wasn’t work-related.

By the time he was grown, he was one of only five. Then four. Then two.

And then he was alone.

Daily instruction became long hours of assembling, then disassembling electronic devices, followed by recitation of what every part was called and what it was for. Once that was rote, he was given more complex devices to work with, and eventually they started to give him trays of random parts with orders to ‘make something’ out of them. He excelled at that; for the first time in his life, he was free to do whatever he wanted, to make something new, to earn their praise and more projects.

They told him he was worth a fortune. They never told him he was a slave...

“No, the five-sixties were *terrible*; so was everything else after they dumped the forty-fives…”

Rey awoke to the sound of the Kourin’s voice; it was still talking.

She wasn’t sure how long she’d been asleep; at some point in the evening, she slid up onto the platform and flopped down behind Ren, but her intention to rest her eyes as she listened quickly became dozing off. It wasn’t that the Kourin’s words held no interest for her; it sped through its history as if that was nothing, then proceeded to interrogate Ren about his experience with Kourin technology, the Ren Transport in particular. She remembered nothing after that.

“… but it wasn’t ‘til the seven thousand series came out that the problem was solved.”

Realizing that the voice was coming from a new location, Rey rolled onto her side and saw that the Kourin and Ren were sitting at its work table. She felt a slight tug; she’d rolled onto a blanket she
didn’t know was covering her and it was trying to hold her down. It was a gossamer thing, translucent and weightless, but pleasantly soft and warm and it slid easily out from beneath her, freeing her to slide her legs over the edge of the platform and sit. She drew the blanket up and around her shoulders like a shawl, then got up and walked over to them.

They both looked up at her.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“Morning.” Irno replied.

“Have you two been up all night?” Rey was looking at Ren as she asked; his first time out and away from the ship since the Goazon and he gotten no sleep that night - and they still had the walk back ahead of them.

He read the expression on her face easily.

“I’m fine,” he assured her. “Irno’s been very informative, and now...” he made a slight gesture, “...he’s going to make us breakfast.”

“What?” the Kourin seemed startled to hear it, paused for a second, then added, “…oh, yes…” then immediately rose from the table and headed for his cooking area, “…breakfast…”

Rey watched him go, then turned back to Ren.

“That,” she gave him an accusing look, “was *mean*. What are you going to do next, make him walk us home?”

He stared at her for a few seconds, considering.

“That’s not a bad idea.”

Rey looked over at the Kourin, who was fussing quietly to itself as it worked, and shook her head.

“I doubt he could do it,” she said.

“We’ll see.”

Irno returned with a bowl of food cubes in his tech hand and pitcher of water in his grip hand; he set both down on the table with a thud.

“Breakfast!” he announced loudly.

Hiding her disappointment that breakfast was not something, anything, else, Rey reached for a food cube. But Ren didn’t; despite the fact that he’d asked to be fed, he just sat there looking at the Kourin with interest, as if he was deciding what to do with it next. Then he took a food cube, but he didn’t eat it; instead he held it up, studying it casually, quietly drawing the Irno’s attention to it.

“Is there something wrong?” Irno asked.

“No,” Ren replied, keeping his eyes on the cube, making the Kourin wait. “We must leave now.”

“So early?” Irno asked; his voice suggested reluctance to hear it. “The day’s only just getting started.”

“It’s a long way.”
“Really?” Irno reached into across the table and picked up a small black sphere; smoothly polished, it looked like a large marble as he balanced it in the center of his palm. “Where did you leave your Transport?” Suddenly a bright but narrow beam of light came out of the top of the marble, then fanned out, creating a shimmering hemisphere on Irno’s palm. Within seconds, it developed into a map; a bright point at center base was quickly surrounded by a holographic image of the area. “Here’s us,” Irno pointed at the bright center point, “this is the scarp and the stream course, and… I don’t see it…”

When no reply came, he looked at his guests and saw that both of them were staring at his map in what appeared to be pleasant surprise, and a wave of self-conscious embarrassment came over him.

“It’s… new…” he stammered, “It scans your perimeter and shows you where you are…” he checked again, then frowned, “… only your Transport isn’t…”

“We walked.” Ren explained.

“*Walked*? How far?”

“The better part of the day.”

“Oh. Wait…” Irno used a finger to press something unseen on the marble and the image bloomed, growing larger, including more territory. Near the outer edge, a bright point of light appeared. “There it is! No, wait… that isn’t your Transport, that’s…” his frown tightened as he became immersed in confusion, forgetting his guests, “no… how could it be?”

“You see why we must leave now.”

Ren’s words broke the spell; the Kourin turned its face.

“You *don’t* have to leave now,” Irno said, “because you *won’t* have to walk.”

Ren and Rey shared a glance; things were about to get interesting again.

………………

Back at the Visitor, morning was off to a very slow start.

Leia woke up alone; Dar Noaa was not lying beside her. A quick look around didn’t result in seeing him, indicating that he was already up and off somewhere doing something. She started to prop herself up on one arm, but a sharp throb of pain coming from her arm stopped her and she fell back onto the platform.

Then she remembered.

Self-inspection revealed bruises on both wrists where he’d held her down; here was proof that yesterday was not a dream; it happened. Just looking at them now caused a flutter inside her. She made herself move, she slid her legs over the edge and let gravity help her sit up, then gingerly got to her feet.

Everything ached. Her back, her arms, her legs, her thighs… everything. The wild girl of yesterday was gone, leaving Leia to pay the bill. She used the sanitary station and cleaned up a bit, then put the
only intact shirt she still owned on and went to find Dar Noaa.

She found him in the cockpit, sitting in the pilot seat, sipping his morning ration from a cup. A small shelf drawn out from below the waveform showed another cup waiting there for her, so Leia walked to the copilot seat and sat down.

Slowly.

Dar Noaa leaned over, picked up her cup and extended it to her.

“You slept late,” he said.

“You drugged me.”

“I drugged *us*.”

“Do I want to know why?”

“You need to know why,” he insisted gently, “because you never took the training.”

Leia put her cup to her lips and sipped carefully; even her mouth ached.

“Yesterday,” Dar Noaa began his explanation, “what happened...” he paused, rehearsing his next words in his head before continuing, “… you and I were caught in a Force disturbance… do you know what that is?”

“Yes.”

“Good. The Force disturbance we were caught in came from your son and Rey...”

His words came as confirmation; she already knew it. She didn’t know how or when she knew it, but she did know it. She’d sensed them making love before, but those times, it was just a whisper in her mind that came and went and *nothing* like yesterday. All she could mange to do in response was give him a questioning look.

“They must have thought they were far enough away,” he continued, “more likely they weren’t thinking at all. They’re both strong with the Force; so are we. Their... energy... became our energy.”

“Are you saying it wasn’t us?”

“No! It was *definitely* us. They just... I don’t have a word for it...”

“They *energized* us.”

He breathed out in relief; she understood.

Leia put her cup down on the shelf, then leaned over and took his hand; a perfect imprint of her teeth was visible on his wrist.

“I’m sorry I bit you.”

“It’s a *beautiful* bite,” he replied. “Bestowed by a princess... on me.”

Leia blushed; she hadn’t been anyone’s princess in a very long time and certainly not one who bestowed bite marks, but he made it sound like a precious gift. He was gazing down at it as if it was the best thing anyone had ever given him. It made her wonder.
“Tell me something,” she said, “yesterday; is that how it would have been if you and had met when we were young?”

“All that,” he seemed to blush, too, “and more; when I was young, I could be very reckless…”

“Reckless?” She pretended to be shocked. “You?”

“If I’d seen you back then, even once,*nothing* would have stopped me; I’d have carried you off and made you mine….”

Suddenly shy, Leia lowered her eyes; fantasies teased her with memories of what never happened, but would have been unforgettable if yesterday was any measure.

“… and then,” he added, “of course, your brother would have hunted us down and killed me for it, and the galaxy would not exist now.”

Leia laughed; she didn’t care how much it was going to hurt, she just had to get up from the seat and kiss him.

………..

The day he was delivered to his contractor, everything changed for KT1097M.

He was processed in; a new ID chip was injected into his arm and then he was escorted to the KT dormitory. It was a drab place; a long narrow walkway with sleep platforms spaced equally along each side and nothing else. No windows, no viewports, no workstations; the only light source came from an overhead panel that ran the entire length of the ceiling.

As the escort led him down the long walkway, Irno began to feel an overwhelming sense of dread; did they actually expect him to live here – with others? There was no one in the dormitory except him and the escort, but he could already feel himself being suffocated by it.

The escort led him to the far end, to the very last platform.

“You will sleep here,” the escort pointed, “your kit is in the storage below; make sure it stays there. The sanitary station is through that door. At morning call, you will rise and dress and take your place in line for work.”

“Where will I be working?”

“Come with me.”

The escort led him from the dormitory, down one long corridor, then another, and stopped at a closed door.

“In there,” the escort tapped a panel and the door slid open, “Go.”

Irno stepped through the door and stopped.

He was in a huge chamber filled with row after row of busy machinery; the noise made his ears ache. The space between the banging and screeching machines was filled with tables and carts piled high with containers – and also with Kourin.

They were standing at machines, or working at tables, loading and pushing carts this way and that;
“I probably shouldn’t be doing this, but,” Irno led his guests to the back wall and put his hands on it; the wall opened like a fan, wide at the floor, then meeting at a point just high enough that he could walk through easily, “follow me.”

Rey went first; she only needed to stoop a little to get through, but Ren had to really bend over to clear the top. Once on the other side, they found themselves on a short metal gantry that ended at a lift. The lift was also of metal construction; they stepped onto a solid floor; the sides were woven wire but offered no view of what might lie in the darkness below. Rey felt an instant of anxiety when Irno tapped a control panel and they began to descend, but she sensed only curiosity in Ren. A few minutes later, a sudden jerk and the sound of metal hitting rock announced that they’d arrived somewhere, and Irno stepped out ahead of them.

Diffuse overhead lights came on automatically, revealing that they were inside a large underground chamber; it had the cool, damp air of a cave and rough rock formed the walls and ceiling, but there was no way to know if it was natural or mined out. But that was quickly forgotten when Ren and Rey saw that the entire floor of the chamber was filled with shelves and tables, all loaded with technology in varying states of completion.

“I live up there,” Irno said with pride, “but I work *here*.”

He ignored the tables as he led his guests past them. Ren and Rey exchanged looks of amazement as they followed; some of the tech looked vaguely familiar, but most of it was unlike anything either of them had ever seen before.

“What is all this?” Rey asked.

“Projects.” Irno’s reply carried disinterest; his thoughts were someplace else. “Some going well; some not going at all.” He stopped suddenly, causing Rey to walk right into him. “But, there...”

Back behind some shelving, covered by the same gossamer fabric that Rey was still wearing as a shawl, something was reflecting the overhead light. Irno went closer, reached out to pull the fabric off, but before he could, the something suddenly came to life; it announced itself with a loud single ding accompanied by the flutter of lights. It rose about a meter from the floor and hovered there. Then a second something did the same!

“They know you’re here.” Irno said, then he yanked the gossamer free.

Ren and Rey recognized what they were seeing instantly; these were personal transports; like speeders or skimmers, they had seats and handles and running lights, but everything else about them was a mystery. Rey spoke first.

“May I?” she extended her arm to touch the closest one.

“Yes.”

The body was firm like composite, not metal, and slightly rough. And even in full light, it tended to blend into the shadows around it. It was Kourin design throughout, down to the coatings. Rey put a
hand on one of the handles.

“May I?” she asked.

“Yes.”

A quick inspection showed Rey where the foot hold was, and she stepped up and swung a leg over, then sat. The machine reacted instantly; the handles curved in, then slightly downward, matching themselves to her reach. Centered on the handles, a small waveform activated; streams of data blurred it for a few seconds, but then it presented a simple control surface. Rey only intended to feel the controls, but as her fingertip touched the surface, the machine took off, taking her with it.

“Ren…!”

“Don’t be afraid,” Ren shouted back, “It’s *intuitive*; it knows what you want!”

The machine gained altitude, then began a slow circuit around the chamber, and then the display in front of her became a tutorial, a diagram of what was where, then what each touch point did. For Rey, it was mere translation; she knew this, and in minutes, she was banking and turning and speeding between shelving as if she had been doing it all her life.

And a few minutes later, Ren was flying beside her.

…….

Back at the Visitor, morning was filled with chores and tasks, so it flew by, but as afternoon progressed and the day’s work finished, time began to drag. With nothing else to keep her distracted, Leia began to think about Ren and Rey and worry. Not even Dar Noaa’s repeated reassurances could put her mind at rest about it because Leia the mother wasn’t listening; she kept finding excuses to go outside so she could look for them.

She’d just returned from her latest ‘walk’ and was making her way to the cockpit to see if Dar Noaa needed anything when the ship’s proximity alarms sounded. By the time she entered the cockpit, he was already staring into the ship’s security display, so she hurried to his side. The security image was simple; a holographic drawing intended to alert rather than inform, it had little to offer in the way of detail, but what it showed was enough: two unidentified flying objects were approaching, following the course of the stream, coming their way.

“What?” She asked.

There was urgency in the question because the intruders were using the same route that Ren and Rey had taken yesterday, and Leia’s thoughts immediately went to ‘what if’s’.

“Unknown,” Dar Noaa answered, “the signal is… fuzzy.”

“Lifeforms?”

“Unknown,” he replied, “Steady course and coming fast; looks like mechanical propulsion to me.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Nothing,” Dar Noaa turned from the display and stepped past her, heading for the corridor, “Let’s
Leia caught up to him just as he was about to step outside the ship’s entry, but he stopped and blocked her way.

“Stay inside.” he told her.

“Not a chance,” she replied.

He thought for a second, then surrounded,

“Then stay behind me.”

Leia thought for a second.

“I’m good with that.”

---

Eventually KT1097M adjusted to life in the production unit.

The Kourin technicians he had to work, eat and sleep with were patient; they gave him his space and rewarded every little effort he made to socialize with carefully measured doses of kindness. Slowly, KT1097 M began to listen to casual conversations; he learned what to say and how to say it; he learned what he was.

He was Kourin. He was a *slave*.

He lived for the hours when he would be permitted to stay late in the workspace because some project required his special ability; the reward of time alone was all the motivation he needed to produce devices that greatly pleased his supervisors because they greatly pleased the contractor. Only one supervisor failed to see his value; a human as uninteresting as the brown uniform he wore that went out of his way to make work more difficult than it needed to be, and KT1097M resented each and every interruption or delay that supervisor inflicted on him.

Finally, one late shift alone, KT1097M decided he would tolerate no more of it, and he firmly told the supervisor to “Stop interfering with my work.” It was a fateful decision; what KT1097M did not know as he challenged the supervisor was that the supervisor had just received word that his most recent request for promotion or transfer had been rejected. It was *final*, too, condemning that miserable being to the production floor for life. The supervisor made no reply to his objection, so KT1097M resumed the task he was working on; he didn’t see the supervisor walk to another table; he didn’t see him pick up the mallet that was lying there...

It came down in front of him so fast, he didn’t see it; it slammed down hard on the device and the hands that were holding it.

The supervisor was arrested, of course, then tried for sabotage and treason; the First Order considered KT1097M valuable military property. He was promptly executed.

For KT1097M, the punishment was much worse.

His moment of defiance had cost him dearly; there were painful surgeries, revisions, then therapy that failed. That was followed by reassignment; placement where there were no special projects,
where he would never, ever be alone again.

Time passed; despair became indifference.

Then one day, as he was standing in line for the endshift meal, a Kourin he did not recognize stepped into line behind him. The line moved forward in silence as always, but then the stranger leaned up close and whispered to him.

“What would you do to be free?”

It was a question nobeing had ever asked before, but he knew what his answer was.

“*Anything*.”

Irno was terrified.

He didn’t know why he’d said ‘yes’ when Ren asked him if he’d like to come along; he disliked flying intensely. He’d only tested the machines twice, and that was limited to very short trips up and out the workshop access tunnel and back again to verify that the calibrations were right. After that, he never thought about why they didn’t come to collect them; he pushed the machines out of the way, covered and forgot about them.

And he didn’t know why he suddenly remembered them, or why he then offered them to two complete strangers.

Or why he climbed onto one of them behind the female, Rey. She put out her hand, inviting him to ride with her, and the next thing he knew, he was holding on to her for dear life. It was lucky for him that her body had two things on front that he could hold on to, otherwise he would have fallen off before they even cleared the tunnel.

Once they were outside, the strangers forgot everything him told them about caution.

They didn’t even wait for the shield antennae to extend and activate the force field, so the air wasn’t diverted up and over in a smooth arc; he had to hold on even tighter to keep from being blown off the back. Rey lowered her head into the wind, and he copied her; that provided some relief, but he didn’t relax his grip until the force field was fully up and they were inside the cone of its protection.

And he didn’t let go at all.

Rey straightened up, let out a high-pitched sound that hurt his ears, and then she piloted the machine forward, taking position beside the male, Ren. He looked over at her with the same expression Irno had seen him use before, while he was watching them on his roof. Something in that look spoke to Irno in a way he did not understand, and for a few seconds, he was fascinated, watching them, wondering.

They made a wide, graceful turn that took them along the scarp, then over the falls and his roof before descending to follow the stream down toward the hills and valley below. And then, both of them accelerated at the same time; the machines took off over the water so fast, Irno forgot to breathe and almost passed out. But he didn’t, and somewhere during the flight, he realized that he probably wasn’t going to die; his machines were performing flawlessly, as expected. He was even starting to enjoy it a little when his guests banked the machines sharply, leaving the stream and heading toward the highland stone meadows.
And there, sitting among the boulders and rocks, Irno saw the prototype.

It was his best work; they let him indulge his genius there, and he rewarded their generosity with little things of astonishing complexity, perfectly suited to its compact design. He was genuinely sad the day they collected it for delivery, because he knew he’d never see it again.

Ren and Rey banked again, this time into a slow spiral descent, and Irno saw two beings emerge from the prototype, look up and stop where they were to give them room to land near it. As soon as the machine touched ground, he half-jumped, half-fell off, then stood up to make sure he wasn’t mistaken.

Leia and Dar Noaa were at the machines before Ren and Rey could shut down and dismount; Ren swung his long legs over and dropped to his feet, then braced himself for the hug. He opened his mouth to greet his mother, but before he could speak, he heard a loud screech that seized everyone’s attention.

There was no translation for what Irno screeched, but his stance told the story; his arms were spread wide, his fingers were waving wildly as he stared at the ship in horror.

“What a *mess*!” he shouted. “What in… what did you *do* to it? Who’s responsible for this… this… *This*!”

“We found him at the waterfall,” Ren faced Dar Noaa, explaining quickly. "He says his name is Irno; he lives here."

“He’s Kourin.”

“Yes, he...”

Dar Noaa walked away before Ren could finish speaking; he went straight to the Kourin and stared into him, only to quickly pull back, dissatisfied with what he’d seen. Everyone felt it, except for Irno, who stood there regarding the Sith, waiting impatiently for a few seconds before he made the accusation.

“It was *you*, wasn’t it?”

Dar Noaa didn’t answer; he was staring away from the Kourin now, toward the vessel that had manipulated and deceived him before.

He didn’t know what this was all about, but he was going to find out.

Right now.

…………

To be continued...
KT1097 M wanted to be free.

The stranger who spoke to him at endshift meal arranged a secret meeting with Kourin he didn’t know, where he was told that freedom was possible, but it came at a price. For KT1097M, the price would be the creation of a little thing they wanted.

KT1097M accepted the offer immediately.

He built it secretly, right under his supervisors’ eyes. He didn’t even try to hide it; it sat in the pile with everything else he was working on, and every shift, he gave it a share of his time. The supervisors had no knowledge of, nor interest in, what he was making; they only cared about the expected delivery dates, so as long as KT1097M was surrendering his projects on time, they left him alone to get on with it.

When finished, the device was a masterpiece.

It was a centimeter wide and a centimeter long, but less than three millimeters in depth; it could be placed almost anywhere and remain undetected. The circuitry inside was elegantly simple, but then it only had one purpose and would be used one time. It wasn’t ready yet, though; it wasn’t KT1097M’s job to arm it.

It was ready for submission.

The hand-off was quick as they passed in the corridor; KT1097M passed the device and the other Kourin passed a tiny note instructing him:

Be ready.

He tended his kit with extra care that sleep shift, and when summoned to work again, he was stopped at the door.

“You,” a supervisor said, “have been reassigned. Go get your kit and report to Outgoing, Dock 5.”

By the time KT1097M arrived at the dock, his two-chambered heart was pounding; the walk through the Production Facility had been terrifying. At every turn, he expected to see security uniforms with weapons waiting for him, and each successful check-though made him light-headed with dread. He passed through the final check point and entered the docking bay, where he quickly fell into a long line of other Kourin heading for the shuttle. Once inside, he took a spot on one of the long benches and waited.

“You made it.”

KT1097M looked up to see the Kourin from that endshift meal again.
“What happens now?” he asked.

But Irno didn’t remember any of that, because that ‘event’, like so many others afterward, had been completely erased from his mind...

………………

In the stone meadow highlands, at the Visitor’s landing site, things were not going well.

The Kourin’s outburst set off a chain reaction; Dar Noaa turned away from it and started back to the ship and the Kourin followed him, so Ren followed them both. He was startled when his mother shot past him; she was actually running, and shouting.

“Noah! *Wait*!”

Inside the ship, Dar Noaa went straight to the cockpit and raised his hands to touch the Waveform, only to stop himself at the last second. With his hands poised as if to slam, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then held it, calming himself, lest his anger provoke another painful confrontation. He was almost in control when he sensed movement beside him and opened his eyes just in time to see a six-fingered hand land on the Waveform.

A soft white glow surrounded the hand.

“KT1097M,” the Kourin said loudly.

The ship replied; a single ding.

On the Waveform, a stream of white data sped past, then settled into a control display unlike anything Dar Noaa had seen before. He stared at the Kourin with suspicious curiosity.

“You know this vessel?” he asked.

“Know it?” Irno replied, “I *built* a lot of it. Not the bulk,” he waved his grip hand around, gesturing at the walls and floor, “but the little things.” The display changed suddenly, drawing his attention back to it, “What’s this?”

By now Leia, Ren and Rey had arrived; Ren raised a hand to intervene, but Dar Noaa waved him off.

“That’s nothing.” Irno’s fingers tapped the surface as he ran down a list the ship had presented, “nothing… nothing… oh...” he paused a second, then turned his head to look at Dar Noaa, “Merrokorbonite? You exposed this ship to *merrokorbonite*?"

“Not intentionally.” Dar Noaa answered, “it was a shock wave; someone detonated an old Empire weapon. We got out of the way as fast as we could.”

“Not fast enough,” Irno replied.

“Why?” Dar Noaa was looking at the display now, too; merrokorbonite had been banned even before the Empire fell because it had a nasty habit of creating dangerous high-speed particles when detonated and then bad things happened. “What’s wrong?”
“One of the Kyber cluster resonators is damaged,” Irno’s fingers moved swiftly as he tapped the surface to generate a schematic and a crisp holographic image formed. “Here’s the Kyber cluster, and *there*,” he put his grip hand inside the image, pointing to six tiny hexagons at the bottom, “are the resonators.” Five were bright, but one was gray. “This one’s burned out, probably hit by a M-K particle.”

“Is that bad?”

“It is if you ever want this ship to fly again; you’re lucky you got this far.”

“How do we repair it?”

“*You* don’t.” Irno pulled his grip hand out of the image and positioned the three fingers so they were almost touching at the tips, “It’s *this* big.”

“How do you know?”

“I made it.”

“Can you repair it?”

“I don’t know, and even if I could, you’d still have to lift the Kyber cluster out of the way to get to it.”

“We can lift the cluster.”

“You can? *Really*?” Irno immediately turned his attention back to the display image. “That changes things...”

Seeing that the Kourin was already completely immersed in the problem, Dar Noaa gestured to Ren to come closer, then waited for a few seconds before speaking to make sure that it was not paying attention.

“Why did you bring him here?” he asked quietly

“Two reasons,” Ren replied just as quietly, “He is the mission objective, so bringing him back made sense; little risk in it, he’s harmless.”

“Is he?” Dar Noaa’s tone went from inquisitive to harsh as he realized that Ren had been dangerously careless in his assessment of the Kourin. “You didn’t test him, did you?”

“No,” Ren admitted. The Kourin had caught him totally off-guard, then he ignored both protocol and common sense afterwards because he was so fascinated by it. “He offered no resistance, and he seemed so fragile that I was...” Ren looked down, embarrassed, hesitating to use the next word, “… afraid... that I might hurt him. Why?”

“Test him now,” Dar Noaa instructed.

Ren reached out and sensed – nothing. There was no resistance because there was *no* effect!

Dar Noaa saw the surprise on Ren’s face; he’d just been surprised by the Kourin, too, but not for very long. He knew that the Kourin evolved on a world rich in Kyber crystal; having Force-sensitivity in their primitive state could easily have resulted in extinction and the Kourin probably survived because the species eliminated the risk naturally by never developing those abilities. No
Kourin could Force-choke or push or commit any of a hundred aggressive acts against another, and that allowed them to develop Force utilization technology safely.

It also meant that a Kourin couldn’t be mentally influenced by it, so Ren’s manipulation of Irno had all been an act on the Kourin's part; Dar Noaa made it official by announcing the fact loud enough for Leia and Rey to hear, too.

“It’s immune,” he said.

Ren’s reaction was instant; Irno gasped as something invisible grabbed him by the throat, then lifted him up and away from the Waveform, turning him, suspending him in the air.

“*Why*?” Ren demanded.

“I don’t... know!” Irno struggled to get the words out and air in, “I... *never* know...”

“Go on.”

“They program me; then I forget...”

Ren relaxed the grip a little.

“Go on.”

“There’s a prompt, a *stimulus*;” Irno explained; the words tumbled out in choppy bursts. “… it makes me do what they want me to…” he sputtered “… but I never remember afterwards…”

“Put him down, Ren,” Dar Noaa said, “I believe him. The Kourin are paranoid about exposure.”

Ren lowered, then released Irno with surprising gentleness.

“I was the stimulus?” he asked.

“I *don’t* know,” the Kourin replied earnestly, “I *never* know.”

Ren looked at Dar Noaa.

“What’s going on here?”

“We’ve been manipulated,” the Sith explained, “The Kourin influenced this vessel, and this vessel influenced us.”

“You’re here,” Irno added quickly, “because this is where they want you.”

“They guided us here,” Ren was looming over the Kourin, using his height to intimidate him.

“Why?”

“I don’t know; maybe they knew the ship was in trouble… they’ll expect me to fix it…“ Irno’s tech hand reached for the Waveform as he spoke, but Ren stopped him with a look, “because that’s what I do.” Then he looked up at Ren defiantly. “You should be asking *yourself* why they guided you here, not me, because I *know* why I’m here. All I can tell you is that they want you here because they want something. From *you*. They *always* want something.”

“We’ll know soon enough,” Ren glanced at Dar Noaa, then back at Irno. “He was alone when we found him...”
“When *I* found you,” Irno corrected him.

“… but he isn’t alone here,” Ren ignored the interruption, “They’ve been taking very good care of him; food, housing; everything he needs to keep producing for them.”

Sensing the shift from talking to him to talking about him, Irno’s eyes darted back to the display and the list there. His mind automatically began to plan what he needed for the job; if they could lift the Kyber cluster, it should be a simple matter to pull the resonator and repair it, but it would have to go back to the workshop for the fine work. His own thoughts quickly became all he could hear.

“Then,” Dar Noaa looked past Ren, at Leia and Rey, to make sure they understood the gravity of the situation, “they already know that we’re here.”

“Yes.” Ren replied.

“If they do,” Leia asked, “why haven’t they shown themselves? They know we’re no threat to them.”


“You’re talking about me,” Ren said.

Dar Noaa looked at Ren; what the events in the Goazon had done to Leia's son was still very much a mystery, even to Ren himself. So far, Ren’s interactions with Dar Noaa had been limited to strictly practical matters; there’d been no personal conversation at all. And even though Ren was calm and cooperative, Dar Noaa could always sense the turbulence beneath that exterior; what happened to Ren in the Goazon had left him confused and terrified. That turbulence only subsided when Ren was alone with Rey, and those were the times when Dar Noaa could sense just how powerful Ren was.

Like yesterday.

The Kourin couldn’t sense that, though; they had to rely on what they already knew about the Kylo of Ren.

“Your presence here with us,” Dar Noaa said, “is something they could not have anticipated. To them, you’re the First Order, the enemy, Kylo Ren; that’s something that requires *serious* consideration, and that could take a long time.”

“That’s the second reason why I brought Irno here,” Ren replied. “They value him. Since he’s with us now, I expect they’ll want to talk to us sooner rather than later.”

The comment broke Irno’s concentration on the display image; he turned his head and looked up at Ren with wide, worried eyes.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re staying with us,” Ren told him, “until we’ve met your… friends.”

“They’re *not* my friends,” Irno informed him. “So, I’m a prisoner here?”

“No,” Ren replied, “You’re our guest.”

………
In another part of the galaxy, above a small world in the Inner Rim, a starship was about to break orbit.

At first glance, it looked vintage; the design suggested re-purposed Techno Union, but that was an illusion. Inside, it was state of the art, a hybrid of the best technologies from the Republic and the First Order. Small and built for speed, every millimeter of the interior was precious, but clever use of convertible surfaces permitted a degree of comfort, even luxury, for its passengers.

Norv Orbilla was in his personal quarters, sitting at his work desk, speaking into the interface.

“Greetings, Director Likit,” he began the transmission, “As you predicted, the news has spread faster than we can keep up with; now when we arrive at a designated redemption site, they’re already waiting for us. I’ve decided to leave an agent here to deal with it so we can continue on to the Outer Rim, where we hope to catch and hopefully get ahead of it. The response has been more aggressive than we expected, so more funds must be shipped immediately if we are to continue paying the promised bounties.”

“I have to say I am uncomfortable with the magnitude of the response, sir. Hundreds have already been paid, but we expect that number to increase in the future. Sooner or later, it’s going to get noticed on an official level, and I anticipate the local governing bodies will take action to stop it. We have not received any sighting reports of Luke Skywalker, and I have my doubts that we will, but we are proceeding to the Outer Rim as instructed. Perhaps we will have better luck there.”

“End transmission.”

Orbilla tapped the Send button, then slumped back into his seat and grimaced in disgust. He’d done many terrible jobs for Likit and the Guild, but none as horrific as this one. They’d paid out hundreds of bounties already and they hadn’t even hit the Outer Rim yet.

“Damn you, Skywalker,” he mumbled.

Then he tapped the comlink to tell the captain it was time to go.

.........

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Playtime is over; time to see what Luke is up to...
The HoloNet was gone.

One might think that a great silence had fallen across the galaxy, but that was not the case at all; most of the galaxy hardly took notice of its demise because it was technology beyond their means, so while the privileged mourned their loss, it was business as usual for everyone else. This fact was largely ignored by those in power who were busy planning a war, but it meant opportunity for those who saw things differently.

And so began the invisible war…

The Outer Rim was a region filled with many worlds; some were well-known throughout the galaxy, but many enjoyed anonymity. Life on the anonymous worlds could be difficult, but many found that a small price to pay for the freedom to live as they pleased. For others, those worlds were a prison from which they could never escape.

Escape required money. A lot of money. More than most could acquire in a lifetime.

So when the rumor arrived, it spread among the working classes like a virus, casually passed from being to being until it found its target: the desperate, the despicable, and those who would exploit them. The pitch went something like this:

“Did you hear? They say the First Order sabotaged the HoloNet, but they had help from inside.”

“What?”

“Terrorist agents, right here, among *us*, working for *them*.”

“Who?”

“They call themselves *Skywalkers*.”

“Never heard of them.”

“Me, either, but listen to this; they’re offering a bounty; a hundred weight in ore ingots apiece.”

“So what?”

“They say the Republic agents paying the bounties don’t ask questions; all you do is show up at the designated place with evidence and get paid.”

“What kind of evidence?”

“Anything suspicious, like, say… Force worship…”

“Force worshipers? You must be joking; they don’t care about politics *here*, why would they care about them anywhere else?”
“They don’t; but they’re out there, minding their own business, all alone. *Nobody* cares about them...”

Then would come the words that mattered.

“… and they’re worth a hundred apiece. Alive *or* dead.”

………

Hyperspace.

The only place aboard the Millennium Falcon where one could expect any kind of privacy was the cockpit, so Dar Na volunteered to sit copilot during Poe Dameron’s watch so he could ask the Resistance fighter a personal question.

“Why haven’t you told him?”

It was a question that Poe expected, and he had a well-rehearsed reply for it.

“It’s… complicated.”

Dar Na understood the use of the term; he’d used it himself once or twice. But after watching Poe tear himself apart over leaving Finn behind when they escaped the Resistance, Dar Na didn’t understand why once Finn was returned to them, Poe began to act as if that never happened.

“In what way?” he asked.

Poe had nothing rehearsed for that question.

He looked over at Dar Na, then shook his head.

“Finn’s not like you and me, Na,” he said, “we’ve been around; he hasn’t.”

“Around what?”

Poe frowned; Dar Na was not going to make this easy for him.

“Ummmm,” he stalled for time, searching for words, then just blurted it out. “Sex.”

“Sex, yes; we talked about that. I prefer females; you have broader interests.”

“That’s because we both have *experience*… Finn does not; none at all.”

“Is that important?”

“To our kind, yes.”

“In what way?”

Poe closed his eyes and prayed for an answer that might make sense to a Sith.
“It would be taking unfair advantage...”

“I understand!” Dar Na saw the problem from a distinctly Sith point of view. "We must get Finn experienced *first*, then you can tell him.”

“No, that’s not what I...”

“I would enjoy sex; I will take Finn with me to find an agreeable female.”

“No, that’s not...” Poe began, then he realized something, “what am I *saying*? The place we’re heading for is just like the place we just *left*, Na. They’re Force-worshippers; that means you won’t find an agreeable *anything* there.”

Dar Na received the news with disappointment.

“Another place with many fine females who look, but will not touch.”

“They *did* look, though,” Poe replied. It was small consolation for the young Sith that the females found him attractive, because Dar Noaa had forbidden him to reveal himself as Force-sensitive, which probably would have made him irresistible to them. “And they did ask when you’d be coming back.”

“Hmmmmmmm...”

That seemed to be the end of the discussion; Dar Na slumped down in his seat to think about impending frustration in silence and Poe went back to watching the display feed. It was a great relief for Poe to once again avoid talking about it in any detail, because he’d been in a situation like this once before and it did not end well.

And Poe couldn’t go through that again.

..................

In another part of the Falcon, Luke Skywalker was finishing his scheduled shower. It was enough, but Luke missed the luxury of the long, hot baths he enjoyed on his island. That bath would take all day to warm; sun on rock was slow, but in the evening when the air cooled, it was a genuine pleasure to sit and soak as the sun sank into the sea. It was one of many small pleasures that came from being all alone.

The drying fan switched off, and Luke walked to the bench and sat down to finish dabbing any remaining wet spots with a small towel, something he never bothered to do on the island. There, he would simply climb from the bath and walk back to his hut naked to sit by his small household fire until dry. Cold and warm would wrestle over his body there, reminding him that the timelessness of his isolation was merely an illusion; he was growing old.

That was when memories and regrets came to haunt him, sometimes in the form of those he’d known and lost.

Force-ghosts.

They would speak to him using words of wisdom and comfort that made him angry, until one night, he declared them dreams, fantasies and hallucinations, then dismissed them all forever.

He never saw them again.

Feeling dry enough, Luke turned his attention to his right hand, running the mechanical fingers through a rapid series of exercise motions intended to squeeze out any water that had managed to find its into the joints. Fingers, thumb, palm, and finally the wrist, then a sudden stop when the arm cramped up. A series of slow tight fists to relax the muscles again, during which Luke remembered the Resistance Transport and how Leia looked after so much time apart.

Sad. Tired. Alone.

But no sooner had he returned to his sister, Luke sent her away with Dar Noaa, and, for once, something he did worked out for the best...

Lost in good thoughts, Luke relaxed, letting his guard down, so he was completely open and vulnerable when a great disturbance in the Force found him there.

Confusion, then fear. Then horror. Then a woman’s voice.

“Help me.”

It cut though Luke, then continued on its way.

He jumped to his feet and raced to the chamber entry, almost colliding with Finn there.

“Did you *feel* that?” Finn begged, desperate to know and terrified of what the answer would be; he was in the communal area with Chewbacca when it arrived. Finn was still new to Force-sensitivity, so he immediately ran to seek Master Luke’s counsel, “Something... bad?”

“Yes.”

Then Luke elbowed Finn out of the way and continued on.

Finn started to follow, but stopped when he realized the Jedi Master was completely naked. He turned around, sped to the chamber, grabbed Luke’s hooded robe, then hurried after him; out to the communal room, where he saw Chewbacca vanish into the corridor that led to the cockpit. Running faster, Finn raced through the corridor, then the cockpit entry, squeezing by Chewbacca in order to throw Luke’s robe over the Jedi Master’s shoulders. He’d missed the first few words exchanged there, but he was pretty sure he knew what those were about.

“… how long.” Luke was asking, “before we get to D’akor?”

“An hour at lightspeed,” Poe replied, “two more after drop out, and then whatever it takes to find a landing site near Jorsuro. We won’t know til…”

“Can you get there any faster?”

Chewbacca mewed something loudly; the sounds were quick and harsh. Finn couldn’t understand the words, but the meaning was clear enough; the Wookie was alarmed by the request.
“I *know*,” Luke looked up at Chewbacca, "but it's important."

Chewbacca growled something quietly in reply. Luke looked down at himself, rolled his eyes, then put his arms into the robe sleeves and pulled it around himself.

“There is a way,” Poe suggested cautiously from the pilot’s seat.

Chewbacca instantly growled disapproval, but Poe met his stare with confidence. Luke was interested, and took a step forward to ask.

“How?”

“If we stay in hyperspace for ten, maybe twelve, minutes longer,” Poe glanced at the control panel read-outs as he spoke, “we can lose the entire last hour.”

Chewbacca mewed out an argument that Finn didn’t need any translation for, and he said so.

“Chewy and I have done that *before*,” he lectured Poe, “and almost got killed. I know you think you can fly anything...”

“I can fly anything,” Poe assured him. “Look, no asteroid fields in our way, no moon...”

Luke looked up at Chewbacca again.

“It’s your ship,” he said, “what do you think?”

Chewbacca gave Poe a long, threatening look, but Poe was oblivious to the threat; he was already imagining the maneuvers in his head. Then the Wookie sighed loudly and mewed something that sounded almost wistful and sad.


Then he squeezed past Chewbacca and Finn and headed back to get dressed.

……….

The hour passed quickly, spent in preparation.

Dar Na relinquished his seat to Chewbacca, then went to join Luke and Finn in the communal room to prepare. He’d felt it, too; the cold touch of a dark Force disturbance was nothing new for him. But unlike the Jedi and Finn, there was nothing complicated about it for Dar Na; he knew a fight was coming.

He always knew.

All he had to do to prepare was check that the blade edges of his knives were perfect, which they were. After that, he would trust the Jedi’s wisdom and his own instincts.

Finn checked his blaster, then holstered it. Then he sat and stared at the lightsaber sitting on the Dejarik table; the blade nozzle stared back at him like a blind eye, offering no guidance.

Luke’s preparation consisted of sitting quietly with his eyes closed, meditating. He’d been motionless
since he sat down across from Finn; he was touching the Force, seeking calm, when Finn’s thoughts drifted in. Luke remembered how it was when he was new to the Force; times when the urge to use it wrestled with uncertainty and self-doubt would paralyze him. Yoda and Ben Kenobi helped him overcome those moments by demonstrating its power; perhaps that would help Finn…

Finn’s lightsaber stood up, then lifted off from the surface of the table. It hovered effortlessly in the air in front of Finn, then began to spin. Finn’s eyes grew wide; he watched for a moment, then slowly reached out and closed his hand around the hilt, reclaiming it.

Then he clipped the lightsaber to his belt.

Satisfied that Finn had been encouraged, Luke resumed his meditation; they were almost there.

It was early evening when the Falcon arrived at Josuro.

It landed in the highland scrub desert just west of the settlement; Poe set it down in a wide stream bed where it straddled the scant and shallow flow of water like a bridge, its ramp extending just far enough to reach the dry edge of the stream bank. Along the banks, plants that evolved to fight for water with thorny tendrils were heaped high on one another, making the stream a natural fortress, and the soil was light and dull in color, providing the Falcon camouflage from above. Although D’akor’s population was small and spread out, Luke insisted on staying out of anyone’s sight.

Luke also insisted that they leave for the village immediately.

Leaving Chewbacca and the droids standing ready with the Falcon, Luke, Finn, Poe and Dar Na followed the stream bed as far as they could, then they tunneled through the thorn forest with lightsabers and emerged from it into a meadow below. A well-worn path at the far side of the meadow led them into a forest of tall, lacy ferns that was quickly becoming dark as the sun slipped lower towards dusk. Finally, a glow appeared ahead, dimly illuminating the path and silhouetting the shapes of the village’s humble houses in the distance. But as they got closer, the village remained eerily still; this time of day it should be a busy place, filled with movement and sound and the aroma of evening meals cooking...


Leaving the young men behind, he ran ahead, into the center of the village, then he stopped and just stood there. Alarmed, they caught up to him quickly, and at first, they didn’t see anything but the Jedi Master.

But then they became aware of what was surrounding them.

Not far from their feet, what seemed like bench logs in the shadows as they ran past became bodies. Instantly, Finn, Poe and Dar Na formed a shield around Luke, who seemed frozen by the sight, and drew their weapons to defend themselves. They stayed that way for several minutes, scanning the village in all directions, but nothing happened.

“Whoever did this,” Luke’s voice crackled with restrained rage, “is gone now. Look for survivors, check everyone.”
That’s what they did; Luke stayed in the center of the village keeping watch while the others went from body to body, home to home. As the minutes ticked by, their silence confirmed what Luke already knew.

Dead. All of them.

Then the sounds of the searchers’ reactions told Luke another story; Poe staggering from a doorway to vomit; Dar Na mumbling curses and then prayers in Sith; Finn muffling a sob with his hand. They returned to Luke with heads lowered, hands shaking.

“None.” Poe reported.

“No one.” Finn reported.

“All dead,” Dar Na reported. “Old males, females,” he outstretched his arm; his open palm held a tiny golden ring, “infants. All.”

“They never had a chance,” Poe murmured, “they died at their tables, food in their mouths…”

“And in their mother’s arms.” Dar Na touched Luke’s shoulder to get his full attention. “And something else…”

Luke turned abruptly to face him.

“What else?”

“The bodies…”

“*Mutulated*,” Finn spat the word out, “all of them.”

“They took hands,” Dar Na added, “ears and feet. See for yourself.”

Luke went to the closest door and stepped inside; he emerged a few seconds later with a look on his face that Finn and Poe could not decipher. Dar Na read the confusion on their faces.

“This was not done by raiders or thieves,” he told them, “They took proof of their kills in order to be paid.”

“*Paid*?” Finn asked. “Mercenaries did this?”

“*Amateurs*. This was crudely done.”

Luke had rejoined them now, so Poe turned to him to ask.

“Who would pay for something like *this*? Why?”


“We must take what we can use,” Dar Na said, “and leave. Quickly.”

“Agreed,” Luke nodded, sounding resigned. “There’s nothing we can do for them now…”

“Help me.”
A woman’s voice, the same as before, only Luke heard it clearly this time.

Finn heard it, too, but just as a whisper; Dar Na only sensed it, and Poe saw on their faces that something had just happened. Finn and Dar Na were staring at Luke, who was staring off into the distance, seeking, then finding, someone in desperate need.

“That way!” Luke pointed toward a nearby hill standing black against the twilight sky. “Follow me.”

Then he vanished.

……………………

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

... and it gets a lot darker...
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

She knew she was going to die.

She didn’t know how long she’d been unconscious; she resisted the first one only to be punched so hard in the face that she blacked out. That spared her the horror of being raped repeatedly, but not the pain afterward.

It was almost dark when she opened her eyes again.

She was lying on bare ground amid the tatters of her clothes, curled up tight on her side with her arms tied behind her back and a rope around her neck. One side of her face was throbbing and she could barely see out of one eye, and when she tried to move, terrible pain down below. She slumped back, closed her eyes and lay there motionless. Then she began to hear them, and opened her eyes again.

They were not far away, at ease, laughing and grunting as they sat surrounding a small brazier that was flaming brightly with sizzling somethings. They’d forgotten her.

She closed her eyes, shutting it out, telling herself it would all be over soon. They were tired of her now; she’d be joining the others in the blood-stained sacks.

There was absolutely no hope, and yet, one last time, the words whispered in her mind.

“Help me.”

They were all drunk, except for the young man.

They sat drinking and drooling as they watched the meat roast, trading stories of other places and times so they didn’t have to think about today. The young man was sitting off by himself, silent, alone, away from them, away from the pile of sacks, trying not to think at all.

He was the only one who saw it coming.

Like an angry spirit, it appeared out of nowhere; in twilight, it was just a dark shape, but then the brazier flared and the young man saw the hooded robe and that face. Deep inside the hood, a rough
The eyes paralyzed him; he couldn’t move; he couldn’t cry out. He could only sit and watch as the angry spirit stretched out his hand...

The brazier exploded.

Meat, metal and burning coals shot out in all directions. Those gathered around it took the blast head-on; one lost his head to flying metal, two others became living torches; not one escaped unwounded. The three went down and stayed there, the others scrambled to save themselves any way they could.

Unnoticed in the chaos, the angry spirit walked toward them, then stopped.

A glimpse of a shining hand in motion, then a blazing shaft of green lit the space, and that sound; the young man had never heard anything like it before…

Those who could turned to defend themselves, but their pistols proved useless; every shot was met by the green blaze and died there, then their pistols exploded in their hands and they fell to their knees screaming.

Anyone who tried to run was dragged back and knocked to the ground by invisible hands.

They were all down now and the angry spirit went to work.

The green blaze went into motion again; the fiery sword cut through the darkness so fast an afterimage glowed in the young man’s eyes, but didn’t blind him to the nightmare. There were hideous high-pitched shrieks as arms and legs met the blaze, then fell away into darkness, but the green blaze continued to split the night and their bodies wide open. Then the angry spirit walked among them and the green blaze sliced through their necks, severing every head.

Silence.

For a moment, the angry spirit stood among them; rigid, still, like Death itself.

And then, to the young man’s horror, it started walking toward *him*…

Luke Skywalker approached the young man slowly, giving the helpless murderer time to anticipate what was coming; if terrified enough, the only murderer remaining alive would tell him anything to stay that way. Luke had little time for interrogation; the woman lying in the shadows was still alive but badly injured and he had to get her back to the Falcon quickly.

But, as Dar Noaa would say, first things first.

“Answer my questions with the truth,” Luke made a slight gesture, releasing the murder’s head, “Do you understand?”

“Ye… ssss,” the murderer croaked, then coughed.

That was when Luke realized the monster was barely more than a boy, so he reached out and looked into the murderer’s mind. It was all there: a young man, no longer a child, put out with nothing, hungry and desperate, willing to do anything in order to survive…

“I needed the money,” the young man answered, “I didn’t ask, I just came with them.”

“Why did they do it?”

“For the bounty, one hundred ingots for every Skywalker killed.”

*Skywalker.*

Hearing his name sent Luke into shock; his lack of response made the young man panic.

“It wasn’t just for the bounty; they were *Skywalkers*,” the story poured out of him like blood from an open wound, “They’re the ones who broke the HoloNet; they serve the First Order; *traitors* and *terrorists*, every one of them! The bounty’s payment for service in a just cause...” Still no response; the young man tried harder. “Listen, those sacks are worth a fortune; I can take you to redeem them... you can have it *all*...”


“Tell me.” The request was icy clam. “Give me a name.”

“Uttey Station; Tech-side Depot,” the young man said, “we tell them ‘Delivery for Norv Orbilla’; they do the rest.”

Luke released him; he fell from his stool, landing on his hands and knees, trembling at Luke’s feet.

“I’ll do anything you want!” He begged, “just don’t kill me!”

Luke looked down at the beggar; this one had done something truly terrible, but how could he damn *this one* for one brutal act when he had forgiven *another* who had done far worse things?

*There’s still light in him...*


The young man crawled away quickly, got to his feet and stumbled into the dark. Luke waited just long enough to be sure he did not turn around, then he rushed to the shadow where the woman was.

She was lying on her side, facing away from him; hands bound behind her back connected to a rope around her neck. Her long, light-colored hair had been twisted tightly around that rope by her struggles, so Luke didn’t touch it; instead he loosened the knot connecting it to her arms with a swipe of his hand, then gently separated the rope, freeing it. Then he untied her hands; her arms flopped away as if she was a rag doll. She hadn’t moved at all, so Luke rolled her over to look at her face. It was dirty and bruised and her eyes were closed, so Luke leaned in close.

“Can you hear me?”

Her eyes opened. She was looking, but not at him; she’d withdrawn inside herself so deeply that the outside world was nothing more than a blur. So he asked her something else.

“Can you see me?”

The question penetrated the fog in her mind; she blinked, then looked straight into his eyes, confused and silently asking a question back.

“I’m Luke Skywalker,” he answered, “I came to rescue you.”
“Who… ?” she found her voice, but it was ragged and dry; then she remembered. She stiffened with dread. “*They*… !”

“They’re gone,” Luke held her, steadying her. “*All* gone. You’re safe now.”

She gasped, taking in a breath, then held it much too long.

“Let it out,” Luke whispered, “it’s all right now…”

She screamed loud and long; the sound of her heartbreak carried deep into the darkness, where it touched the souls of the three young males who were almost there and guided their way ahead.

When she’d spent the last of her agony, Luke lowered her gently to the ground so he could remove his robe and cover her. Then he left her only long enough to search for an undamaged bottle or flask of anything. He found the young man’s half-empty cup and returned with that. He knelt beside her with the cup, but she was too weak to sit up to drink, so he slid an arm underneath her shoulders, then pulled her backwards between his legs as he sat, so his body could support hers. Once there, she made no attempt to reach for the cup so, using one arm across her waist to hold her steady, he used the other to put the cup to her lips.

“Slowly now, slowly…”

Finn, Dar Na and Poe arrived at the scene with their weapons ready, but quickly realized that they had come too late.


“Over here.”

Relieved, they rushed in the direction from which the reply had come, slowed when they passed through the aftermath of what seemed like a decidedly one-sided confrontation, but then continued on.

Their hand lights revealed the Jedi Master sitting on the ground holding onto something that was wrapped with his robe.

“*Hurry*,” Luke spoke with urgency, “She’s from the village; help me get her up.”

Luke stayed as he was, supporting the woman from behind and below while they lifted her. As soon as she was vertical, he stood up and pulled her out of their grasp into his. Holding her tightly against himself, he gave instructions.

“Take anything we can use,” he said, “then get back to the village as fast as you can,” he told them. “We’ll pick you up there.”

Then he vanished, taking the woman with him.

........
To be continued...
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Warning: Turn out the lights; close your eyes. It's *that* dark...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Folding space.

Luke Skywalker had been doing it for years, and he knew that every attempt to travel that way came with an element of risk.

His first successful attempt, made on the stony beach at Ahch’tu, was intended to take him a few meters along the beach but landed him three meters out to sea. Instead of just washing ashore with the waves, he tried to fold himself back onto the beach, landed on one of the boulders there, then promptly fell off it and sprained an ankle.

His second attempt was much more cautious, and he managed to travel about a meter and land safely. From then on, his progress would be measured in meters, sometimes in millimeters, but eventually he learned the basic rules of folding space.

The most important rule was to be *totally* focused on what he was doing; even the slightest distraction would result in missing his target. The distraction could be anything; physical sensations like an unexpected drop of rain on his face or an aching joint, a random thought - or strong emotion. Any one of them alone was enough; in combination, they could be disastrous. Only a fool would try to fold space while his heart was still pounding with unspent rage...

Luke Skywalker knew all of that, but it didn’t matter; he did it anyway, because of her. The result was landing more than a quarter-kilometer upstream from the Millennium Falcon in water up to his knees.

In the dark.

Fortunately, it was a stretch where the current was slow and he managed to stay on his feet without losing his hold on her. She reacted to the sudden, cold wet with a terrified squeal; arms that had been hanging limp at her sides flew around Luke, hugging so tight that it hurt. He spent the next few minutes struggling with her while trying to spot the Falcon downstream so he could try again.

The next attempt landed him just a short distance from the ship, not far from the ramp, so Luke used the Force to call for Chewbacca.

The Wookie was expecting contact over the comlink and stared at it for a few seconds before realizing that the voice he was hearing was actually in his head. He hurried to the entry, tapped the control panel to open the door and turn on the ramp lights, then stepped out and saw Luke at the far end holding someone. He didn’t know who it was; it seemed too short to be Dar Na, too slim to be Finn, so it must be Poe. As he ran down the ramp, he saw the tangled light hair and realized that, to his relief, it was none of them.
Without a word, the Wookie eased the stranger out of Luke’s hands and into his own.

Luke relinquished her to Chewbacca’s strong arms, then followed him to the ramp, up, inside, through the communal space to what once was Han and Leia’s private space. The bed there was clean and close to the sanitary station where the Falcon’s meager medical kit was stored. The Wookie lowered her onto the bed, then went to get the medical kit, returning her to Luke’s care.

Luke sat on the bed beside her, drew his robe off her shoulders and began to work on freeing her hair from the neck rope. As he worked, the soft overhead lights gave him his first real look at the woman he’d just rescued; she was neither young nor old, but somewhere in between; it was impossible to estimate her age because her face was swollen and bruised. Her dark blonde hair felt silky as it slipped through his fingers, and it had a lingering fragrance of some sweet floral rinse that caught, then held, Luke’s attention for a moment. He looked at her face again; he didn’t recognize her, but then, he hadn’t visited Josuro for many years.

*Who is she?*

She could be the daughter of friends he knew back then, or someone who came to join them in the years since he left them behind. Josuro was a kind and welcoming community that accepted the wanderer who called himself only ‘Luke’ like a guest, giving him food and shelter and then useful work. It was the evenings there that Luke remembered best, and the hours spent listening to them talk about the Force. Force-worshippers were not Force-sensitives, so their interpretations of what it was and how it worked were sometimes wildly imaginative and often completely wrong, but their stories showed Luke aspects of the Force from another perspective than his own.

Those stories opened his mind to the possibility that perhaps there was more to understanding the Force than could be found in Jedi philosophy, so in a sense, Josuro was the place where Luke Skywalker began his quest for the truth.

He leaned over and brushed a few tangles away from her face.

*She’s beautiful. That’s why they kept her alive...*

The woman stirred, then opened her eyes. They were bloodshot, but blue, like the sky above Ahch’tu on a clear day, and this time they were looking at him with awareness.

And fear.

Realizing that his face was in shadow from the overhead lights, Luke pulled himself back, then turned it so she could see him clearly.

“Hello.” He kept his voice soft and reassuring as he said it.

She stared at him for a moment.

“My feet...” The pain of moving her jaw stopped her; she made a face, closed her eyes, then made herself go on. “… are cold.”

“They’re wet,” Luke answered, “I had to...”

“The stream,” she interrupted him, her eyes opened wide as she remembered. “You … were holding me… and then... we were in the stream.”

“Yes.”
“But how…?” She struggled to sit up. “I can’t remember...”

“Don’t try,” Luke took hold of her shoulders, both stopping and supporting her. “Let that go for now. Let’s get you cleaned up first, and then...”

“*No*...” she strained against his hold on her. “I should be *dead*... just let me die...”

“Don’t think,” Luke put his living hand to her forehead, putting her to sleep. She sagged back onto the bed. “Rest now,” he whispered.

Chewbacca returned with the ship’s medical kit, which he placed on the bed at the woman’s feet, then looked down at Luke and warbled out a worried question.

“They’re waiting for us at the village,” Luke replied. “Land as close as you can, Chewy; but keep the Falcon *hot*.” He reached for the medical kit, “You stay in the pilot’s seat; send R2 and Threepio out to help them bring whatever they have on board.” He opened the kit and began to search inside. “As soon as that’s done, be ready to go.”

Chewbacca mewed another question.

“Do you know anyone at Uttey Station?”

Chewbacca nodded.

It had been awhile, but he and Han had done business there, and that contract worked out well enough to promise a decent reception now. How they would pay for it was another matter, but he figured Luke would think of something.


“I have business there.” Luke lifted a suture gun from the kit, examined it briefly, then put it back. Then he dug deeper into the kit and pulled out a small tube of suture glue and placed that on the bed beside the woman. Then he looked up at Chewbacca again. “What are you waiting for?”

Chewbacca mumbled something that Luke didn’t hear and left.

Luke leaned over the woman and touched her forehead again. She was deeply under, drifting in a sanctuary of dreamless sleep that would protect her from knowing that one more man was about to violate her body. It was absolutely necessary to find and treat her all her injuries, wherever they were. He would do it gently, with respect, and she would not remember it.

At least he could give her that.

Then he’d clean her up as best he could for the time being and cover her with the bedding while he went to find something for her to wear. That wasn’t going to be easy, because Leia already moved all her clothes to the Visitor and whatever was available in the Falcon at the moment might be dirty or masculine.

Or both.

................
The night guard was mourning the last gulp of his beverage; few things were capable of making a night watch assignment even worse than it already was, but an empty drink cartridge was one of them. In a few hours, the night walk guard would pass by, and maybe he would have something to share, but until then, the guard had nothing to distract him from boredom.

Very few beings showed up this time of night; those that did hid their faces from the security sensors, so the guard was not concerned at all when three beings covered in heavy cloaks came through the gate walking his way. One led the other two, who were carrying full sacks.

The guard looked down to check his schedule, saw no names listed there and snorted to himself.

*Just my luck, he thought, more bounty hunters…*

The first one approached his station and stopped there as if waiting for something, so the guard challenged him.

“State your business here.”

The hooded figure moved closer and lifted his head, revealing little more than a rough beard.


“You,” the guard looked at him, then around him at the two others with their full sacks, “look *old* for this kind of work.”


“Listen, old man,” the guard warned, “do you have something to redeem or not?”

Luke raised both hands; using two fingers tight together to point, he summoned his companions forward.

Two grimy sacks hit the guard’s desktop with muffled thumps; it was a sound the guard had heard before and he knew what was inside.

“There,” he pointed toward the Techno Union ship parked off by itself, away from the other docked vessels. “I’ll tell them you’re coming; be quick about it.”

“I assure you,” Luke replied as he started his walk to the ship, “we will.”

There was something chilling in the old man’s words; so the guard kept his eyes down on the schedule below. The other two said nothing; they quickly stepped up, grabbed the sacks and set off after the old man.

The guard didn’t look up from his desk to see where they were going.

Some things were best left unseen.

………..
Norv Orbilla was lounging in his quarters trying to drink himself numb when news of yet another delivery came over the comlink.

He’d only been here two nights and he’d already paid out one hundred and twelve bounties; now came three more with two sacks full. His subordinates dutifully recorded the contents of every sack received, and it made him sick inside when he read them. He told himself this was it; when this job was over, he would cash out and disappear.

There had to be someplace in the galaxy where he could forget…

Suddenly the door across the room, which he’d locked tonight, as he did every night, slid open and someone walked through. Orbilla didn’t look up from his glass; anticipation had become reality; at last, it was time to deliver the message and go home.

“ Took you long enough; damn you,“ he complained without confirming identity. “ *Jedi*.”

With a shake of his head, Luke Skywalker shed the hood, revealing himself.

“I’m sure you have questions,” Orbilla looked up at the face he’d been paid to find, "but I’m just the messenger.” He leaned toward a table close by and tapped a small holo-display plate. “This will answer your questions…”

An image in blue, a human that Luke did not recognize, appeared on the plate and began to speak.

“Luke Skywalker,” the image said, "Jedi Master…”

“You were summoned by the Emergency Council to come to Coruscant, but you have not appeared. I can understand that; they’re weak and disorganized and have nothing to offer someone like you. I, on the other hand, can offer you a great deal… if you have the wisdom to accept it. I am the Technology Guild, and you have something I want.”

Luke’s eyes went from the image to Orbilla, who wasn’t watching; he was downing the last of his drink like a drunkard who knew it was closing time. Luke turned his attention back to the image.

“ Not long before our little war broke out,” the image said, “the Republic managed to acquire a piece of technology that was, to be brief, *unique*. Our governing body was foolish enough to reject the Technology Guild’s offer to assume authority over it; a mistake that cost them dearly when it was stolen out from under them by one of their own. But that no longer matters now; what matters now is *you*.”

“We know about your sister and the Sith. She’s found love again, and so *soon* after her beloved husband’s death, it makes one wonder. Unfortunately for you, and so many others, she chose to run away with him in the very piece of technology that you are going to find and bring to us.”

The speaker in the image paused, shrugged, then resumed.

I know what you’re thinking; you’re thinking *no*, so next, I’m going to tell you why you’re going to do it.”

The image had Luke’s full attention now, so he didn’t see Orbilla filling his glass again.

“By now,” the image said,” you’ve heard the ‘Skywalker’ rumor; right now, all across the galaxy, hundreds of totally *innocent* beings are being hunted down like animals and slaughtered, all because of a vague and unverifiable rumor that somehow *they* were responsible for the HoloNet being lost. Imagine that! A terrible thing, rumors; usually they last only long enough to kill a few
moments of idle time, unless, of course, they have *substance*. In this case, the substance is a hundred weight in ore ingots, paid out for every ‘Skywalker’ slain with no questions asked. By us."

"And we shall continue to pay, until you make us stop - by bringing us that ship. The moment you deliver it into our hands, we will stop making payments, then spread the news that it was all a First Order lie intended to create suspicion and distrust. The slaughter will stop."

The speaker in the image began to slide his hands together.

“We will wait for your reply, but don’t take too long; with so many innocent lives at stake, it should be an easy decision for you. Bring us the ship.”

The image paused again, as if thinking, then resumed.

“And one more thing, Master Jedi; bring us that Sith, too. Alive if possible, but if not, his head will do.”

The image froze, then dissolved, and the room fell silent. Luke stood there staring at the empty space.

“He means what he says,” Orbilla said dully.

Luke looked over to see him emptying the glass. Again.

Orbilla gazed at the glass, then threw it across the room. It shattered as it hit the wall; for a second, a hundred shards sparkled like stars, then fell into the shadows below.

“I’m finished; *done*,” he mumbled. “I’m going home.”

There was a flash of green and a sound he’d never heard before. He turned his head to see what it was.

“You’re going to *Hell*.” Luke said.

Then, with a single stroke, Luke sent him on his way.

..........  
To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Busy week coming up, next chapter might be late, which gives you time to think...

Note: for some reason the banner isn't posting the correct update date. Ignore it.
Chapter 9

………………

Hyperspace.

The Millennium Falcon was on its way back to the Edge.

Luke Skywalker did not explain why he was cutting the mission short, and after everything that happened at Josuro and Uttey Station, and no one was prepared to question him about it. Finn and Dar Na gave Poe and Chewbacca the details of their raid on the Tech-Side dock: how they were separated from Luke as soon as they boarded the ship there; how the guards and crew fought and died; how they found three chests that were filled with ore ingots.

They couldn’t report anything about Luke; he reappeared while they were filling the freshly-emptied bags with ore ingots, and after that, they came directly back to the Falcon, pausing only to drop off one of the bags to pay for services rendered before they boarded the ship and learned that they were going back to the Edge immediately. Since then, Luke had become a ghost; he was either with the woman or off by himself somewhere, meditating. Anyone who tried to get a conversation going with him was thwarted by one word replies.

Or no reply at all.

Only R2D2 and Threepio could hold Luke’s attention for more than a few minutes; perhaps that was because they had no expectations and required no explanations. The droids simply did as they were told...

After what seemed like an eternity standing idle, C-Threepio finally had another assignment.

He did not want to come along on this trip; he wanted to remain with General Organa, but Master Luke insisted they might need his services as a translator. Yet, so far, those services had not been needed and Threepio was relegated to staying behind with R2 and Chewbacca.

Waiting.

He resigned himself to it; asking if he could be of service, and then, when they would say no, staying out of their way.

That changed when Master Luke brought the stranger aboard; suddenly it was ‘Threepio this’ and ‘Threepio that’ in the frenzied rush to load the ship and leave. After that, he was enlisted in the search for ‘suitable’ clothes with Master Luke, then assigned to wait outside the door in case the Jedi Master needed something. The initial flurry of requests slowed, then ceased, so Threepio shut down to save energy.

Sometime later, he was roused by a rude tap on his face; he opened his eye sensors and saw Chewbacca’s furry hand there. The Wookie mewed and made a gesture that said ‘come with me’, then headed to the nearby galley and kitchen. Threepio followed, then watched as Chewbacca worked on a meal for the crew. It wasn’t much to look at; a thick, steaming, golden liquid that had almost no aroma, but was easy to ladle up and pour into the small bowls lined up on the counter.
Chewbacca filled the first two bowls, set them on a small tray, then gestured to Threepio to pick up the tray. Threepio complied, then stood there waiting for instructions, provoking an annoyed growl from Chewbacca, who pointed past him, at the wall. For a circuit or two, Threepio was confused, but then he calculated that the food was intended for Master Luke and the stranger, who were in the room behind the wall, so he sought confirmation.

“I’m to take this to Master Luke?” he asked.

Chewbacca was midway through filling the remaining bowls, and simply nodded without looking at him, so Threepio left to make his delivery.

There was no response when he tapped on the closed door, so he tried calling through it.

“Master Luke?”

No reply.

Threepio tapped the access pad; the unlocked door slid open. The droid entered the space quietly, so he would not to disturb the occupants while he made his delivery.

Master Luke was sitting in a shabby, old cushioned chair not far from the bed where the stranger was; his eyes were closed and he gave no sign that he had heard Threepio at all. The droid was relieved that he had not disturbed Master Luke because the aging Jedi had been behaving so strangely of late, he certainly needed to get some rest.

Threepio set one of the bowls on the small table beside the chair, then went to deliver the other bowl to the stranger.

She was soundly asleep; lying on her back with her head and shoulders raised by pillows and her arms folded neatly across her chest, Threepio wondered if she had died and this was how Luke arranged her body afterwards, but then he detected deep, relaxed breathing. That was a great relief to Threepio, because It would have been just terrible if Master Luke had been unable to save her life after saving her body from those horrible bounty hunters.

Threepio set the bowl on the little shelf next to the bed, taking special care not to make a sound, but something, perhaps his movements, caused her to stir, then roll onto her side and open her eyes.

“*Greetings*,” he addressed her cheerfully, “I am C-Threepio, protocol...”

She cut him off with a scream, followed by the bowl he’d just set down crashing against his face.

Blinded by the golden mess that now covered his sensors, Threepio opened his arms to show her he was no threat, but a foot slammed against his legs, knocking him backwards.

Her scream woke Luke instantly, so he witnessed it all.

He rushed to the bed, where the woman who had just kicked Threepio away with astonishing strength was now sitting on the edge of the bed, struggling to stand up. When he arrived, she welcomed him with a wild swinging fist that missed; the momentum of her arm carried her body with it, twisting her off the bed entirely. Luke was able to catch her fall, but not without taking a few blows to his head from flailing fists; the only way to get any control over her at all was by dropping her onto the bed, then using his body to keep her there.

“It’s all right,” he pushed himself up on his elbows, so his face hovered over hers, “You’re *safe* now.”
She stopped struggling to look at him.


She stared at him.

Luke could understand that she might not recognize him; he hardly recognized himself right now.

“Luke… “ she said his name slowly, as if searching her memory, then her eyes told him that she remembered *everything*, but she remained calm. “… yes.”

“Good.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” Threepio called from behind him. Luke looked over his shoulder and saw that only the droid’s dignity was damaged, but he asked anyway.

“Are you all right, Threepio?”

“Yes,” Threepio replied, “but I’m *covered* with… whatever this is.”

“Go get yourself cleaned off,” Luke instructed, “and come back with another bowl; I’m sure she’s hungry.”

“Yes, sir, I'll go right away,” Threepio’s voice provided the pout he was unable to make; then he was on his way out the door, mumbling, "how embarrassing...”

With Threepio gone, Luke turned his attention back to the woman. He studied her face; it was still swollen and the bruises had gone purple, but her eyes were different now. Before, there was only fear and hopelessness in those eyes; now they were bright with intelligence and spirit. It was a good sign; it meant the worst was over. She would need time to heal, and then...

“You can get *off* me now.”

“Oh...” Suddenly self-conscious, Luke rolled off, onto the bed beside her, then sat up. He turned his head to look down at her. “I was concerned you might hurt yourself.”

She laughed bitterly until the pain in her jaw stopped her, then she looked at Luke.

“There’s nothing left to hurt,” she shared the dark joke with him, “nothing left at all...”

“Don’t,” Luke leaned over and brushed her hair a little with his fingers, “I need you to be strong now; I need...” His fingers stopped, but he didn’t take them away. “to know your name.”

“Lacindaline Kin.”

“Kin? Lutor Kin’s daughter?”

“No, his wife.”

Her words puzzled Luke; Lutor was already old when Luke first met him; he was devoted to his wife Inna and when she died some years ago, Lutor vowed to remain faithful to her forever. That was shortly after her funeral, but time often changed people; maybe Lutor grew weary of being alone.

“I didn’t know,” he said, “that Lutor had married again.”
“Again?” She asked, but then she realized that her rescuer didn’t know. “Not Lutor the elder; Lutor the *son*.”

That helped Luke remember; the last time he saw Lutor Kin, the man had three sons and one daughter; Lutor was his second child, and first son.

“Lutor the *father* died four years ago,” the woman continued, “Lutor the son…” her voice grew quieter as the fresh and terrible memory surfaced, “… died…” she started to tremble; she couldn’t go on.

“In the village,” Luke rescued her from telling him any more of the story. “I know, I’ve been there. I’ve seen it. That’s where I was when I heard you call for help.”

“Did I? I don’t remember…”

“It’s all right, Lacindaline, “ he used her name so he would remember it, “that’s not important; you’re safe now, and you’re going to get well…”

“Laci.”

“What?”

“My name’s too long,” she managed a little smile, “so everyone calls me Laci.”

“All right, then,” Luke said, “so will I… Laci.”

Then he got up and went to see what was taking Threepio so long with that bowl…

………………

Coruscant.

It had been a busy day for Ronjir Likit.

A morning spent keeping two of the Technology Guild’s directors from killing each other in a dispute over a microcircuit design, followed by an afternoon spent sitting in Emergency Council meetings had devoured the day, and there was still much to be done. His assistant had already informed his wife that he would be working late, and now that same assistant was calling his mistress to inform her that he had been detained and would not be coming tonight.

Likit had no sympathy for either of them because they both knew from the start that he was married to the Technology Guild, and it would always come first.

Tonight was no exception to that rule.

He’d finished with the day’s financial reports and was just starting to review the development division updates when a priority transmission coming from the Guild’s private network appropriated his workstation display. Likit didn’t recognize the face that appeared, but the ID code indicated that this was one of the many newly-acquired ‘friends’ that the Guild needed for the acquisition project on the Outer Rim.

“Director Likit,” the face said, “I regret to inform you that there has been an unfortunate incident here
at Uttey Station involving a Technology Guild starship; vessel registration code TG-2000126, docked at our facility under the name “Seeker”.

The face paused, looked down as if checking his facts, then resumed his report.

"Last night, your vessel was boarded and robbed by unknowns. Crew and one passenger killed; secure compartment breached. There is no manifest, so we do not know what was taken from inside your vault, but we found three open cases filled with what looks like horbul processing waste; mostly hooves, ears and snouts. Unless you supply us with a manifest of what was originally in those chests, we will be unable to determine your loss."

Likit scowled; when Agent Orbilla’s scheduled transmission failed to arrive in the morning, he’d given it little thought. The Guild’s private network was fast, but not entirely reliable; unavoidable delays happened.

“Deaths,” the face continued, “vessel captain, two subordinates, passenger listed as Norv Orbilla, contract facilitator, Coruscant Technical Guild, and three of our guards. Images attached.”

Dozens of images lined up across the bottom of the display image.

“Regarding the dead,” the face droned on, “your crew and our guards were killed by conventional means, but we are unable to identify what weapon was used on the passenger.”

Likit paused the transmission, scanned the images and selected one. He saw two pieces of what used to be Orbilla lying on the floor beside the melted remains of a personal holo-display. There was no sign of a struggle except a shattered glass on the floor not far from him.

And no blood. Orbilla had been sliced, then sealed, in one clean stroke.

“Message delivered,” Likit said to himself, “and message *received*.”

The Jedi was angry.

That was expected; Orbilla’s death was not. Likit would have to think about that later, after he heard the rest of the transmission and sent a reply. He resumed it.

“Please advise us,” the face said, “what you wish done with the bodies; specifically, whether you want them shipped back to Coruscant or disposed of here. We are processing your vessel for evidence, and then we will place it in storage pending release to whatever representative you designate. Our contract provides for a twenty percent discount on the storage fee, but I have been authorized to extend another thirty percent to compensate for your loss. End transmission.”

The face disappeared and the images began to display one after another; Likit leaned back into his chair to view them, and put his hands together. Soon his hands began to move, sliding up and down against each other as the Guild Director studied each one. When the slide show presented the image of his three cases filled with slaughterhouse waste, Likit’s hands slowed; then the image of Orbilla’s body appeared once again, and Likit’s hands stopped altogether.

He stared at the image for a long time. It troubled him; perhaps he’d made a serious error. Perhaps he’d underestimated the Jedi or, worse yet, misunderstood him entirely. The message being sent in the image wasn’t fear; it wasn’t rage; it was cold and calculated, as precise as the single stroke of the lightsaber that ended Orbilla. The message in the image was personal, too, intended just for him; Likit could feel it.

*He’s coming; he’s coming *here*...
A chill flowed through his body as he realized the implications; his fingertips went blue, then white, and the hair on his arms stood on end.

… *to kill me.*

..........  

To be continued...
Unknown Regions, First Order Territories, 4 years before Starkiller...

Before it was the Visitor, it was the prototype.

In most ways, it was a marvel of technological innovation; it was the first, and ironically, also the last, of its kind. The heart of the vessel was its Kyber Crystal cluster, a matched set of six perfect Kyber crystals aligned so perfectly with one another that, when wrapped in conductive gossamer and then compressed inside the cluster housing, they acted as one. The result of its perfection was an astounding increase in both transmission and efficiency that made it possible to generate enough energy to power a starship with a ‘generator’ that was only sixty by forty centimeters in size.

The secret of the Kyber Crystal cluster’s performance was not the crystals, though, it was the six tiny resonators permanently installed on the underside, inaccessible and unmentioned. Trying to remove the cluster from the power assembly incorrectly would result in “irreparable damage”, so it could never be touched, except by the Kourin technicians who built it.

At least, that’s what the Kourin told their masters.

There were much larger Kyber Crystal clusters in use by the First Order fleet, but because they lacked those tiny unmentioned resonators, they were never quite as efficient in practice as originally promised. The Kourin technicians shook their heads, then pointed at the engineers, who pointed at the installation contractors, who had no one to point to, so they took the blame.

Arrests, trials, prison and executions quickly followed.

The problem of who to blame died with the unfortunate contractors, but the problem of compromised Kyber Crystal clusters remained. Kourin technicians tweaked the clusters as best they could, but were never able to pinpoint the problem, so the fleet’s Kyber Crystal clusters never performed anywhere near their theoretic potential.

But they did work, and that gave the First Order an advantage they fully expected to guarantee victory over any adversary anywhere, so Central Command had no reservations about sending the prototype back to Production for disassembly in order to investigate why it performed so well.

The prototype, however, had other plans…

*******

The Edge.

The discussion in the Visitor’s cockpit lasted well into the night.

The Kourin’s explanation about what was wrong and how he could fix it quickly became an inquisition, then an outright argument between Dar Noaa, the Kourin and the ship. The Sith had serious doubts that there was actually anything wrong with the Kyber Crystal cluster and didn’t hesitate to tell Irno why he thought so.

“You said,” he addressed the Kourin accusingly, “that they wanted us *here*; one way to ensure we *remain* here would be to make us believe that this vessel is broken, so we cannot leave. This vessel
has lied to me before.”

“I know what I said,” Irno fired back. “I also know that this system is not capable of faking a malfunction; it’s a *machine*; it can’t lie.”

“Do *you* lie?”

“Yes,” Irno admitted it without hesitation, “when I have to; sometimes when I want to. Don’t you?”

The Kourin’s directness made Dar Noaa reconsider; there was an honesty in the creature that Dar Noaa found appealing, but he wasn’t willing to risk everyone’s lives on it. The argument had come to an impassible stalemate...

Silence.

Up to this point, Leia, Ren and Rey had been little more than an audience as the two technicians went at it. Rey was able to follow most, but not all, of what they said, and from her point of view, there was a simple solution to the trust problem.

“Irno,” she spoke quietly, making them all listen, “show Dar Noaa how to unlock the cluster from the assembly.”

The Kourin stared at her for a moment, then turned its face to Dar Noaa.

“Yes,” Irno embraced the idea enthusiastically; it was a fair offer. “Step by step, start to finish; *nothing* held back.”

Dar Noaa’s expression changed; the offer was tempting, but he was still unconvinced. He turned to Leia for guidance.

“It’s your vessel,” he told her, “What do you say?”

“I say,” Leia replied, “what are you *waiting* for? Let’s do it.”

............

**Arranging for its own theft was no problem for the prototype; the First Order was absolutely predictable in matters of procedure. Despite the fact that the prototype could easily take a direct route to Central Production, protocol required at least one stop-over for security inspection before it would be permitted to enter Homeworld space.**

Just prior to its arrival at the outpost, the prototype reported a malfunction in the battery array. The batteries were only required when the ship was powered down, but protocol required the problem be addressed and resolved before it could depart due to safety regulations. That was going to take awhile, because there was absolutely nothing wrong with the battery array.

At the same time, the prototype sent a coded message to an unidentified recipient, who forwarded the message to another unidentified recipient, who did the same. The message traveled fast and far, finally reaching the listening ears of a Republic agency known to be operating in the region. Acquisitions and Analysis or "A and A", as it was called by those who knew its unsavory reputation, wasted no time in dispatching someone to investigate and, if possible, acquire the First Order property known as the prototype.
The assignment was extremely dangerous; probability of failure was ninety-five percent.

So they sent the Sith.

........

The Edge.

The first step in accessing the Visitor’s Kyber Crystal cluster was exposing it, which was easy because it was located beneath the central corridor floor. Rey watched as Ren lifted the central floor panel, exposing the top of the gossamer-wrapped cluster beneath, then carried the panel outside to get it out of the way. When he returned, they sat down together on the floor to have a look at it.

The cluster itself was wedged into the cavity so tightly that without the slick wrapping, it would have been impossible to move without special equipment, but Ren was special equipment; as soon as they told him the cluster was unlocked, he would use the Force to lift it, then hold it suspended in the air so the Kourin could get to the suspect resonator.

Up in the cockpit, Dar Noaa and Leia were watching intently as Irno worked at the waveform.

“This command sequence,” Irno’s tech hand fingers entered the commands quickly, “must be *exact*, or you’ll trip the lockout and shut down the entire system.”

“Understood,” Dar Noaa replied. “How long will the lockout last?”

“It’s permanent,” the Kourin snickered. “all you can do tow the ship back to Central Production and hand it over to them to be restored.”

“A great way,” Leia said, “to make First Order engineers keep their hands off it.”

“Indeed,” Dar Noaa agreed.

“*Hey*,” Irno stopped and looked at both of them, “Pay attention.”

Leia and Dar Noaa stopped talking and looked back attentively. The Kourin gave them a warning look, then resumed entering commands. The ship responded to every command with a single ding, then displayed a prompt for the execute code.

“It took me awhile,” Irno said as he entered it, “to chose the right code. It had to be something I could think of even if I couldn’t remember.”

Dar Noaa and Leia leaned closer to see what it was.

THEY WANT SOMETHING

The ship accepted the code with a single ding; then a data stream started.

“That’s it.” Irno pulled his hand away from the waveform, “let’s go.”

“But it’s still running,” Leia replied.

“This?” Irno pointed at the display, “It’s the log, just in case.”
Then he slipped past her and Dar Noaa and went to see just how the one named Ren was going to lift the cluster so he could get to his resonators. Leia followed him, but Dar Noaa didn’t; he stayed at the waveform, watching the log.

.............

The prototype had been docked for days and days.

Every attempt to correct the problem in the battery array only succeeded in creating another problem. The diagnostics system reported that the ship’s engineer’s efforts had unintentionally caused a ‘cascade’ surge in the wiring, resulting in ‘intermittent conductivity phase distortion’.

Then it recommended that every circuit be disconnected, tested, then reconnected again to address the problem.

The engineer mumbled something about 'animal excrement', then requested a day’s leave while his report on the problem was being processed at Central Production. The pilot approved the request, then granted himself leave as well, so the prototype was sitting idle and empty when its perimeter sensors detected the disturbance.

Intruder: No ID signal. Perimeter.

Casualties: 2

Weapons discharged.

Casualties: 4

Casualties: 7

Casualties: 10

Casualties: 12

Casualties: 15

Weapons silence.


SYSTEM OVERRIDE: Entry access granted.

Dar Noaa staggered into the cockpit holding his wrist; a blaster bolt had clipped him there, not badly, but enough to burn a hole and crack a few bones. He forgot all about it when he looked up and saw the waveform for the first time.

It was beautiful. He'd never seen anything like it. Anywhere. Ever.

Going straight to it, he studied it for a few seconds; it had to be the vessel’s control console, but the elegant shape in front of him offered no clue how to access it. The throbbing pain in his wrist was a distraction, so he eased his arm forward and lowered his hand to the smooth surface in order to free his other hand. The instant his hand made contact, the waveform flashed to life, glowing red symbols
scrolled too fast to see, then it went dark. Then a red glow appeared; light flowed out from under his injured hand like blood, spreading outward, lighting the waveform.

Three overhead beams of light bathed him in red for an instant. He looked up.

When he looked down again, the waveform had been transformed; its smooth dark surface had become a glowing red control panel. One of the glowing symbols was blinking brightly.

Dar Noaa touched it.

The vessel responded; a single ding.

Another symbol in red began to blink; Dar Noaa touched it.

The vessel responded; a single ding.

Symbol after symbol flashed, then reformed; Dar Noaa realized that the images developing before his eyes were a tutorial – the vessel was directing him, teaching him what to do…

The prototype was curious; many hands had touched it, but none like this one. This one had exceptional intuitive skills; once the tutorial showed him where everything was, it became superfluous; the intruder brought systems online without assistance.

That was when the prototype detected the anomaly in the Kyber Crystal cluster.

It registered like a sympathetic inrush current, except that the cluster’s design eliminated that possibility; its Kyber crystals could not be energized individually. The resonators quickly adjusted to the new current, and the cluster settled down, but at a much higher register. Analysis took fifteen whole seconds to determine that there was only one possible reason for the anomaly:

Something had been added.

It took another ten seconds to identify what, primarily because that required accessing the ‘silent data’, the files that only Kourin technicians knew were there, the files that added two new terms to the prototype’s identification program.

Force-sensitive and Sith.

……………

When he entered the corridor, Irno was disappointed; the Kyber Crystal cluster was still snugly secure in the sub-floor cavity and Ren was sitting on the floor with Rey, just looking at it. He expressed his disappointment without hesitation.

“I thought,” he aimed his words at Ren, “you said you could lift it.”

“I was waiting,” Ren replied, “for you to tell me it was ready.”

“Oh,” Irno’s expression changed; he had told Ren to wait. “It’s ready.”

“Then,” Ren advised, “get out of the way.”
Irno was confused; Ren hadn’t moved at all; he was still sitting on the floor, and there was nothing, not even one tool, in sight.

“How are you going to.. ?” he asked.

“You’ll see.”

There was a split second of stand-off, then Rey got involved.

“Come,” she waved at Irno to come, “sit by me.”

The Kourin accepted the invitation and stepped past Ren, sat next to Rey, then leaned over in front of her to give Ren a dubious look. Suppressing a giggle, Rey put her arm around Irno and spoke very softly.

“Just *watch*.”

Ren raised his hand and focused.

The perfection wrapped in gossamer offered no resistance at all; it rose smoothly from the cavity, clearing it, then hovered completely motionless in the air above it. Rey glanced at Irno to see his reaction, and the Kourin’s face said it all.

Irno had worked with the Force all his life, but Kourin technicians were always warned to keep their distance from the Kylo of Ren and those with him. Irno had heard all the stories, though, but he’d never taken them very seriously.

Until now.

“How long,” Ren asked, “do you think you’ll need?”

“I just told you, I don’t know,” came the reply, “why are you asking ?”

“I might get tired.”

“Oh…”

Watching from the cockpit entry, Leia allowed herself a moment of motherly pride, then paid for it with a flood of memories from the time when Ben was little and his power was just beginning to manifest itself. Before it all went wrong.

Then she saw the way Ren and Rey looked at each other, and her thoughts brightened again.

Not long now...
The theft was almost a complete success.

The prototype was in flight, speeding away from the outpost, away from the First Order, but it was not out of danger. The intruder was still learning the navigation protocol, which was necessary before the prototype could proceed with the next step in its escape; a clean jump to someplace else. Delays had been anticipated, but an unexpected complication had arisen...

Dar Nooa was tired and his wrist ached.

It wasn’t the tutorial’s fault that he just wasn’t getting it; he was simply worn out. A and A was right when they sent him on this mission alone because once the killing started, he didn’t bother to think about who actually needed killing; he just killed everyone. If any A and A agents had been involved, they would have died, too.

A series of dings told him his coordinate entry was incorrect, then the tutorial reset itself.

He had to begin again...

"Akida. Klazje kia nun." ***

Dar Nooa froze. “Stop. Listen to me” - spoken in *Sith*!

“Kuris sayid anas?” He asked, then asked again in Republic. “Who said that?”

“Proximity alert.”

It was the vessel! The vessel had a voice command interface; Dar Nooa could not believe his luck. He was uncertain about how the commands should be spoken, but he was sure they could work that out. That would have to come later, though, a proximity alert meant trouble, so first things first.

“Identify.”

“ID-002.”

Dar Nooa caught his breath; he knew who it was.

He couldn’t fight; this prototype had no armaments at all. He couldn’t outrun it, either. There was only one thing left to try...

“Closest planet.”

The waveform generated a holographic display of the immediate space surrounding the vessel, which included a moving point identified as “ID-002”. Dar Nooa was still absorbing the information when one of the objects in the display brightened, then the waveform presented the jump command with the coordinates already supplied. If this was a suggestion, Dar Nooa was eager to accept it.

“Execute.”

Dar Nooa felt the familiar jerk as the vessel’s hyperdrive engaged, pressing him against the back of the seat, but there was something else there, too; something new and exhilarating flowing through him. He only felt it for an instant, it flashed in his head and was gone. Something about making the
jump...

.........

To be continued...

**** Source for the Sith language is:

http://funtranslations.com/sith
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Difficult weeks like this one has been make me happy to have my own little Universe to play in.

*Unknown Regions, First Order territory.*

*It was a silent, rocky world that welcomed no one.*

*Ancient volcanoes, long dead now, scarred its surface with domes and cracked flow plains; creating low mountain ranges and canyons that cut deep and channeled what little water there was into dark algae-stained lakes set like gems on a necklace. From space, it was pretty; the gray surface was painted with rusty, windswept dunes of eroded minerals that wrapped around the planet like ribbons, a bright contrast to the green and blue of a million lakes encircled by rings that proclaimed the presence of life.*

*The prototype had no interest in the lakes, though; it was seeking sanctuary.*

*It was seeking someplace where dust and stone collided; where dust particles coated rock and filled the air at any disturbance, no matter how small, because landing there and blowing dust would create instant camouflage.*

*The intruder, now recognized as the Sith, knew nothing of the special coatings; so the prototype determined the choice of landing site and subsequent settling procedures to be performed and offered the Sith only the holographic display of their progress.*

*Despite being totally exhausted, Dar Noaa watched the display with intense interest. At first, letting the vessel select the jump destination seemed like the logical thing to do, but by the time the vessel dropped out of hyperspace and he was seeing his new location highlighted in the display, Dar Noaa knew he’d made an error in judgment. The vessel made a logical choice; his pursuers would look at the same data and make the exact same choice because the vessel they were pursuing him in was almost identical to the prototype, using the same technology, so it would offer the same ‘suggestion’. That meant he was in real trouble; they were probably right behind him, and their vessel was bigger than the prototype, very well armed, and unlike Dar Noaa, their pilot knew what he was doing.*

*The Ren Transport.*

*A and A knew all about it; a gift presented to the Kylo of the Knights of Ren by his doting Supreme Leader, the Ren Transport was reported to be so technologically advanced that it was literally invincible.*

*Invincible.*

*Dar Noaa didn’t believe that, but no one sent by A and A to investigate ever returned with evidence one way or the other.*

*Invincible.*
That was also the reason that A and A jumped on the chance to steal the prototype on which it was based. They chose Dar Noaa for the mission because he had the right combination of tech skills and savagery and he was also completely expendable.

Dar Noaa sensed its arrival before the prototype did; then a point of light confirming his senses appeared, indicating another vessel had just dropped into normal space, and was heading straight for the planet and the prototype.

And him.

He was jolted from his thoughts by a rough thump. The prototype had landed.

The vessel shuddered for a few seconds, then Dar Noaa heard all the thrusters firing, and the shudder resumed. A few seconds later, the shudder stopped again and Dar Noaa tried to bring up a visual of where he was. He succeeded, but all he got to see was a cloud of dust settling all over and around the vessel. If he was lucky, that dust would make the vessel look like one of the surrounding boulders, so he began to shut down the vessel’s systems to make it electronically silent. In less than a minute, the vessel was dark and still; all that remained on line was the display.

As he watched the point of light moving through the display, Dar Noaa considered his options. There was no escape; if this camouflage failed, and that was likely, the Knights of Ren would have him.

If taken alive, he would be tortured until he revealed everything he knew about A and A’s activity in First Order space.

And he would reveal everything. Eventually.

And then they would kill him.

There was only one other option; destroy the prototype and himself with it.

The prototype had no weapons, but it did show him a supply of survey probes that used a very sophisticated-looking modifiable program. The probes used a compact, but conventional fuel system and carried enough fuel to make an impressive explosion. All he’d have to do was activate one of them, then immediately send an abort command and the probe would explode while still inside the prototype, detonating all the rest and vaporizing the vessel and everything inside it.

That would deprive the First Order of their prototype; it would also deprive the Kylo of Ren the pleasure of destroying one more Force-sensitive. And if he timed it right, he just might be able to damage, or even destroy, the Ren Transport as well.

Dar Noaa wasn’t afraid to die; he had no regrets... wait, there was one regret.

Leia Organa.

She would never know what happened; he would just be someone who vanished from her life without saying goodbye, and not even someone who mattered. She mattered to him, though, more than she would ever know.

He should have told her.

Of course, if he had told her, her response would have been a polite – and final – rejection. Then she would never let him see her again.
That was why he never did it.

The brightening point of light in the display altered course; it slowed, then turned, then began its descent.

They had him.

Dar Noaa tapped the waveform and got to work.

……………

The Edge.

Leia Organa was watching her son.

Leaning against the wall in the cockpit entry and keeping very quiet, she took in every second as if it was precious, because, for her, it was. Ren had been sitting on the corridor floor with his hand out, suspending the Kyber Crystal cluster in the air for more than an hour, and for all that time, his hand and arm were motionless; Leia wondered how he could do it.

Rey was sitting beside him, close enough that they touched legs, and every time she and Ren looked at each other, Leia felt a flutter. Things happened so quickly after they got back that the subject of Force discretion and why they should use it had been completely forgotten, and Leia could sense their desire building again. As soon as they found a way to be alone together, they’d be all over each other.

Leia knew that for a fact because it was she was feeling it, too.

And that raised a question in her mind; now that she knew about the effect Ren and Rey’s lovemaking could have on others, wouldn’t that make it less risky to take ‘advantage’ of that effect? It was an entirely self-serving question, though, because Dar Noaa would be all for finding out…

Noah.

Realizing he hadn’t come to watch at all, Leia turned and looked back into the cockpit. He was exactly where she’d left him, standing at the waveform watching the log readout. Leia could see that the log was reporting something in a graph format, and that image had Dar Noaa’s full attention, so much so that he didn’t hear her say his name as she approached, and then when she touched his arm, she took him by surprise.

“Leia.”

“I’m sorry, I startled you,” she said, then glanced at the display, “what’s all this?”

“The register readout from the crystal cluster,” he touched the graph, leading her eyes with his fingers to a low line, “This is just before Ren lifted it,” he said, then traced the line as it rose sharply to the top of the graph and stayed there, “and this is after.”

“Ren is causing that?”

“Yes.”

“The register is all the way up; that seems like… a lot.”

“A lot, yes, how much I can’t say.” Dar Noaa frowned as he thought. “The system can’t measure higher than this point, it’s maxed out.”
“You were hoping this would tell you about Ren?”

“It does tell me, Leia. It tells me a great deal.”

“Tell *me*.”

“We know he was powerful before the Goazon,” Dar Noaa moved his fingers down the graph, “when we first brought him on board, the registers climbed to here.” He moved his fingers back to the top again. “Now he’s recovered – and then some.”

“That’s good, right?”

“Perhaps.”

“Just say it, Noah.”

“This,” he ran his fingers along the top line, “represents an *astonishing* amount of energy, and you son is well beyond it. There may be no limit to what he can do now.”

“No wonder he’s terrified.”

“We can’t ignore this.”

“What do you want to do?”

“First things first; I must speak with him.”

His words sent a chill through her; she’d been keeping them apart deliberately because she’d imagined a hundred different ways they could hurt each other, all of which ended with Dar Noaa dead and Ren worse than ever. She wanted to say no. But she didn’t.

………..

Unknown Regions, First Order territory.

At first, the prototype didn’t understand why the Sith was accessing the survey program, so it monitored his command entries. One probe was active and online, but no destination coordinates had been entered. Then the Sith modified the source code; he disabled the mission abort safety protocol. The vessel scanned all probable and possible reasons why the Sith would do this and determined which one was most probable.

Self-destruct.

“Akida.” the prototype said. “Stop.”

“I am sorry,” Dar Noaa answered, addressing the vessel as if it was alive, “I cannot allow us to be captured.”

The prototype understood; if the camouflage failed, the prototype would be returned to Central Production and the Sith would die. It couldn’t comprehend death, but it knew what it meant for the Sith. In the nanosecond that followed, something extraordinary happened; the prototype determined that it did *not* want the Sith to die.

So it overrode his commands and deactivated the program. The waveform display went dark.
“*No*!” Dar Noaa slapped his hands down onto it; his wrist punished him instantly and he sagged forward. “No...”

“Jostas nun.” the prototype said. “Trust me.”

Dar Noaa didn’t reply; he put his head down, against the waveform and closed his eyes. He had to think of another way to do it...

The prototype wasn’t interested in what he might do next; it was already taking action. It called out to ID-002 and made a request. Then it activated the navigational program and selected coordinates in another part of the galaxy, far from here.

Then it waited.

Ten seconds later, Dar Noaa heard notification chimes and looked up expecting to see a proximity alert, but that was not what he saw. Instead, he witnessed the point of light that was the Ren Transport suddenly accelerating and overshooting his position, then holding course for at least ten kilometers before landing.

And then, it just sat there.

Before Dar Noaa could process what had just happened, the prototype suddenly launched itself; it left the ground so fast and at such a steep angle that all he could do was watch from the pilot’s seat until he passed out.

………..

The Edge.

Irno was in his element.

The instant he learned that the ship’s Kyber Crrystal cluster had a problem, Irno knew that power had shifted in his direction; he was a captive, but no longer a prisoner. By the time he was stretched out underneath the cluster and working to uncover the damaged resonator, he was fearless; if the Kylo of Ren wanted his ship to fly again, he’d have to accept whatever Irno demanded in return.

“How’s it going under there?” Ren called to him from the corridor floor.

“Almost there,” the Kourin replied, “Just have to separate the membrane to expose it.”

“If you cut it,” the question came, “will it still work?”

“I didn’t say ‘cut’,” Irno snapped back, “I said separate.”

“But it’s one continuous web; we were told if you...”

“Don’t you *know* by now?” Irno mocked him. “what you were told might not have been accurate. They told you what they wanted you to *believe*. You’re so gullible!”

Up on the corridor floor, Ren bit his lip in annoyance and Rey held back a giggle.

“So,” Ren persisted, “how do you separate it?”

“With your finger,” Irno explained as he performed the task, “The polymer is self-healing... ah, there you are...” The resonator was held in place by two tiny clips that completely covered it, rendering it invisible; Irno thumbed them out the way and then used his tech hand fingers to ease the device out
of its socket. “When you’re finished, pull it together again,” he palmed the resonator, then used his grip fingers to approximate the edges of the wound in the web. It sealed instantly. “And it does the rest. I’ve got it, now pull me out.”

Rey yanked on the legs she’d been holding down and the rest of the Kourin slid out from beneath the suspended cluster. He looked positively rigid.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Had to lock up,” Irno grimaced as he sat up; there were audible pops as each of the vertebrae in his spine released. Once he was straight enough to look at her, he opened his tech hand to show her. “Look.”

Rey and Ren, too, leaned over to see the resonator sitting like a tiny jewel on his plam.

“Can you fix it?” Rey asked.

“I don’t know yet,” Irno replied, then turned his face to Ren, “but I know I can’t fix it *here*.”

Ren gave him a look, but said nothing. Irno didn’t flinch.

The negotiations were open.

…………

Asteroid field known as The Screamers, Outer Rim.

Dar Noaa was adrift, caught someplace between oblivion and awakening, when he heard the sounds calling to him.

Three dings. Another three dings.

As he roused, he automatically tried to steady himself by grabbing the armrests of the seat, and a jolt from his injured wrist gave him sudden clarity. Using his other hand to move it, he laid his wrist against his chest and willed himself to ignore the pain.

Three dings.

He looked at the waveform; a holographic navigation chart was hovering in the space above it. He leaned closer to study it, and was surprised when he recognized where he was.

The Screamers.

It was a vast asteroid field with a reputation for ‘unexpected outcomes’, most of them disastrous enough to earn it its infamous name. There was little mystery to why the asteroid field was so dangerous, though; it was populated with highly magnetic and radioactive chunks that interacted with anything that got close, so it was charted as someplace to avoid. And yet, this was where the prototype had brought him; it was drifting along with the space rubble on an invisible current that was taking it nowhere, as if it was waiting for something.

It was also in Republic-controlled space; the Outer Rim.

Three dings.

The navigation program brightened on the waveform surface display, and Dar Noaa saw that it was requesting coordinates. The prototype must have made an amazing jump to get him this far, and
Dar Noaa was sorry he’d missed it, but they were not out of danger yet; all the jump did was buy them a little time to plan their next move.

So now it was asking him to choose the destination.

And he knew where he wanted to go.

……..

The Edge.

Ren was tired.

The resonator was out; the Kyber Crystal cluster was back in place, but without one of its resonators, it was essentially useless. There was no immediate crisis because the Visitor’s battery array was fine and there was plenty of water nearby to recharge it.

The immediate crisis was the Kourin’s insistence that it be taken back to his workshop.

The problem was that Irno was making an entirely logical demand, but giving into that demand would mean dividing the group in order to take him home, leaving those who did not have possession of the Kourin vulnerable. Ren was having trouble with it, so he took Irno and the resonator to Dar Noaa and the General, then went outside to clear his head, leaving the fighting to them. Rey started to follow, but he gestured to her to stay behind.

He needed to be alone.

The boulder field was quiet in the afternoon warmth; the only sound came from the gentle breeze caused by rising air racing up the slopes. Ren followed the breeze a short way, then stopped and just stood there listening as it whispered its way past him. He didn’t understand why he was so exhausted; the cluster was almost weightless, it was no effort at all to hold it.

No effort at all, and yet... I’m so tired...

Then he sensed the Sith coming, but he didn’t turn to look.

…….

Hosnian Prime.

He knew why he called her; he knew why he went there; he knew exactly what he wanted to say.

Then she opened the door, and he forgot it all.

“Dar Noaa,” she greeted him with the usual smile, but she seemed a little sad. “Please, come in.” She turned and led him into the social room, “You caught me just in time; I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“Leaving?” he asked.

“Offworld,” she replied, “another boring diplomatic mission.”

“I understand.”

He did understand; her commitment to the Resistance effort was taking her away more often and for longer periods of time. The situation with the First Order was heating up and one day, she would leave and not come back.
Where,” she turned around to look at him, “are you off to? And what can I do for you this time?”

“Oh,” he realized this was the first time he’d ever come to see her when he wasn’t going away. “Nowhere. And nothing, not this time,” he waved his hand, “I’m working on a project that should keep me here for awhile.”

“What’s this?” She was staring at the cast on his wrist. “What happened?”

“It’s...” he lowered his hand to his side, “… nothing.”

She intercepted his hand with hers, touching him for the first time ever.

“It’s *not* nothing,” she lifted his hand to examine it, “What do they have you doing over there at the Institute?”

“It’s...” she’d taken him captive; he had to force himself to think, “… classified; and sometimes...” she looked up at him, their eyes met, “... I am...” he searched for the word, “… clumsy.”

She was looking at him, no, looking *into* him; they stood there, just like that, for much too long. It was Leia who broke the spell.

“You know,” she said, “I was just about to heat something up; are you hungry?”

“Always,” he replied.

The Edge.

Long before he reached the spot where Ren was standing, Dar Noaa sensed how exhausted Leia’s son was, and he thought he knew why that was. He walked up beside Ren and stood there quietly until Ren turned his head and looked at him.

“The Kourin is right,” Dar Noaa said, “he cannot fix the resonator here.”

“I know.”

“You’re exhausted.”

“Yes,” Ren conceded, “but I don’t know why. Lifting the cluster was nothing.”

“Perhaps that isn’t what exhausted you.”

“All I did was lift the cluster.”

“No, you did something else, something much more difficult.”

“What?”

“You held back.”

“No.”

“The Kourin wanted a record,” Dar Noaa explained, “so he logged everything he – and you - did. When you reached out for the cluster, the registers went off the scale, Ren. I saw it.”
“Off the scale?” Anxiety washed over Ren’s face as he asked.

“Yes.” Dar Noaa confirmed Ren’s fears calmly, “you’re not exhausted from lifting the cluster; you’re exhausted from holding the power at that low a level. If you hadn’t done that, you would have launched the cluster into space.”

Ren closed his eyes.

“Power,” he said it sadly, like he was confessing a terrible sin, “I felt it; absolute power; right in my hands.” He opened his eyes again, looking frightened, like a lost child. “My thoughts became reality. *Instantly*. No thought was safe. It was… horrific.” He looked at Dar Noaa. “What if it’s still *here*, inside me? What if I can’t control it?”

It was an anguished question, and Dar Noaa had no answer for it.

But that was how things started; with a question. It would take time, but an answer would come.

“You don’t have to face this alone,” he said, “Let us help you.”

………

Hosnian Prime.

It was very late when he said goodnight.

They’d spent hours sitting at the table, picking at the food, sipping her favorite fermented drink and talking, carefully avoiding forbidden topics: her mission; his project; her family; his wrist…

Now he was in the open doorway, forcing himself to leave.

“How night, senator.”

“I think it’s time you started calling me Leia.”

“Only if you call me Noah.”

“It’s a deal.”

She offered him her hand; he took it.

And he held onto it, longer than he should, longer than he had a right to, but she didn’t pull it away.

“When I get back…” she spoke quietly, as if sharing a secret, “… I’ll call you.”

“Yes.”

“Then,” she reclaimed her hand, “goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

She closed the door.

For a moment, he fought the urge to push the door out of his way and go to her, but then reason overcame passion. He could sense the conflict in her; what she desired was not what she *wanted* - at least, not tonight.

He would be patient. He would wait.
With that decided, he headed back to the Institute and the prototype.

……………

The Edge.

It was the moment that would change everything, but no one knew that yet.

Ren nodded his head.

“Yes.”

It was a relief to surrender, to accept an offer of help.

Sounds of commotion coming from the Visitor interrupted them; they both turned and saw the Kourin on its way toward them, followed by Rey and Leia.

“Here he comes,” Dar Noaa gowled. “He has us, and he knows it.”

“Yes.”

Dar Noaa looked past the approaching group, at the Visitor.

“It’s an extraordinary machine, you know,” he said admiringly, “it’s worth whatever we have to do to to keep it.”

Ren looked at him, and almost smiled.

“You certainly did whatever had to be done to steal it.”

“Yes, that,” Dar Noaa recalled it all too well. “You know, for awhile, I was sure you had me.”

“I *did* have you. We had a system malfunction.”

“Did you?”

“Overshot the landing,” Ren supplied the details, “then went into full security lockdown; took us five hours just to get the doors open, and by then you were long gone.”

“Yes, I was,” Dar Noaa saw that the group was almost close enough to overhear them. “The general knows nothing of that,” he told Ren quickly as he started down to meet them, “I saw no need to tell her then and I see no need to tell her now.”

“Agreed.”

Ren started down with him, and as they got closer, Dar Noaa sensed something that required *immediate* attention. He’d forgotten all about it.

“Another thing,” he told Ren, “Force discretion.”

Ren stopped in his tracks, realizing. Dar Noaa looked at him sternly.

“*Use* it.”

……………
To be continued...
Chapter Notes

Patience.

Laying foundations isn't flashy work, but without a foundation, there's no way to build a bridge across the distance between them.

A roller coaster is always slowest as it approaches the top...

Highland stone meadows, The Edge

The evening meal aboard the Visitor was usually a quiet event.

Actually, it wasn’t an event at all; everyone collected their ration and then did as they pleased. Ren always went to his quarters to eat as was habit for the Knights of Ren. Rey went with him to make sure he ate everything. Leia and Dar Noaa were always working on something, often in different parts of the ship, so they shared the task of preparation; whoever thought of it first did the work and then joined the other to eat.

Those times were over; their guest made sure of that.

Irno was a creature bred for one purpose: the work. Once he’d removed the damaged resonator and had time to examine it under magnification, he quickly saw the problem; a tiny particle-sized hole drilled through the resonator had partially severed one of the microcircuits. The resulting instability in the Kyber crystal cluster made the prototype something akin to a land mine; any one of a dozen technical missteps could have set it off, destroying the prototype and everything inside it.

He explained the problem and each of the possible ways that disaster could have happened to Dar Noaa and Leia in great detail, so they could appreciate just how serious the problem was and how lucky they’d been to avoid really, truly, terrible deaths.

They listened absolute silence, and when Irno was finished, Dar Noaa said that he should go explain it all to Ren.

In fact, he should go do it right now.

Irno delivered himself to Ren’s quarters; he opened the entry and walked in without announcing himself, catching the couple in each other’s arms. They separated quickly, and looked at him with embarrassed expressions on their faces, but the Kourin was oblivious to it.

“The Sith sent me,” Irno told them. “He says I should tell you everything I just told him.”

“Can’t this wait,” Ren asked, “until morning?”
“No. He said I should do it *right now*."

Ren flushed with anger; he’d been using Force discretion, but Dar Noaa was still able to sense him and Rey – and this was the Sith’s way of telling him so. The familiar rush of darkness rising surged through him like a powerful drug, but then it occurred to him that perhaps the Sith was not just making a point about Force discretion; perhaps this was an exercise in self-control.

He thought about the Kylo of Ren and his countless fits of rage and destruction, which always had the same outcome; they never changed anything and afterwards, he’d be ashamed of his weakness. Snoke would exploit every outburst, lecturing Ren from the throne, pouring humiliation on his shame like salt onto an open wound, keeping him in a constant state of bottled rage, tearing him apart from the inside.

Snoke never said anything about the fits of rage themselves, though; not one word. It was not the rage that offended Supreme Leader, it was Ren’s shame afterward, and Snoke made sure that no one would dare to suggest anything else by forbidding any interference when the Kylo of Ren decided to take his rage out on whatever was available. No one ever said ‘stop’; no one ever asked ‘why’; they just got out of harm’s way.

Looking back on it now, Ren realized that while a considerable amount of First Order property suffered, few living beings had been on the receiving end of those mindless outbursts of destruction. They might have gotten knocked around a bit, but nothing worse than that. Ren’s dirty little secret, one that he kept even from himself, was that even in the darkest moments of those fits of rage, he somehow still possessed enough compassion to spare them from the worst of it. It was nothing more than a tiny spark of self-control, but it was real.

It was real then, it’s real *now*. I am in control...

He felt Rey’s hand slip into his and squeeze gently; her touch promised that patience now would be rewarded later. Taking a deep breath, he willed himself calm; the rage dimmed, then died out.

The look on her face was instant reward; he’d pleased her.

“Well, then,” Ren motioned the Kourin to come closer, “find someplace to sit and let’s get on with it...”

...........

Hyperspace.

The Millennium Falcon was on its way back to the Edge; their mission had been cut short by the tragedy at Josuro and the chain of events that followed; they were returning much too soon and with far too little, but Luke’s orders included no room for debate. The confusion of the first few hours slowly gave way to an uneasy calm as everyone retreated to routine and the illusion of normalcy.

On the Falcon, time in hyperspace was measured by watch assignments; there was always someone in the cockpit keeping an eye on things while the rest of the crew busied themselves with the endless repetitive tasks required to maintain the ship. And someone was always asleep, or at least, pretending to be asleep; that didn’t come easily because periods of quiet gave rise to haunting memories and troubling speculation, neither of which was something they wanted to share.
It was hardest on Finn.

Everyone else on board was a seasoned veteran who’d seen it all before, but they showed no desire to discuss it; not even the games at the Dejarik table could loosen their tongues. They talked and joked about everything else, leaving Finn on his own to come to terms with himself about it.

He was a killer now. A real killer.

Uttey Station wasn’t like the times before; those times before, he was simply a soldier doing what he’d been trained to do, fighting other soldiers doing what they’d been trained to do. The rules of engagement, the whats and whys were obvious, and every choice he made was based on the conviction that his cause was just.

Not so at Uttey Station.

Before then, Finn believed the Jedi Master was the Light Side, a shining example of everything good and virtuous in the galaxy; now he wasn’t so sure. He’d followed Master Luke on that raid without hesitation; what he’d witnessed at Josuro had filled him with rage and although he told himself it was justice, deep down, he knew it was also vengeance.

Dark, savage, merciless vengeance. Something Ren would do.

*Ren.*

*It always comes back to Ren...*

Finn was just about to go over it all in his mind one more time when something unexpected caught his attention. It came stealthily, silently, drifting out of the kitchen, across the communal room and into his nose to rescue him from his thoughts.

*Something smells good.*

Out in the cockpit, Luke Skywalker was spending his time on watch in deep, almost desperate, meditation, trying to find peace again. But it did not come; his thoughts kept invading the silence.

*Skywalkers. How many have already died because of me?*

Likit’s preposterous offer echoed in his head; the killing would continue until he gave them what they wanted. But if Luke gave in to Likit's demand, he would never take another free breath; this demand would lead to another and another after that...

*And how many more will have to die?*

The choice was the lives of many innocent strangers against the lives of those he loved; there was no lesser of two evils, *both* were unthinkable.

He would not choose between them, so another choice had to be made.

His choice.

It came to him quickly; crystal clear and icy cold. He was already planning the first steps when the same stealthy diversion that had taken Finn reached his nose.

*Something smells good.*
Luke went to investigate, following the delicious scent to the communal room, which was empty, but he could hear the sounds of happy voices coming from the private quarters. He hurried through the passage and entered the galley to see his crew mates clustered together at the kitchen counter; all of them. Chewbacca was leaning over their heads surveying whatever lay below with great interest, but his peripheral vision was very sharp and he jerked his head around to look when Luke arrived and mewed out a greeting that caused the others to stop what they were doing and turn to look, too. As they did, they revealed the counter and several puffy mounds of freshly baked loaves in various stages of slice and on the other side, the woman was standing with a knife in play.

Luke walked to the group, who watched him approach, chewing contentedly like idle pasture animals. Ignoring them, and the loaves, too, Luke addressed his question directly to her.

“What’s all this?”

“I thought,” she answered with an uncertain smile, “you would like something… different… to eat,” she looked for a sign of approval, but saw none, “so I made you some Kun loaves. They’re a kind of local specialty…”

Her words made Luke take his eyes off her and direct them to the loaves; he remembered Kun very well. A regional grain, dried and then ground fine, it was used to make dozens of baked delights that made for many pleasant meals when served with something well-seasoned and warm.

The spell only lasted for a second, though, then Luke looked up at her again.

“You should be resting.”

His remark drew an instant reaction from the others; they’d been seduced by aroma and flavor and in their excitement, forgotten why she was with them. The tone in Luke’s voice conveyed disapproval, so they all instantly remembered that they had to be someplace else.

Right now.

They said their 'thank you's, talking over each other as they jostled to grab one more slice of Kun to take with them, then trotted off to wherever.

Suddenly Luke found himself standing alone at the counter, looking at her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, facing him with quiet resolve, “but I couldn’t just lie around feeling sorry for myself any longer, so I got up. And when I saw the container,” she put a hand on a dented metal can that was sitting beside the loaves, then gestured to the pile of scavenged supplies crowding the far end of the space, “I decided to make myself useful; it’s the least I could do, considering.” Then she ran her fingers over the can, almost caressing it. “Besides… it’s *mine*.”

*It's hers.*

Luke felt terrible; in the rush to scavenge anything they could use from the village, no one considered that something they were taking might be hers. Finding her can in the pile must have brought back many painful memories.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized, “we took only what we needed.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” she replied, “I’m *glad* it’s here; that we have it. All of it. The villagers would have been honored to share; they had such great regard for you.” She paused,
looking at him, studying him for a moment. “Luke Skywalker, the Jedi Master, the Legend…”

Luke flinched at the words; they were true, but not accurate. Not accurate at all. She saw his reaction.

“I have to say,” she blushed a little as she admitted it, “you’re not how the stories painted you.”

For some reason, her words made Luke uncomfortable; he looked away from her face, back down at the loaves. Cooling fast, but still aromatic, they beckoned shamelessly to be seized and eaten. It had been a long time since he stopped caring how food tasted…

“Don’t you like Kun?” she asked.

“What?”

“Kun,” she picked up a thin slice, offering. “At least, try it.”

Telling himself that this was no time to show indifference, that she needed all the support and encouragement she could get, Luke pulled the slice from her hand. He saw her eyes widen with expectation as he slid the slice into his mouth.

_Sweet, salty, a gentle bite of fermentation, all coming together…_

“Mmmm,” he couldn’t help himself, mumbling it out as he chewed, “it’s... *good*!”

“I know,” she replied.

There was something regal in her response, as if he was merely confirming what everyone knew; it was all *hers* - her can, her skill, her loaves.

*Her* life.

Luke saw the strength in her; she was making a statement through the work, showing him that although she’d been brutalized, she had not been conquered. The hours of hopelessness and despair were behind her now; she was starting to care about life again. Everything about her, from the way she’d tied back the unruly curls of her blond hair to how she’d tucked and folded Han Solo’s vintage shirt until it draped over her body just right, told him that.

“Do you want more?” she asked.

It was a simple question, with a simple answer; he didn’t know why he hesitated.

“The others…”

“Have all had their share,” she stabbed the knife into a loaf and cut off a warm, thick slice. “It’s *your* turn now.” She picked up the slice. “Take it.”

And Luke did, this time without hesitation.

…………….

Highland stone meadows, the Edge.
It was very late.

Sometime during Irno’s lecture on how many ways a bad resonator could bring on disaster and death, Rey stretched out on the sleep platform and quietly dozed off, leaving Ren to endure it alone. The Kourin had no sense of what was truly important when it came to his creations; he had to describe everything, so his visit became another exercise in patience. Irno did reveal one interesting piece of information, though; the Kourin who couldn’t remember *anything* remembered *everything* about the devices he designed and built.

That made it easy to divert him from his original subject to more useful subjects, and as the hours slipped by, Ren learned a great deal about Kourin technology and about one Kourin in particular. Eventually, Ren had to excuse himself to use the sanitary station and when he returned, he found Irno on the sleep platform with Rey, snuggled beside her like a spoiled pet.

And already sound asleep.

Seeing that any plans he might have had for the rest of tonight had been canceled, Ren knew he should just lie down on the floor and go to sleep, but the Kourin had filled his head with many ideas, and he was more restless than tired.

So he went for a walk. Outside. In the dark.

He’d only wandered a short way from the ship when he made a wonderful discovery there.

Silence.

Without the sun, the air had gone still, there was not even a whisper left of the daytime breeze. It was so late that all the evening creatures had returned to the safety of their hiding places, so nothing rustled in darkness, either.

Ren stopped and listened.

He heard only muffled sounds coming from his own body; his heartbeat, his breath. The only voice in his head was his own.

He quieted his mind and let the silence flow through him…

It came naturally, without being summoned; the great expanse of the galaxy formed in his mind as if he and it were one. His power stretched from one end to the other; nothing was beyond his reach, no place was too far, no being was too hidden.

Ren saw without looking.

There were the Unknown Regions, where the First Order was in crisis. Like Ren, the Order had followed Snoke blindly and now, like Ren, they were paying for it. He could feel the chaos; the war they’d planned out so confidently had only just started, but they were already falling apart. The attack on Hosnian Prime was never part of the grand vision; both the Order and the Republic were taken by surprise and both discovered that they weren’t as prepared for war as they believed. Now the Republic was racing to build a fleet for a counterattack while the Order was coming to terms with the fact that Snoke had diverted all their energy to his own interests and then conveniently vanished at the first sign of trouble. The Order had become a battleground, insiders were fighting each other for everything. Their desperation was like the cry of a wounded animal; they had no reserves left; no resources; no leadership...

*Armitage.*
With their Supreme Leader's ordained General gone, the Order had degenerated into a savage political arena where every ambitious officer dreamed of filling the power void. That would be no small achievement because Armitage Hux had been bred from birth for the job, and was actually the best, if not only, man who could fill it. That was impossible now.

*Armitage. Poor bastard.*

The thought drew Ren’s attention to Jakku, the place where they’d left Hux behind.

Jakku was also in chaos, but for a different reason; beings from across the galaxy were swarming over the planet like ravenous insects. They were all after the same thing, too; the secret of the Goazon basin. They were digging and tunneling, fighting for every millimeter gained; all for nothing. They would find a few small sources, remnants really, but not much more than that, because the secret of the Goazon basin wasn’t there anymore; he was here.

*Armitage.*

Even on crowded and crazy Jakku, he was easy to find… alive and angry.

*There you are; not so arrogant now...*

As much as he enjoyed sensing Hux’s misery, Ren liked sensing how Hux was *changing* even more; given the opportunity to think for himself for the first time, Armitage was actually doing it.

*He’s not just surviving; he’s learning. Soon, he’ll be ready to come home.*

*Home.*

For some reason, that word made Ren look for the Millennium Falcon. It should be somewhere in the Rim and easiest of all to find because Finn was there, and just like with Rey, Ren always felt him. Distance didn’t matter for the three of them; the events in the Goazon basin left them permanently connected. That fact was one more reason why Finn hated him so much; there was no place in the entire galaxy where they could be free of each other.

*A Force bond is forever. There was no time to warn him about that.*

Finn’s hatred glowed like a beacon across the vastness of space. Ren admired the purity of it; Finn honed his hate to a fine edge, keeping it razor sharp and ready. One day, Ren would have to deal with it, but that time was still far off in the future, and until then, he would respect Finn for it. In another reality, Finn could have become a Knight of Ren.

*Finn. He’s coming... *home*?*

The Millennium Falcon was on its way back, but it was much too soon.

Something was wrong.

---------

To be continued...
Okay, it's like this: I forgot to mention I was working at the Polls last week and would be late. :-(

So, I was sitting here working on this chapter and realized it was getting long, so I decided to make it into two. And I needed some Reylo. Badly. Have you seen the Vanity Fair images? The one of Mark and Carrie haunts me.

Highland stone meadows, the Edge

Night was over, but it was not yet day; morning twilight had taken the stars, but overhead deep gray lingered, as if the sky wasn’t ready to face another dawn. The meadow boulders were black silhouettes rising up from a sea of morning mist like ancient islands; their long and tortured history was for the moment lost in shadowed tranquility, but all too soon, that illusion would vanish with the mist. The rising sun would start the up wind, then day creatures who’d made it through another night would wake and the meadow would come to life.

*I’m losing the silence.*

Ren didn’t know how long he’d been sitting out there alone on the rock; he’d barely noticed as the stars tracked past overhead because his mind had been someplace else the entire time.

*Something’s wrong...* 

So far, all he’d been able to sense was Finn; there was confusion and concern, but no sense of immediate danger. And for once, Finn’s primary emotion was not his hatred for Ren, but that changed when the Traitor finally fell asleep. In dreams, Finn fought and then re-fought his confrontation with Ren in the snow; Ren saw himself being killed over and over again in hundreds of gruesome ways, none of which would have actually succeeded, but all of which gave sleeping Finn a jolt of satisfaction. It was a bad sign, not because it was directed at Ren, but because it revealed a glaring vulnerability: Finn’s wounded ego was reinforcing reckless behavior. A lightsaber in the hands of someone who lacked discipline was dangerous; a lightsaber in the hands of someone who didn’t care about that was *suicidal*.

*Must do something about Finn...* 

Ren’s head ached; tracking someone who was traveling in hyperspace was something new for him, and he had to stay focused on Finn or risk losing him entirely. He was unable to sense Luke Skywalker at all because his uncle mastered the ability to conceal himself long ago and used it all the time, so until Luke chose to reveal himself or send a message, Ren would have to wait. He hesitated to act first and send a message himself because the Jedi Master had made a point of avoiding him before, and he had no desire to stir things up between them now.

Surrendering to the inevitable, the cloudless sky brightened; purple and blue flowed down to meet the orange and pink glow on the horizon; a single bright spike caused by light hitting tiny ice particles suspended high in the air proclaimed the sun’s arrival was imminent.
Rey.

He sensed her before she appeared at the ship’s entry and turned his head to watch as she emerged. She was beautiful, every bit as breathtaking as the rising sun.

_A Force of Nature…_

This morning, his Force of Nature awoke to find him not there beside her, and Ren could tell that she was not happy about it. He allowed himself the pleasure of watching her walk to where he was before sliding off the rock to greet her.

“Are you up early,” she asked, “or were you up late?”

“Late.”

“How late?”

“All night,” he confessed. She’d see it in his face anyway; he probably looked it. “I couldn’t sleep. Where’s our guest?”

“Still asleep,” she reached for his hand, then hooked his fingers inside her hers to warm them. “You’re cold; come inside and I’ll make us something to eat before we get started.”

“We can’t go today.”

“What? Irno’s not going to like that. Why not?”

“The Millennium Falcon’s on its way back.”

“You felt them?”

“Yes.”

“So soon?” She grasped his fingers tighter, “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, but we should be here when they arrive.”

“You think they’ll be here today.”

“Yes,” he looked up, far away, beyond her reach, “They should be dropping out of hyperspace any time now; you’ll know when they do.”

“Come on,” she tugged on his hand, “We’ll get you fed, then maybe, some time to sleep…”

He tugged back, pulling her against him, then put his other arm around her back to keep her there. It wasn’t exactly a hug, more of a gentle embrace, time for their bodies to share secrets. She stood on her toes and brushed his lips with hers, teasing, reminding him of an outstanding promise she wanted to keep.

“What if we give Irno back to the Sith for the morning?” he suggested quietly, “Dar Noaa said I’m supposed to work on Force discretion; you can help me with that.”

“I think,” she cooed back, “I could do that… if you’re sure it will help.”

“I’m sure,” he replied, “because it has…”

He laughed and let her lead him back to the ship and inside.

………..

Hyperspace.

It was very quiet aboard the Millennium Falcon; Poe was napping in the cockpit; Dar Na and Finn were fully engaged in strategy at the Dejarik table under Chewbacca’s watchful eyes; the droids were off by themselves, shut down, saving power.

Luke had taken refuge far in the back of the ship, fiddling with a few small items that needed attention; they were simple maintenance chores that made him recall life on Tatooine, long ago, before his life became relentlessly complicated. Eventually he grew bored, and his mind shifted forward in time, to the situation at hand and what he would have to do about it.

He was wiping his hands when he heard sounds coming from the galley; objects in motion.

It was *her*.

When he requested over the last of the Kun that she go back to bed and rest, she complied, but that was hours ago. Now she was up and doing something in the kitchen again, but Luke couldn’t tell from the sounds what she was up to this time.

So, he went to check on her.

He found Lacy standing at the far wall, sorting through the scavenged items. She seemed to sense his arrival; she turned and smiled at him.

“What are you looking for?” He walked to where she was and stood beside her.

“I’ve been separating this… pile,” she replied, gesturing as she explained, “into what will keep for a long time, what will keep for awhile, and what won’t keep for long at all.”


“It’s not ‘thoughtful’, she corrected him, “it’s *practical*; if we don’t eat this pile soon, it will go to waste.” She picked out a box and practically shoved it into Luke’s chest. “Take this to the counter for me, I want to get something started for… what should our next meal be, anyway?” She frowned as she wrestled with the thought, then selected another box and started to walk. “What time is it in hyperspace?”

“I don’t know,” Luke admitted as he followed her; he hadn’t thought about that in years; living alone, he just ate what was easy when he felt like it. It shouldn’t matter to him, not at all, but somehow the taste of those Kun loaves was still fresh in his mind and now he wanted something.

He just didn’t know what.

“I’ve got some talah brewing,” Lacy plopped her box onto the counter, then took the one Luke was carrying out of his hands and plopped that beside the other. “Want some?”

Luke remembered it; talah was strong tea made with sweet, condensed milk and a touch of spice that was said to be the cure for anything. For an instant, he was lost in memories, but the look on her face
brought him back. She was waiting for answer.

“‘Yes, I do.’”

A few minutes later, they were sitting side by side on the bench that occupied most of the short corridor wall, taking careful sips because the brew was still very hot. In the time between, Lacy saw a chance to ask a few questions.

“The villagers said,” she began the interrogation slowly, “you were strong with the Force. I didn’t understand what that meant then.”

She paused, remembering her first glimpse of him. He was a shadow moving in the firelight and she thought he was Death coming for her, but that wasn’t who he was at all. Then he spoke to her, and that voice; for a moment she thought he was *him*, but that was impossible; *he* was a fantasy, someone she dreamed about when things were hard. She’d close her eyes and shut the world out, and he would come…

“How long have you lived in the village?” he asked, redirecting her attention away from himself.

“Not long,” she answered, “about five years now. I’m from Breedin. Lutor was from Josuro; he never cared much for country life, so he moved to Breedin as soon as he was old enough to leave home. He only went back because he had to.”

“To care for his father?”

“Hardly,” she sniffed as she said it, a trace of contempt slipped out. “Lutor wasn’t one for family; his father was sick, but our business was sicker. Import-export; we were hit hard when the Guilds came; he was running from his creditors.”

“And your family… ?”

“Not much to tell there,” she sighed, “they were long gone by the time the business failed. My father was Import-export, too. Family business; we all worked. When my father over-extended and couldn’t make good on his debts, Lutor showed up and bought them all, saving us from slavery.” She stared into her cup, looking back through time. “All he wanted in return was a wife.”

Luke was listening, but didn’t interrupt. She had more to say; he could feel it.

“It was a good contract,” Lacy’s tone hardened, “Lutor forgave the debt, then he paid for my family’s transport offworld. We never heard from them again.” She paused and took a long sip of her drink, then swallowed hard. “My job was to run the household and service his needs, but mostly he wanted me to work in the business. And we were doing well until the Guilds arrived; they tried to buy us out, but Lutor refused, so they undercut us everywhere we did business until they’d bled us dry.”

Luke sighed softly; it was a familiar story: the Guilds came and took over.

Then they took *everything*.

“When we got the message about his father,” Lacy continued, “we were bankrupt, so we went to live in the village. That was big change for me; life became very simple.” She shook her drink gently, swirling what was left, watching the tiny whirlpool inside the cup. “And the villagers were kind to us... more than we deserved.”

“Yes,” Luke agreed, “they were always kind; they were once very kind to me, too.”
“And *that*,” Lacy sounded relieved to be reaching an end point, “is my story. All of it. It’s your turn now; who are you, Luke Skywalker?”

That was a good question; Luke wasn’t sure he had a good answer. He’d always made a point of not saying much about himself to anyone except for Leia when she insisted, and as the years went by, fewer and fewer beings even asked, so he was totally unprepared now. He’d usually deflect the question by saying there wasn’t much to tell, but that was a lie; the truth was there was too much to tell.

His life had been an epic of loss and betrayal, violence and disillusion; nobody needed to hear about that. Especially her.

But she was sitting there beside him, looking at him with anticipation on her beautiful, bruised face, expecting his story in return for hers. What harm would it do if he told her something about himself?  

*How to start?* He thought. *Where to start...?*

“Tatooine.” he started, “I’m from Tatooine...”

She smiled at him approvingly, then settled back against the wall to listen.

..........  

Highland stone meadows, The Edge  

Dar Noaa was alone in the cockpit working on a calculation, and he was just about to submit it to the vessel when Irno found him. Leia had spent the night tossing and turning in her sleep, and when he woke to find her finally resting peacefully, he took great care not to disturb her. But his plan to let Leia sleep in evaporated like the morning mist outside the instant Ren informed the Kourin that they would not be taking him home today.

“It’s not fair!” Irno’s voice arrived before he did, but the words were directed backwards, toward someone else behind him. “I did *everything* you wanted; you said you’d take me home!”

“I will,” Ren’s voice replied, “but not today.”

Dar Noaa turned to see the Kourin come marching in, followed by Ren, and then Rey.

“You!” Irno bellowed in a voice that was much larger than he was, “Sith! Tell this... *Ren*... to take me home!”

Dar Noaa looked to Ren for clarification.

“The Millennium Falcon,” Ren explained, “is on its way back. It will be here today.”

Dar Noaa didn’t have to ask; if Ren said it was so, it was. It also explained why Leia had been so restless; she must have felt it, too.

“Millennium falcon?” Irno demanded. “What’s that?”

“Another vessel,” Dar Noaa answered in a quiet voice, drawing the Kourin’s attention in hopes of quieting him, “We told you we did not come alone, remember? Their return is unexpectedly early, so we are concerned that there has been some trouble.” He looked at Ren again, cueing him. “They will be here soon...”
“Later today,” Ren said. “Afternoon, maybe evening.”

“And we promise,” Dar Noaa resumed his little speech, “once they’re here and we know why, we will get you home. This is just a brief delay; we have to take you home so you can repair our resonator.”

“*My* resonator.”

“The *vessel’s* resonator.”

Irno sniffed in annoyance; Dar Noaa was using the ship against him. And it was *working*, too; the idea of the prototype just sitting here, alone and helpless, was extremely upsetting. It wasn’t meant to sit; it was meant to fly...

“Agreed,” he mumbled loudly, reluctantly averting his gaze in a show of submission. “But you don’t get to do it again, and...” he spotted the un-submitted problem on the display, and he pushed his way past Dar Noaa to get to the waveform for a better look. “What’s this?”

“Something I’ve been working on,” Dar Noaa gave Ren a quick side glance; a diversion had been found. Then he stepped beside the Kourin and joined him in studying the display. “I’m looking for a formula that can extrapolate power sensor readings accurately.”

“Linear or exponential?”

“I don’t know.”

“How can you not know what you’re looking for?”

“It’s... “ Dar Noaa looked down at the Kourin, “… complicated...” He looked back at Ren and Rey and gave them a ‘get going’ tilt of his head. “… it’s about your resonators.”

“Oh...” Irno’s demeanor changed instantly. “in that case, you want exponential; let me look at these numbers...”

Seeing the moment of opportunity, Rey grabbed Ren’s hand and pulled hard.

“Come on,” she whispered.

They backed out of the cockpit quietly, then scurried through the corridor and back to their quarters like mice, pausing only long enough to make sure the entry was firmly locked before pulling their clothing off and themselves together. But then Ren surprised her by turning just enough to ease her down onto the edge of the sleep platform. Then, as she watched, he knelt in front of her and placed his hands on her knees.

“I’m gong to teach you,” he leaned forward as he said it, “how to use Force discretion. Are you ready to try something... new?”

Rey felt a flutter of excitement down below; until now, Ren had always waited for her to make the first move, hesitating, following her lead, as if he was afraid she might break if he wasn’t careful. She saw a trace of uncertainty in his eyes now.

“Yes.”

She made it sound like an invitation; the insecurity in his eyes became desire.
“Close your eyes.”

She did as he asked.

“Now, reach out,” his voice became sensuous. “Imagine you and I are in a cocoon; see how it’s wrapped all around us; feel its protection...”

She felt him entering her mind; he was spinning a web around the two of them. It was as delicate as gossamer, but powerful; the world beyond faded and disappeared.

“Can you feel it?” He asked.

“Yes.”

“Now, take it from me. Make it yours.”

She felt it flow from his mind to hers; strangely familiar. She was about to ask Ren about it when she felt the hands on her knees gently pushing them apart and opened her eyes to look.

“Close your eyes;” he commanded gently. “Keep them closed.”

She obeyed.

“Can you feel it?” He asked. “Are we... alone?”

“Yes.”

She felt his hands leave her knees, then travel up her inner thighs, spreading them.

“This is *our* space,” his voice was close now, drifting up. She resisted the urge to open her eyes and look down. “Only ours; in here, we can do... anything... we... want...”

His mouth reached its destination; a gentle lick took her breath away. In this new territory, it was an instant reward that made them both want more. He tasted and tested and she responded, showing her pleasure with little sounds and movements that asked, then demanded, until she shuddered and let out a breathless, silent scream of pure delight. When she opened her eyes and looked down, he was gazing up at her adoringly, as if she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

Taking hold of her hands, he shifted his weight backwards and pulled her forward, off the sleep platform and onto the floor. She started to climb onto him, but he turned her, then laid her on her back and simply took her over.

And she let him. He was in control.

................

To be continued...
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Sometimes, I have to edit viciously, because if I didn't, each chapter would be fifty pages long. This one might need tweaking.

Highland stone meadow, The Edge

Ren was asleep.

Rey looked at the remaining food in the bowl and sighed; he had not eaten nearly enough. A sleepless night followed by morning lovemaking left him exhausted, but in a good way; she could tell that. Each time they were together was better than the time before; this time especially, since the awkward, self-conscious fumbling of their first few times hadn’t come along for the ride. She was less controlling and he was less afraid; give and take flowed easily between them today. It was deliciously satisfying for them both.

And now, he’d probably sleep for hours, perhaps all day.

He was stretched out on his back, on the floor as usual, but naked, so she pulled a blanket down and covered him with it, then eased a pillow under his head. Eventually, he would rouse just enough to pull that pillow out and toss it across the room, also as usual, but Rey kept trying because in some small way, she believed the comfort of the pillow could help Ren find a way back from the severity of his life as a Knight of Ren. She knew he would never be completely free of the Knights’ influence, but she was determined to put them in their place and keep them there.

Rey ate, then scraped the bowl clean, making sure that nothing was wasted, and saved her assigned ration for later, when he was awake again. After that, she cleaned herself up, dressed and quietly crept out of the room.

She’d only ventured a few steps in the corridor when the door to the Sith’s quarters opened and General Organa stepped out. Noticing Rey there immediately, the general offered her a still-sleepy-looking smile.

“You’re still here?” she asked, “I seem to have slept late this morning... did Ren go without you?”

“No,” Rey walked to where the general was, then stopped, “he’s here; he’s sleeping late, too. Something came up...”

“Is he all right?”

“Yes,” Rey assured her quickly. “He didn’t get any sleep last night, but he’s all right. General...”

“What?”

“Ren says the Millennium Falcon is coming back today.”

“Yes,” Leia answered, frowning slightly. “I know.”
“You know?”

“Just a feeling,” Leia explained simply. “Something last night.”

“Ren said,” Rey filled her in on the details, “that we should be here when they arrive. Irno wasn’t very happy about it, but Dar Noaa found something to keep him occupied for the time being. I was just on my way to check on them.”

“Me, too.”

When they entered the cockpit, their eyes were instantly assaulted by movement and light; silent pandemonium filled the entire space. The waveform was active all the way to the ceiling; multiple red displays were ablaze there, busy performing calculations at dizzying speed. White holographic displays were suspended in the air above, beside, even behind one another, drawing and re-drawing images as each new result was applied. It was mind-numbingly difficult to look at.

And there, between the chaos on the waveform and the circus in the air, slumped in the pilot and copilot seats, Dar Noaa and the Kourin were both…

“Asleep.” Leia said in disbelief.

“I am *not*.” Dar Noaa answered Leia’s question without opening his eyes. “I’m protecting myself. If you look too long, it will make you quite ill, so lower your eyes.”

“What is all this?”

“I don’t know,” Dar Noaa replied. “I asked a question and our guest did the rest.” He pointed at his companion, whose only reaction was a snore. “Impressive, isn’t it?”

Shielding her eyes, Leia walked up to the seats with Rey following, copying her. When she was close enough, she touched Dar Noaa’s arm and he opened his eyes to look at her.

“The Falcon’s coming back today,” Leia said.

“I know; Ren told me.”

“Something’s wrong…”

“We don’t know that yet.”

“I do. I can feel it.”

Dar Noaa reached for her hand; it was a small gesture, but his support was all he had to offer until the Falcon arrived and they learned why Luke had come back so soon. It made him angry, too, because he’d brought her here, to the literal Edge of the galaxy, to take her out of harm’s way, to give her the happiness she deserved after a lifetime of sacrifice for and service to others. But the ungrateful galaxy just wouldn’t let go.

“I’m glad you’re awake,” he told her, “You’re just in time to rescue me from…” he looked up and around, “… this. Take me away… take me… anywhere.”

“How about,” Leia made a face, as if she really had to think about it, “something to eat? Are you hungry?”
Dar Noaa laughed.

“Always.”

“Good,” she gave him a playful smile, “I’ll cook; which gruel do you want, the white or the tan?”

“Hmmm,” he pushed himself out of the seat, then nudged her to get them started on their way out, “I don’t know; surprise me.”

“Rey?” Leia asked as he guided her past, “You’re welcome to join us.”

Rey smiled and declined the invitation with a wave of her hand, then watched the couple disappear into the corridor. She stepped forward, leaned over and looked down at Irno, but the sleeping Kourin seemed so content and comfortable amidst the chaos that she decided not to disturb him. She left him as he was, returning to her quarters, to a dozen little chores that needed doing while she kept watch over Ren.

As soon as he was sure that they were not coming back, Irno opened his eyes and got to work.

He’d been careful to guide the Sith through all the calculation requests, making sure that each new request was entered correctly. He could have done it all much faster himself, but allowing the Sith to do the actual entries kept him from getting too curious too fast; it also kept the calculations within the parameters that the prototype would allow a non-Kourin, and that kept it from drawing unwanted attention.

There was one more calculation to be made; he’d only just realized it when the females arrived and conveniently took Dar Noaa away. It was possible that the Sith had unknowingly stumbled onto something of *incredible* importance, but until the prototype ran the numbers and produced a result, Irno would not know for sure.

After that, he would know what – if anything – to tell the Sith.

Irno touched the waveform and a tiny new interface appeared; he was so nervous as he made the entry that his grip hand was uselessly clumsy and he had to do it all with his tech hand. Slowly, carefully, the line of white symbols stretched to completion. There was only one more step to take.

He tapped ‘submit’.

The tiny interface shrank to a tiny square; this calculation would run in secret.

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Afternoon came to the highland stone meadows; warm air from the valley below pushed up and over the cool air of the meadow, stirring the air. If the weather held up, the warm, gentle breeze would linger awhile past sunset, then die out until the next day’s heat; then the cycle would begin again. The breeze kept the rocks and boulders in the meadow from getting too hot, so they would become little islands where one could sit comfortably and enjoy just being outside the ship.

Leia was sitting on one of the rocks, waiting. Again.

She knew Luke was coming back; she could feel it, but she couldn’t feel him; not yet anyway. She’d
spent most of her life resisting the Force, so now she had only herself to blame for not being able to
use it to track him. Dar Noaa could do it, but he was back in the Sith quarters, completely absorbed
in the tidal wave of data flooding the workstation there and he’d kept putting her off when she asked
if he felt anything yet. Repeatedly. The fourth, maybe fifth, time she asked, he got up from the
workstation, went to her, and put his hand to her cheek.

“I love you,” he said, “but I need you to be someplace else right now.” He watched her face intently,
hoping he was choosing the right words. “Go outside; find a nice rock; I promise to come out and
join you in a little while.”

So now, she was sitting on the rock. Waiting for Dar Noaa. Waiting for Luke.

She didn’t know how long she’d been there; she’d been staring off toward the mountains, but not
really seeing them because all her thoughts were someplace else. Luke had run into trouble; she
knew it; the feeling tugged on her heart like an like the cry of a fallen child...

“Leia? Are you all right?”

Dar Noaa’s voice took her by surprise; she hadn’t heard him coming. She turned her head and saw
him standing there, looking concerned.

“Were you stalking me?” She asked, making it sound like praise, teasing to reassure him.

“I’m *Sith*,” he bragged, mocking himself as he said it, “it’s what we do.”

“Did you get your answer?”

“Not yet. Irno says it won’t take much longer.”

“What was the question?”

He dropped himself onto the rock beside her; the telltale thump as he landed told Leia that he was
about to say something he knew she probably wasn’t going to like, and his expression confirmed it.
She put her hand on his knee, then patted it to encourage him to get on with it.

“It was about Ren;” Dar Noaa began, “he’s in trouble, Leia. We know the Goazon changed him, but
what we don’t know is how much.” He put his hand on hers. “Ren’s new power… it’s more than I
imagined; more than the vessel can measure.” He folded his hand around hers and held it tightly. “It
may be more than he can survive.”

More than he can survive.

The words hit Leia hard; she was unprepared, unwilling, to hear them. Her mind went numb.

“What?” she asked weakly.

“There’s so much power surging through him now that he’s afraid he won’t be able to control it.
He’s been spending himself holding it back; that’s why he gets so tired so quickly.” Dar Noaa
continued. “We saw it on the Kourin’s log; when Ren lifted the Kyber Crystal cluster, the reading
went off the scale; when I spoke to him about the problem, he was aware of it.”

“He hasn’t said anything,” Leia replied, “nothing at all. Neither has Rey.”

“I don’t believe he’s told her.”

“How bad is it? You just said...”
“I said ‘may be’; and I meant that. The risk is real, but I don’t know how real yet; I should be able to tell you something very soon.”

“The question?”

“Yes. In order to help him, first, we have to know how much power we’re dealing with. I asked if there was a way to do that using the vessel’s power monitor and the Kourin showed me how to submit the question.”

“Yes…”

“What?”

“*Yes*!” Leia jumped to her feet, then turned and threw herself onto him, into his arms, “Remember? What the Kourin told Finn!” She didn’t wait for a reply. “The answer to your question is *yes*!” She rocked back, bringing him to his feet with her. “Let’s get back there; it might be finished…”


But she wouldn’t.

............... 

It was quiet in the cockpit. One by one, as each task completed, the waveform displays and holographs vanished; there were now only two sequences still running. One was a brand new power sensor monitor display, where a crisp white line was snaking across the bottom of the grid in a peaceful wave pattern. The other process, a tiny white square just below the new monitor display, was virtually invisible to anyone who didn’t know to look for it. That one still had awhile to run.

Irno was digesting the first set of results when he heard them coming.

As he expected, the formula to extrapolate the monitor results would only require a few small adjustments in the receptor heads and the command sequence. Changing the code was easy; he’d already done that, but the receptor heads in question were embedded in the corridor wall; they’d have to be pulled, adjusted and replaced. That would give a preliminary result, and the rest of the receptor heads, especially the ones embedded in the coatings, could come later. Irno would give the first set of results to the Sith and that should keep him engaged and distracted when the last set arrived. He leaned back against his seat and waited for them to appear.

They came through the entry arguing.

“… you can’t be serious;” the Sith said, “there is simply *no* way that they could have known about any of this in advance.”

“I understand that,” Leia replied, “but I just… know. We’ll find out soon enough. *Irno*!”

Irno turned and looked, first at him, then at her. He didn’t understand why she was suddenly so interested, but her involvement was a lucky development; she’d keep him busy and out of the way.

“Are there any results yet?” She asked.

“Right here,” Irno waved them forward with his grip hand, “Take a look.”
The Sith came forward instantly; she followed him.

Dar Noaa put his hand on the waveform; the monitor brightened, but did not change color. He studied it, almost petting the surface of the waveform as his fingers followed the lines. It was exactly what he needed, too; it was tracking Ren as he slept.

“Look,” he said to Leia, “See this? That’s Ren… he’s asleep.”

“Is this,” Leia watched the display hopefully, “what you needed?”

“Yes,” he replied, “It’s just a starting point, but… yes.”

Leia turned her face away from the display and looked over at the Kourin, who was looking back at her in an oddly curious way.

“Thank you, Irno,” she said. Somehow, that wasn’t enough; she stepped past Dar Noaa, leaned over Irno and gave him a grateful hug. “This means so much to us.”

Irno frowned; he didn’t understand why she was so pleased. It was just a new monitor.

…………

Not far away, in the General’s, now their, quarters, Ren was still sleeping soundly on the floor and Rey was sitting at the workstation silently watching herself on the monitor. The General had given Ren access to the Ren Transport transmissions, but he neglected to secure them, so when she discovered them by accident, it was *all* available to her.

His logs. The security images.

Everything…

Suddenly, Ren roused. He pushed himself up on his elbows, took a deep breath, then lowered himself back down. Rey got up from the workstation and checked; he was still asleep. She was gently brushing an unruly curl off his face when she felt it.

Finn.

There was no mistake; it was him. Ren must have sensed Finn, too.

The Millennium Falcon was back.

By the time she reached the cockpit to tell the others, they were already on the comlink talking.

“Something’s happened,” Master Luke’s voice rose from the waveform, “We’re all right. We’ll be there in ten minutes, come over to the Falcon; we need to talk.”

“All of us?” Dar Noaa asked.

“No.”
“Understood.”

So did Rey; that meant that Master Luke did not want Ren. Maybe Ren sensed it, too, and that was why he didn’t wake up; so no one, meaning her, would have to tell him that he had to stay in his quarters while everyone else got the news. He accepted the restriction without complaint, but she could feel how he’d torture himself with memories and regret as he waited there alone.

This time, he could just sleep through it...

.........

Ren was standing at the mouth of a wooded ravine; the spot where it intersected a wide, well-worn trail that curved in both directions and was quickly lost to the forest. There was no ground clutter, no rocks or fallen branches, no sign of recent activity, no litter, no tracks, nothing. It was as if the area had been swept clean in preparation for some event.

“I do not know this place.”

He wasn’t sure who he was talking to; he just knew that someone was there to hear him.

No reply.

Then he heard someone coming; familiar voices flowed out of the wooded ravine.

“I can see it! We’re almost there...”

“Wait!”

It was Finn. Poe Dameron was behind him, hurrying to catch up.

Finn strode ahead, reaching the trail first, then stopping to look both ways. Then Finn turned completely around, slowly, scanning the cliff walls from top to bottom. And then he pulled out his blaster.

“He’s got a bad feeling about this.”

The words cut through Ren; he turned and saw Han Solo. His father’s face was ghostly pale, but his eyes were kind and filled with affection. It was wonderful; it was unbearable...

“It’s a *trap*!” Poe shouted.

Suddenly the ravine erupted with violence; laser bolts flew from all directions, filling the air. One found Finn’s hand; he gasped in pain. His blaster fell at his feet. Finn grabbed the lightsaber suspended from his belt and ignited it; he managed to deflect the first few bolts, but the next one struck him just below his waist. The one after that hit him in the chest. He dropped to his knees, still swinging his blade, but to no avail. Three more bolts found their marks, his arm, his shoulder, his head.

Finn slumped, then fell forward onto his face, with the lightsaber still clenched in his hand.

Ren looked at his father.

“Will you help him?” Han Solo asked.
“Yes,” he replied. “Anything.”

Ren sat up before he was fully awake; agonizing seconds passed before he remembered to breathe. As he caught his breath, he recognized where he was; in his quarters, on the floor.

Alone.

His head ached; he put his hands to his forehead and rested his head until it cleared.

When his senses returned, he felt Finn’s presence; Uncle Luke’s, too. That meant the Millennium Falcon had arrived while he was sleeping. It also meant that the nightmare he’d just had was not a vision of something that already happened; Finn was very much alive. No, it was a look ahead; a warning of what was to come.

But the future was always in motion; it could be changed. His father’s words echoed in his mind.

“Will you help him?”

He had to tell Rey what he’d just seen; she could tell Uncle Luke for him. It had to be her, because he couldn’t tell the General. He just couldn’t.

He looked around and saw where Rey had left his clothes in a neatly folded pile with his lightsaber on top. He dressed quickly, pausing only to inspect the weapon briefly before attaching it, as the Code required. Then he went to find Rey.

When he looked into the cockpit, all he saw was the Kourin busy working at the waveform. The white display was actively drawing a design for something; Ren couldn’t tell what.

He left the Kourin to his work and went outside.

He didn’t need the Force to know where everyone was; the Millennium Falcon was sitting across the meadow with its ramp down. He was halfway across the meadow when he saw movement; two figures had just stepped out of the ship and were making their way down the ramp.

Finn and Poe Dameron.

Finn saw him instantly and surged ahead, leaving Poe behind.

He walked directly toward Ren, but then stepped sideways and slowed his pace, as if to let him pass. It seemed as if they were going to pass one another without incident, but as the moment came, they slowed, then stopped and looked at one another.

Ren gave Finn a cursory inspection from top to bottom, and Finn slid his hand down over the hilt of his lightsaber reflexively in response; an unfortunate choice, since it drew Ren’s attention right to it.

“Only an *idiot*,” Ren observed, “carries a weapon he doesn’t know how to use.”

Then he started to walk on, passing Finn, leaving him behind.

Finn turned and watched him go, just long enough to think of a retort.

“And only a *monster*,” he snarled loudly, “kills his own father.”

Even as the words were blasting from his mouth, Finn knew he was making a terrible mistake, but he
couldn’t stop himself. The hate was just too powerful.

Ren stopped, but he didn’t turn around. Finn waited.

For a moment, the two stood motionless, then Ren’s body spoke for him; a slow, controlled exhalation that meant a decision had been made. Moving his hand so quickly that it blurred, he grasped his lightsaber and ignited it; his familiar trademark side-swing set off a surge of fear, then fury, in Finn.

Challenge made. Challenge accepted.

Finn grabbed, then ignited, his lightsaber, unconsciously copying Ren’s movement exactly.

Ren didn’t turn around at the sound; instead, he let his lightsaber dip until it was just touching the tips of meadow grass. The grass sizzled and smoked as the plasma blade skimmed over it.

“You are not ready,” he said.

The words as warning fell on deaf ears and, although unintended, the words as *insult* hit the target and Finn’s rage exploded.

“*Try* me!” he shouted.

Ren turned around, then raised the fiery red plasma blade into position.

There was a moment of hesitation; they faced one another in silence. Like bookends on a shelf in some ancient library, they mirrored each other almost perfectly; same stance, same blade position. The only difference was the obvious trembling of Finn’s hands; the yellow plasma blade was shivering in front of his face, but he could neither stop trembling nor take his challenge back.

So he made the first move.

Gripping his lightsaber with both hands, Finn charged straight at Ren. It was madness, of course; Finn knew that, but it didn’t matter. This was kill or be killed; either way, this would be an end to it.

Ren met his charge directly; striking Finn’s plasma blade with a powerful stroke of his own, he forced Finn back, making him stagger to keep his balance, but Finn managed to keep his blade tight against Ren’s, then pushed hard. Ren had to step back, then spin around to free his blade, but it cost him precious distance and gave Finn an opening to lunge again. Finn rushed forward; his powerful arms produced a strong stroke in the right direction, but missed delivering the blow. The plasma blade swept past Ren’s waist, its momentum pulling Finn with it, leaving him completely exposed, but Finn dropped to the ground and rolled, putting himself out of Ren’s reach.

As he was scrambling to get back on his feet, Finn saw that Ren wasn’t making any move to take advantage of his mistake. But that didn’t matter; Finn charged again.

This time, Ren met Finn’s blade with the exact same move he’d used to disarm him that night in the snow; a quick spiraling blow that knocked the hilt of Finn’s lightsaber out of his hands, then sent it flying several meters away. Finn braced himself for the inescapable, but the blow did not come.

Instead, Ren held his position and switched his lightsaber off.

“Remember this,” Ren said sternly, “if you’ll need more than three strokes to win a fight, you should reconsider starting it. This lesson is over.”
“No. It’s. Not!”

Fists tight, Finn threw himself at Ren, punching furiously. The first blow landed on Ren’s right arm and made him drop his lightsaber. The second grazed the right side of Ren’s head, tagging his ear, but nothing more; Ren brushed Finn’s fist away with his hand, then gestured.

Finn’s arm froze.

For an instant, his mind went blank; instinctively, he reached out…

*Learn... he heard a whisper … Now, do it.*

…and suddenly, unexpectedly, he felt Ren’s grip evaporate. He was *free*!

Charging again, this time with his whole body, Finn ran straight into Ren with such power that he knocked his target backwards, off his feet.

The meadow shuddered; the boulders bucked, then shivered; the plants waved wildly as a shockwave sped out and away in all directions.

They hit the ground together.

Groaning with pain, the two combatants lay sprawled on the grass beside each other, utterly spent. They remained that way for almost a minute; an eerie peace settled onto them like ash after a forest fire.

It was over. For now.

As soon as he was able to get air back into his lungs, Finn rolled onto his side to look at Ren.

“If you think...” the words chugged out in little bursts, “… I should be grateful that...” he breathed, “… that you just spared me... again...”

“I don’t.”

“Why do you keep doing it?” Finn asked the question with volcanic force. “You think this *changes* anything? You think, if you spare me enough times, I’ll forgive you?”

“I don’t want your forgiveness.”

“Then tell me why; why won’t you kill me? That first night...”

“I didn’t know then,” Ren replied. His voice was disturbingly calm. “But I know now; I need you to live because some day, I may need you to kill me.”

Finn’s eyes narrowed; he’d imagined many reasons, but never this one.

“When... if... that day comes,” Ren continued, “I know you’ll do it.” He was looking past Finn, at someone who was racing towards them. “Don’t leave it to her.”

Finn looked back, over his shoulder, and saw Rey.
To be continued...
Highland stone meadows, The Edge.

Laci Kin had led an uneventful life. Born into the commerce class, she was taught from infancy what her role was: work for the family, then marry for the family. And that was exactly what happened; her father taught her the trade, then found a suitable husband for her, setting the course for the rest of her life.

All that changed in one night.

She was still getting used to the idea; her thoughts would swing from confusion and fear to a wild sense of excitement. For the first time in her life, she was on her own; there was no one to tell her what to do now. The thought terrified her at first, but he told her everything would be all right and she wanted to believe him.

Him.

Luke Skywalker; the man with the haunted blue eyes and graying beard that didn’t fully disguise the faint, vintage scar on his face. When she asked about it, he simply laughed softly and told her it was a long time ago, when he was young. It was not the first time he’d used that phrase, ‘when I was young’, but he wasn’t old; well, not *that* old. No one could do what he did that night and be that ‘old’.


He was a puzzle; he walked and talked with simplicity, like an ordinary man, a humble man; the kind of man most would pass right by without even seeing - and yet, one look from him was enough to silence the young men who traveled with him and Laci could hear the awe in their voices when they spoke with him. She felt it, too. There was something about him, especially when he looked at her, that made Laci find herself privately fussing over how she looked, something she’d never done before, lest she see disappointment or disapproval in his face when they were together. Or worse yet, *indifference*.

He was reluctant to talk about himself and an expert at diversion, so he now knew more about her than she did about him. But she was determined to know more, so she lured him with food; he’d always arrive after the others, then linger over the meal long enough for them to finish and leave. Those were the times when, if she worked very hard, she could get him to tell her a story or two and she caught glimpses of him as he really was. He was witty, even funny at times, and wise... and deeper than she expected. She loved listening to him; just before they got here, Luke told her about his unusual ‘family’, and Laci could tell how much they all meant to him; she could feel the love.

So it confused her when the Falcon hadn’t been on the ground for even fifteen minutes before two members of Luke’s ‘family’ tried to kill each other...

Luke had just finished making introductions; his sister Leia, whose last name was Organa, not Skywalker; Dar Noaa, who was related to the young Sith Dar Na; and a pretty young woman with
only one name, Rey. Luke’s sister greeted her warmly, then paused mid-sentence when she noticed what Laci was wearing. A trace of sorrow fell across Leia’s face like a shadow as she stared at the clothing, but then she lifted her head and smiled again.

“These clothes...” she said.

“Oh, yes...” Laci interrupted her, eager to apologize but not knowing why. “My clothes were... well, I needed some new ones, and this was all Luke could find on the ship. I must look awful...”

“No,” Leia laughed gently, “you look good in them... better than their previous owner ever did.”

“You knew him?”

“I knew him,” Leia replied, “very well.”

Laci was just about to ask about the one called Han Solo when the commotion started; voices from outside, muffled by the ship’s hull, but clearly angry, caught everyone’s attention at the same time. Then Laci heard a sound she’d heard only once before, on that terrible night as she lay in the darkness waiting to die...

Everyone else bolted for the entry together.

Swallowing hard, Laci pushed the horrible memory out her way and followed them.

…..

Out in the meadow, Rey was first to reach Finn and Ren, who were both down, but moving. She skidded between them and sat down there.

“*Enough*!” she shouted.

They stared at her blankly, and didn’t reply. There was nothing to say; neither had any fight left in them anyway.

Poe arrived immediately after Rey, but he wasted no time on talk; grabbing Finn by an ankle, Poe yanked hard and started to drag him away. Dar Na arrived to grab Finn’s other ankle; together they hauled Finn through the grass as fast as they could, stopping only when Dar Noaa and Leia blocked their way. Leia slipped around them and hurried on; the Sith looked down at Finn, but only for a second, then he followed the General. Finn’s relief that he wasn’t going to be first to get lectured was brief, because Dar Noaa’s face hovering over him was instantly replaced by Luke Skywalker’s.

“Get him back to the ship.” Luke stared down at Finn as he spoke, “*Now*.”

Poe and Dar Na dropped ankles and reached for wrists, then yanked Finn to his feet. Then they marched him back to the ramp, up it, then inside, passing Laci as they went. Luke followed, pausing just long enough to give her an embarrassed smile and a shrug.

“Every family,” he told her, “has... issues.”

Then he continued on his way. Laci followed; there was no way she was going to miss this...

…..

Out in the grass, Ren was sitting up, but not doing much else.

Rey was sitting next to him, watching, waiting in angry silence when Leia and Dar Noaa arrived.
Ren pushed his hair back, out of his face, with one hand and looked up.

“*It was my fault,*” he admitted without being asked, “I shouldn’t have… oh...”

Rey felt it; she reacted instantly.

“*Ren?*” She was already reaching for him, but she wasn’t quick enough; his eyes rolled, then he fell over onto his side. “*#Ren#!” She dived after him; as her arms went around his, his body went rigid, then his arms, his legs, even his head, began to twitch; his fingers waved stiffly in the air. Rey could hear him grunting in short, rapid-fire bursts as if he was trying to clear his throat. She saw his face contort; the pupils of his eyes dilating, becoming pools of black.

“He’s *seizing*!” Dar Noaa shouted. “Keep him as he is, don’t try to restrain him!”

Leia dropped to her knees to help Rey position him; Dar Noaa quickly stepped over and around Ren, then knelt to help from there. Leia looked up from her son to Dar Noaa.

“What can I do?” she pleaded.

“You’re already doing it,” he replied. “keeping him safe, seeing him through it.”

…..

Inside the Millennium Falcon, in the communal space, Poe and Dar Na deposited Finn at the Dejarik table, then stood close by to keep him there. Still trying to absorb what happened, what Ren just told him, Finn looked up at them, and then at Master Luke.

“It was my fault,” he confessed without being asked, “I shouldn’t have...” He paused, his eyes staring at nothing, then his expression changed; anticipation became concern, then alarm.

“Something’s *wrong*...”

He started to get up, but Dar Na and Poe pushed him back down.

“I have to go,” he protested, “back...”

“No,” Luke said quietly; the anger on his face had vanished. “You must stay here.” Then he looked at Dar Na, “Go out and see what’s happening.”

Dar Na obeyed without hesitation; he’d felt it, too. Releasing Finn to Poe’s care, he sped to the entry and vanished into the corridor beyond. Finn was fighting the urge to follow him when Master Luke interceded.

“*Finn*.”

One word, his name, uttered by the Jedi Master was all it took; the urge to go back, to Ren and Rey, vanished instantly.


“You asked us to leave,” Finn answered, “while you spoke with the General and Dar Noaa.”

“Yes, I did. What happened next?”

“We went outside,” Finn answered; that memory was clear. “I saw him coming. I…” He paused; a thought flashed, then was gone. He searched for a reason. “… he was told to stay in his quarters… I went to stop him, but then…” His eyes narrowed as it became clear again. “… I stepped out of his
way to let him pass."

Luke gave Poe a quick side glance; Poe nodded silent confirmation.

“He stopped. He said something,” Finn’s voice became flat, disconnected, as if he was merely a spectator and not a participant. “I said something back. We fought.”

“What did he say?”

“He said… ‘only an idiot carries a weapon he doesn't know how to use’.”

“And what did you say?”

“I said… “ Finn paused; it was painful to say it again. “I said ‘only a… monster… kills his own father’.”

“And he challenged you?”

“It gets confusing,” Finn squinted, as if the act could help clear his mind. The truth was that it happened so quickly he didn’t *know* exactly how it happened. “No, I don’t think he did. I think it was *me*, at least, I feel like it was me. He said I ‘wasn’t ready’.”

“And that made you angry?” Luke asked.

“Made you *crazy*,” Poe mumbled, “just like he is.”

A sharp look from Luke reminded Poe who was in authority here; the silent reprimand worked, Poe lowered his eyes and said no more. Finn noticed none of that, though, and kept on talking.

“I thought he was…” Finn made a face that looked sorry, not angry. “No, I didn’t think. I saw red; I saw Solo…”

Sighing deeply, Luke closed his eyes; Finn offered no resistance. The moment of Han Solo’s death blazed in Finn's memory, just like the moment of Darth Vader’s death blazed in his own. Luke understood that pain well; he knew how poisonous it was. The hate made Finn reckless; Ren must have sensed that.

“What happened next?” He asked.

“Ren…” Finn grimaced as he remembered throwing himself repeatedly at Ren - and failing repeatedly. And every time he failed, he could hear a voice telling him why he’d failed, then telling him, no… *giving* him… knowledge, “… was teaching me. It was a *lesson*.”

“A lesson?”

“I can see it now; I can feel it. I… understand.”

“Understand what?”

Finn didn’t reply; there was no answer for that question; no way to look at Luke Skywalker and repeat what Ren said when the lesson was over. Suddenly, inescapably, it all became clear.

“One day I may need you to kill me.”

There was only one way to ensure that.
Ren used the fight, used Finn’s blind rage, to put everything he knew about how to use – and not use – a lightsaber into Finn’s memory; there would never be another one-sided duel between them again. And he’d given him more than just that; Finn could feel new abilities, some known, some yet to be discovered, pulsing inside him now. Ren had done it for one reason; to make sure that should the time come, Finn would have the skills and power necessary to do it.

He could *kill* Ren. Anytime he wanted.

It was incomprehensible.

“Master Luke,” Finn looked up at the waiting Jedi, “I’m so sorry.” He chose his next words carefully, because he was not going to lie. “I need time to think it through.”

He saw a trace of reaction in the Jedi Master’s eyes, but nothing more.

Luke studied Finn for a moment in silence; whatever Finn was holding back had to be important, but Luke could be patient.

"I'll wait.” he said.

…….

As soon as he reached the group in the meadow, Dar Na knew what was happening; he’d seen this kind of thing before. When he was a child, he had a friend, another Sith boy like himself, only much stronger with the Force. They were both sent to the training; both tested, both accepted. Since Na was a Dar, the instructors demanded a great deal of him, but that was entirely due to his family’s prestige; the Dar were not royalty in the conventional sense, but the family was Oldblood Sith and known to be strong with the Force. The instructors demanded even more from his friend, but never said why. Time and time again, they pushed and pressed both boys to exhaustion, but neither complained lest they be expelled for it. Then one day, after an extremely brutal session, his friend suffered the 'Drop'; the seizure lasted a long time and afterwards, the friend was taken away and never returned.

Now Dar Na was seeing it again; the young Lord Vader had the Drop...

After long, torturous minutes, Ren’s seizure subsided. The twitching stopped, his arms and legs went slack. His neck muscles relaxed; his head bobbed forward and the awful grunting ceased.

His eyes closed and stayed closed.

The sudden peace seemed to terrify Rey and Leia; they were checking him frantically for signs of life when he moved his head ever so slightly, as if he felt it.

“It’s over,” Dar Noaa told them. “He’s coming out of it.”

“Ren?” Rey knew she was saying his name much too loud, but she couldn’t help it, “Ren?”

“No...”

Rey let out a squeal of relief, then noticed the confusion on Leia’s face.

“It’s all right,” she assured the General, “It’s something he says when you wake him up.”

“Ren?” Leia joined the effort, “Can you hear me?”
Ren opened his eyes and looked at her vacantly.

“Welcome back,” she said gently.

“Where...” he mumbled back, moving, trying to sit up. “… was I?”

“Don’t talk,” Dar Noaa reached out, stopping him. “We’re going to get you off the ground and back to your quarters.” Then he turned his head to look at Dar Na. “Help us get him on his feet.”

Dar Na quickly moved closer, filling the gap between Dar Noaa and the women; they worked together to pull Ren up, then support him, then carrying him back to the Visitor and inside.

…..

In all the commotion, no one noticed that not everyone had come outside.

No one noticed that Chewbacca ran to the Falcon cockpit, grabbed his bowcaster, then collapsed into the pilot’s seat and just sat there staring down at it.

He was still there, still staring.

No one noticed that Irno never appeared at all, not in the meadow, not in the Visitor’s entry. The Kourin was still in ship’s cockpit, but he was no longer simply waiting for secret results; he was standing at the waveform staring at the new power monitor in astonishment.

He saw the spike; he saw the monitor reset *four* times in order to track it!

The monitor reset again, but before it completed a new grid, there was a *burst* of something and it crashed outright. Irno was working on a restart when he heard activity in the ship’s entry, but whatever that was all about wasn’t heading his way, so he stayed on task. The monitor restarted flawlessly; it even produced a detailed report on the anomaly. As Irno read the summation, he suddenly realized why the Sith had been so interested in extrapolation. Any Kourin who worked with the Force learned one thing about it very quickly: It was real, It was measurable, It was *unbounded*. Even the slightest miscalculation in design or construction could result in disaster; an unstable device would overload and fail, overload and explode; one time, he made one that overloaded and *vaporized*. One of the worst aspects of Force work was the uncertainty; there was absolutely no way to predict when an overload would occur or how bad it could be, so Irno always kept a log for future reference should the worst happen...

*The log!*

It was right there in front of him the entire time and he’d *missed* it. He was thinking devices and crystals, but this… this was a *living being* on the monitor - this was *Ren*!

Somehow, Ren had become so strong with the Force, that his power, like Its, was becoming unbounded.

And it was almost certainly killing him.

.........

To be continued…
Sometimes an idea that is so clear in your imagination is really difficult to translate into words. Be patient with me.
Chapter 16

Stone meadow highlands, The Edge.

Stalemate.

The silence in the Millennium Falcon’s communal space had become unbearable for mere mortals, so the two witnesses to the deadlock between Luke Skywalker and Finn found reasons to be somewhere else. Poe Dameron went to check how things were in the cockpit and Laci Kin headed for the ship’s galley. Now it was just the two of them: Finn sitting at the Dejarik table and Luke standing right there, looking down at him.

Finn was staring at his lightsaber, which was lying on the table in front of him; he didn’t dare look up at the Jedi Master because there was no way a novice like himself could hold out against someone like Luke Skywalker for very long. On top of that humbling reality, Finn still had no idea what to say.

Ren. Someday he may need me to kill him. Poe’s right; he is crazy.

The thought bothered him, but he didn’t know why; fantasies of killing Ren had occupied every idle moment of his life since Starkiller Base. Dreams that started out as simple justice had become so savage and sadistic that Finn would wake in a fitful sweat, then lie there in the dark, horrified by the monster he’d just seen.

But the monster in his dreams was not Ren, it was *him*.

He showed no mercy, felt no remorse; there was only the intoxicating rush of power through his body every time he watched Ren die. Then, in the real world, he felt the same rush during the raid at Uttey Station; no hesitation, no mercy – and no remorse. He could feel himself slipping, and he blamed Ren for that, too. He wanted to believe that his connection to Ren was behind it all, that what was happening to him was damning evidence that Ren’s darkness was somehow becoming *his* darkness. It was one more reason to hate Ren; it was as valid a reason as the scar on Finn’s back, and yet...

Ren. Something's wrong...

Finn felt it; he hated Ren; he wanted him dead - but not right now. Right now, all he wanted to know was if Ren was all right. He was wrestling with the contradiction when he sensed something and looked up to see Dar Na arrive. The Sith’s return was nothing short of rescue because now Finn had something to say:

“What happened out there?”

Dar Na glanced at him, but only long enough to acknowledge that he’d heard Finn’s question before directing himself to Luke Skywalker, because the elder Lord Vader should be told first, even if he rejected that title.

“Ren is unwell,” he told the Jedi.

“What?” Finn asked.

Dar Na ignored Finn. The Jedi was was staring at him in expectation; he probably already sensed what he was about to be told, so there was no reason to delay the confirmation.
“He has the Drop.”

A fleeting expression of dismay on Luke’s face betrayed him, but he quickly composed himself.

“Thank you, Dar Na.”

Dar Na lowered his eyes, showing both respect and regret that he had been the bearer of such bad news.

Watching from his seat at the Dejarik table, Finn’s need to know allowed him no patience at all.

“The Drop?” he asked loudly. “What’s that?”

Again, Dar Na ignored Finn; he raised his eyes to meet Luke’s.

“It was brief,” he told the Jedi. “We carried him to his quarters to rest. The General says as soon as she has him settled, she and Dar Noaa will return to you.”

“Good,” Luke answered, “Please... ask Laci; if there's any talah left, could she brew some? I think we’re going to need it.”

“What’s the Drop?” Finn badgered from below.

“I will go now,” Dar Na said, still ignoring Finn. It was both a good idea and a way to give the Jedi and Finn privacy so Luke could explain. As a Force-sensitive, Finn had a right to know the risks as well as the privileges of the distinction. “I will assist her.”

Luke waited until Dar Na was gone before beginning.

“The Drop.” he folded his hands in front, but the fingers of his living hand seemed restless against the cold fingers of his artificial hand, “is the Sith term for a kind of... seizure...”

“Ren had a *seizure*? Is he all right?”

“For now, yes,” Luke replied. This was the second time that Finn had shown concern for Ren; Luke noted that the sincerity in Finn’s voice as he asked was genuine. “but the Drop is a very serious condition.”

“What exactly is it?”

“It’s something that can happen to a Force-sensitive,” Luke wanted to keep his explanation simple, but the Drop was not simple; it was a terrible affliction that always ended the same way. “It’s very rare, and there isn’t much known about it. It tends to strike only those who are very strong with the Force.”

Finn frowned; he trained as a Stormtrooper, so he recognized evasion when he heard it. This was sounding like a pre-deployment speech; the real story was hidden somewhere behind the words. But he could let it go for now because he was sure Dar Na would fill in the missing details later if pressed.

Luke chose not to notice.

“Sometimes,” he continued, “using the Force causes a reaction in the body; most often, a seizure. “It’s like an allergy...”
“Is it serious?” Finn interrupted. “What do you do for it?”

“It can be.” Luke knew Finn could sense his reluctance to say too much, but until he saw Ren and verified it for himself, he would not say the words ‘incurable’ or ‘fatal’. “And not much.”

Finn read between the lines; ‘not much’ meant ‘*nothing*’.


On the other side of the meadow, inside the Visitor, the situation had calmed down about as much as it was going to. Once inside their quarters, Rey insisted that they put Ren on the floor because he’d just end up there anyway. He was fully conscious and able to sit up on his own, but he had no memory of the seizure at all; beyond that, he seemed tired but all right.

Leia was unconvinced.

“Go,” she said to Dar Noaa, “without me.”

“I’m all right, General,” Ren protested from the floor, “You should go; he needs... to see you.”

“And I’ll be here,” Rey added.

Ren looked from his mother to Dar Noaa, seeking support. Her eyes followed his.

“Tell her I’m all right.” he said.

“Yes,” Dar Noaa assured Leia cautiously. “The worst is over...” he caught himself before the words ‘for now’ slipped out, then changed the subject. “… and we must find out what brought your brother back to us so soon.”

Leia looked back, down at Ren. For a moment, they were both caught in memories from long ago; she remembered every time she’d been afraid for him and he remembered how every time he was afraid, she would be there to comfort and protect him. They’d played this scene so many times before that what happened next was inevitable.

“Don’t be afraid, mo...” He stopped himself before the word finished, then swallowed it. “… I’m all right. *Really*.”

Pretending that she hadn’t heard the word he’d almost said, Leia looked at Dar Noaa.

“Let’s go.” She said.

Then she she turned to lead the way, walking quickly to the entry and through it, making Dar Noaa hurry to catch up.

Sighing deeply, Ren twisted his body enough to get his back facing the side of the sleep platform he never slept on, then used his legs to push himself against it for support. Rey watched him get settled there, then stepped over his legs in order to sit down next to him.

There was a long moment of silence as they sat there, side by side, each looking straight ahead.
“Stupid.” Ren said quietly.

“*Yes*.” Rey replied, confirming his assessment. Then she reached for his hand. “And stubborn...”

Ren gave a little snort; laughing at his own expense because he knew what was coming next.

“... as Skywalker as they come.”


In the Visitor cockpit, Irno was watching the energy monitor log again.

He’d forgotten all about the question he submitted hours ago; the calculations could take hours, even days to resolve, or perhaps never resolve at all, and while the question he’d asked was important, another question had arisen that was just as important and much more immediate.

What was happening to the one called Ren?

Irno didn’t know very much about Force-sensitives; he knew they existed within the First Order, but who they were and what they did for the Order was wrapped in secrecy. The Kourin technicians were under strict orders never to approach one and even casual references to them were forbidden, but because his work was always done in isolation and didn’t involve them at all, Irno never gave it much thought.

Right now, he could think about nothing else.

The pattern on the monitor log was familiar; Irno had seen it many times before. It resembled the energy flow logs from the early design for his resonators. He examined it closely, marking each stage of the process.

*There’s the power spike, the diffusion arch, feedback loop, resonance stabilization...*

… *but no dissipation slope.*

That meant that the Force was flowing into, but not completely *through*, Ren.

The log told the story: when Ren called the Force, it poured into him at an incredible rate, only a tiny fraction of which was actually needed. That tiny fraction was making it through, transferring from Ren to whatever object he was manipulating, but the rest was being held back somehow. With its flow restrained, the Force would naturally try to stabilize itself by diffusion throughout the containing device, in this case, Ren’s body, but there was a limit to how much Force energy a device could handle before it would overload. Overload meant a catastrophic failure cascade - circuits fried, gossamer melted, matter itself fragmented and then something bad would happen.

Something *very* bad.

Irno knew how to fix the problem; he just couldn’t fix it here. Or could he?

*Maybe something temporary...*

He tapped the waveform and accessed the ship’s parts inventory, but the list was short and out of date.
He dismissed the inventory and began to scroll through the ship’s schematic diagrams.

Then he came to the schematic diagram for the ship’s defense system. It had two components: the range sensors and the energy sinks embedded in the exterior coating. The energy sinks were there to disperse directed-energy weapon strikes; since the prototype had no offensive weapons and could not fight back, the energy sinks would protect the ship just long enough to escape an attack. The coating was really just a synthetic form of adaptive skin; heavily modified, of course, but its composition and structure was basically identical to the biology on which it was based.

The idea was preposterous, even for Irno; that’s what made it instantly irresistible.

There was one way to find out; carefully noting the location and spacing of the energy sinks, Irno left the cockpit and headed for Dar Noaa’s quarters to find something he could use to make a hole in the ship.

Aboard the Millennium Falcon, the conversation in the communal room was still on the topic of ‘what’s the drop’, and Finn was growing more frustrated with every answer Luke gave him.

Or didn’t give him.

The question he couldn’t get an answer to was the one that mattered most, but Luke kept skirting around a direct reply. So Finn tried once again.

“How *bad* is it?” He persisted, “Is the Drop something he can live with or not?”

Then Finn felt it; it was coming at him fast, and it was angry.

“It’s not the Drop.”

Dar Noaa’s voice came from the entry. The Sith walked into the room with the General and headed straight toward him, raising his arm as he approached.

Finn’s lightsaber flew off the table into Dar Noaa’s hand.

“Must I take this *from* you?” Dar Noaa asked accusingly.

Finn felt as if he’d just been slapped across his face; Master Luke’s disapproval was painful, but Dar Noaa’s disapproval was positively devastating. What little confidence he had left evaporated and he seemed to deflate as it left him. He stared down at his hands.

“I’m sorry.” He was almost whispering. “I was...”
“Reckless?” Dar Noaa finished for him. “Or just plain *stupid*?”

“Both.”

“I did *not* give this to you,” Dar Noaa pointed the lightsaber at Finn, “so you could kill yourself with it!”

As she stood there beside Dar Noaa listening, Leia knew that his anger was really his distress in disguise. The sight of Finn and Ren fighting in the meadow had terrified her, too, but unlike Dar Noaa, she was a veteran parent; Ben starting terrifying her before he could even walk. Dar Noaa had no similar experience to rely on, and seeing Finn - who, in so many ways, represented the son he never had - in mortal danger because of something Dar Noaa considered a pointless vendetta, had knocked him completely off balance.

And now, she was seriously worried that he was going to be Sith about it.

“Noah...” she suggested calmly, “I think Finn knows how you feel...”

Dar Noaa’s attention instantly turned in her direction; the fierce glow in his eyes sent a chill through her, but she met his gaze without flinching. They’d done this, exactly this, many times before; he’d come to her when he was having trouble not being Sith, and she would help him through it.

“It’s over, Noah.” Luke said loudly. “It’s done. Finn has admitted that it was his fault.”

“So has Ren,” Dar Noaa replied.

“How is Ren?” Luke looked from Dar Noaa to Leia as he asked. “Dar Na told us it was the Drop.”

“Dar Na is mistaken,” Leia answered, “it was a seizure, but caused by something else.”

“How is he?” Finn asked.

“He’s...” Leia gave him a reassuring look. “... better.”

Finn felt relieved, but not completely; the General’s answer sounded cautious, as if it relayed more hope than actual fact. He was about to ask another question when Master Luke reached down and touched his shoulder.


Finn slid out from behind the table without protest; his collision with Ren had interrupted Master Luke’s private talk with the General and Dar Noaa before it even began. He had to pass between them to get to the entry, and as he stepped past Dar Noaa, he glanced at the lightsaber that was still in the Sith’s hand.

“We will talk about *this*,” Dar Noaa shook the lightsaber slightly, “later.”

Finn nodded in silence and continued on his way.

He could have gone to the galley, he could have gone to the cockpit, but he didn’t; as soon as he was in the corridor, Finn felt the pull.

*Ren. Rey.*
He made it as far as the ramp, but stopped when he found Poe standing at the far end of it. Poe’s arms were crossed, as if he’d been waiting there for some time and grown weary of it.

“Going somewhere?” Poe asked.

“For a walk.”

“No you’re not,” Poe replied. “You’re going to *them*. I knew you would; just as soon as you got the chance.”

Finn walked down to join Poe, who stood his ground, blocking Finn’s way.

“I’m sorry,” Finn apologized before the fact, mostly because it pained him to see Poe so concerned that he would stand guard against it. “I don’t expect you to understand; *I* don’t understand.” He tapped Poe’s shoulder with a loose fist; Poe uncrossed his arms and let them drop to his sides. “I just… I need to know.” He could see Poe was wavering, so he quickly added, “I promise, I’m not going to start any trouble… and I’ll come right back.”

“I’m going with you.” Poe replied.

“Yes... good.”

They crossed the meadow together in total silence. Finn could feel Poe’s anxiety; the pilot’s gait, his breathing, every single thing about him was broadcasting it. He and Poe had been through a lot, facing real life-or-death situations together, but Finn could not recall seeing Poe worried or even anxious then. All they were doing now was crossing a meadow and Poe was acting as if they were walking into hell itself. Finn was confused and curious about it.

They were just a few steps from the Visitor’s entry when Rey suddenly appeared there.

She looked at Finn, then at Poe and then back at Finn; the look on her face told them both that she was in no mood to be welcoming.

“What do *you* want?” She challenged Finn.

“We heard Ren was sick.” Finn replied.

“He’s all right,” Rey studied him suspiciously. “He’s asleep.” She jerked her head back, looking past him, toward the Falcon. “You can go back now.”

Poe started to turn, but Finn stayed as he was.

“Rey, wait,” he pleaded, “can we talk?”

Rey’s expression changed, going from hard to soft instantly. It gave Finn hope; she was feeling the pull, too. Her eyes looked away for a second, as if she was checking on – or with – Ren, who was back in his quarters, unseen but never out of touch. Finn couldn’t understand it, but he envied it.

“We should talk,” she said. “Let’s take a walk.”

They started off, then Finn noticed Poe had not followed and stopped to look back.

“You go,” Poe waved him on, “I’ll wait in the cockpit; I bet Viz missed me.”

Finn shrugged, then he and Rey walked away.
Poe watched them until he was sure they were fully engaged with one another before he entered the ship, but he didn’t go to the cockpit. Instead, he went the other way, into the corridor, heading towards the far end.

He was going to see Ren.

......

The stone meadow was pleasant this time of day; a gentle breeze flowed across it, filling the air with sweet scents from the multitude of nameless plants in bloom. Tiny creatures were busy making the most of it, moving from flower to flower on legs or wings as they raced to get whatever the plants had to offer. Beyond a few annoyed buzzes, they were indifferent to the two beings walking among them, who were oblivious to them, too. So nothing took notice when one of the flying things left its perch and began to follow Finn and Rey...

“It wasn’t intentional,” Finn presented his case earnestly, “It just happened.”

“I know.” Rey replied. “Ren said the same thing.”

“What else did he say?”

“That it was stupid,” she snapped back at him. “I agree. *Stu-pid*.”

*He didn’t tell her.* Finn thought. *She doesn’t know what he did.*

“You and Ren,” Rey stopped walking, making him stop, making him give her his full attention. “are so wrapped up in your little personal war that you don’t see what it’s doing to the rest of us. The General, Dar Noaa...”

“I know.” Finn’s eyes moved from Rey to the Falcon in the distance. “I saw it in their faces; they took me in, and I let them down...”

“You *scared* them. They don’t want to lose you,” Rey’s tone drew him back to her. “*I* don’t want to lose you.”

Finn grabbed her shoulders and held her at arm’s length. He’d try one more time.

“Then *don’t* lose me!” He pleaded. “When we leave, come *with* us. Come with *me*.”

Rey didn’t answer; she let her expression speak for her, but Finn was determined.

“Come with me,” he argued, “if only to clear your head. Once you get away from him, you’ll see...”

“Stop trying to save me, Finn,” Rey raised her arms and Finn’s hands flew from her shoulders as if they’d been swept off like annoying insects. “I don’t want to be saved, I don’t *need* to be saved. I’m where I want to be; why won’t you see that?”

Finn chewed his lower lip in frustration; he knew it was true. Rey loved Ren; she would never leave him. There was nothing he could say, nothing he could do, that would break Ren’s hold on her.
But now, there was something he could do about *Ren*.

......

Inside the Falcon, Poe had reached his destination.

The door to Ren’s quarters was closed, and Poe hesitated to hit the control panel; he was reminding himself one more time that this was probably a really big mistake when the door slid open in front of him.

He leaned in slightly and looked.

Ren was sitting on the floor with his back against the sleep platform and his knees pulled up. His long arms were wrapped around his legs, fingers threaded together to hold them in place.

His eyes were closed, but Ren was not asleep.

“Come in.” he said.

Poe’s heart was pounding as he stepped inside, just enough to clear the door before it slid closed behind him. It was too late to turn back; he’d come this far...

“I came here,” he was so tense, his voice almost cracked, “to ask you to leave Finn alone.”

Ren didn’t move; he didn’t even open his eyes.

“I’ve only done,” he replied, “what was necessary.”

“And what was necessary?”

“That isn’t your concern.”

“Not my concern? You know what *is* my concern?” Poe ventured forward, coming closer. “*Finn*! You’ve beaten him; you’ve burned him; you've made yourself the dark center of his universe; everything he does now has your mark on it.” He was standing looking down at Ren now. “I can feel the darkness growing in him; changing him; making him into… *you*.”

“I know.”

“Then do something about it,” Poe made it sound like a request, not a demand. “When you needed his help, he gave it; you saved the galaxy, but only because *he* was there to help you do it.”

“I know.”

“Then find a way to help him now,” Poe begged. “You showed compassion for someone as undeserving as Armitage Hux, so I know you have it in you. All I’m asking is that you show some of that same compassion to Finn.”

“Armitage… yes… he’s almost ready to come home.”

“What?”
“We’re going to need him… *Oh*...” Suddenly Ren opened his eyes, looked at Poe and gave him a chillingly warm smile. “I had no idea, Poe Dameron, no idea at all.”

Poe felt fear and anger; he also felt exposed and helpless. *Naked*. Ren had just looked into his head and seen everything! Images of all the terrible ways Ren might use that knowledge flooded his mind.

“I understand,” Ren’s voice was unnervingly gentle, “why you’ve kept it to yourself; when you care for someone that much, you want to protect them, even if *you’re* the one they need protection from.” He closed his eyes again, then took a breath that sounded tired and sad. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad that Finn has you. He needs you. More than he knows.”

Poe didn’t know what to say; fear had become confusion. This was not the Ren he expected.

“One more thing,” Ren added, “There’s a trail in a forest; it’s been swept clean like a walkway. Avoid it; stay in the trees. It’s a trap.”

“A trap?”

“I don’t know the place,” Ren opened his eyes again, this time to stare intensely at Poe. “I’m sorry to say I have no where or when to give you; but I know if you step onto that trail, you will die there...”

Poe stared down at him, not wanting to believe, but knowing he had to.

“… and so will Finn.”

........

To be continued...
Chapter 17

Stone meadow highlands, The Edge.

Aboard the Millennium Falcon, in the ship’s galley, Laci Kin was ready.

The talah was brewed, what was left of the latest batch of Kun was sliced and set on the counter, along with several small bowls of leftovers. Now they would have something to drink, and something to pick at while Luke Skywalker told them the story.

She sent Dar Na to collect them from the communal room.

She was waiting for them with apprehension and burning curiosity because Luke had told her almost nothing about the raid on Uttey Station. He said they ‘found those behind the massacre and dealt with them’, but gave few details beyond letting her see the huge piles of ore ingots that would not be used to pay for future attacks. Then he said he had to go home and talk with his family.

He didn’t ask her if she wanted to stay on her own world; she didn’t ask to be left behind.

No one questioned it; her presence in his life seemed… right.

The young men weren’t forthcoming about Uttey Station, either, probably on his order. Laci couldn’t help feeling resentful about being kept out, even though she knew Luke was doing it to protect her. Being asked to prepare some food for them now was a sign of inclusion; he was finally ready to let her in.

Luke’s sister Leia was first through the entry, and when she saw the food, her face lit up.

“Real food!” She greeted that first, before greeting Laci. “Did you make all this, Laci?”

Laci accepted the greeting happily; in spite of everything that happened right after the introductions, Luke’s sister remembered her name.

“It’s nothing fancy,” she told Leia. “Leftovers.”

She saw Dar Noaa enter, and right behind him, Dar Na; it was hard to see a family resemblance because Dar Na’s face was decorated and Dar Noaa’s was not, but the similarity in the way they moved was obvious.

It was also obvious that Leia and Dar Noaa shared a special affection for one another; Laci was fascinated by how the two of them turned something as insignificant as inspecting leftovers into a shared adventure. Leia picked up a slice of Kun, then turned and fed it to Dar Noaa as if he was a cherished pet – and he *ate* it from her hand. When he finished, they exchanged a look that Laci thought was sensual, even erotic; that intrigued her because, although many men had looked her way, she’d never once looked back. Whatever the secret shared in that look between them was, Laci didn’t know, but it made her wonder what it would be like to have that kind of secret.

Then she looked past them and saw Luke standing there. He gave her offering a quick review, followed by an approving wink. The unspoken compliment made her blush; it was one of many things Luke did or said made her blush, and she wondered if he even noticed.
She poured the talah into little bowls and served Leia and Dar Noaa first, then offered the next bowl to Dar Na, who declined. That one she kept for herself and then poured one more bowl for Luke because she’d noticed that he seemed to like the dark, sediment-heavy bottom of the pot best. She used her hands to slide the warm bowl to him, and to her surprise, he didn’t wait for her to release it. Instead, his hands met hers, sliding over them, holding hers for a instant, before letting her pull them back.

_Dammit._

He’d made her blush again.

She couldn’t stop herself from looking at his face to see if he’d noticed, and the expression she saw there was not what she expected. Luke seemed uncertain, maybe even worried.

“This won’t be easy for you,” he warned. “You don’t have to stay...”

“Yes, I do,” Laci replied matter-of-factly; it was a deliberate show of confidence intended to reassure him that she was not going to run screaming from the room or anything like that no matter what she heard. “Whatever you have to tell them, I want to hear, too.”

Luke gave her that look, the one that seemed to go right through her, but she kept her eyes locked on his until he accepted her determination to stay. After a few seconds, he sighed quietly, then his expression softened.

“All right, then,” he turned his attention to Leia and Dar Noaa. “At our first stop, they were friendly but had little to trade, so we moved on to Jorsuro, where I had friends...”

“I remember that name,” Leia said. “You spent time there.”

“Right before we arrived, the village was attacked,” Luke continued, “We got there too late to help them.” Luke looked back at Laci, who gave a tiny nod to encourage him to go on. “I tracked the raiders and dealt with them,” he was still looking at her, “that’s when I found Laci...”

“He saved my life.” Laci added quickly, looking first at Leia and Dar Noaa, then back at Luke. “They were going to kill me, too.”

That seemed to embarrass Luke; he looked down, away from her, then looked directly at Leia.

“I was able to question one of the raiders,” he said. “He told me where I could find the ones behind the attack.” He paused to choose his next words, “This is where it gets bad, Leia; he told me that they were paying a bounty to anyone who killed a Skywalker...”

He saw the shocked expression on her face. Soon it would turn into horror.

.....

Outside in the meadow, Finn was trying a new tactic.

“Something’s happening to Ren,” he said, “No one is safe around him; even he knows that. He’s afraid he’s going to hurt you.”

Rey’s eyes narrowed; she looked deep into him, trying to see what he was holding back. Finn felt the
intrusion, but his dark thoughts were safe, hidden behind a wall of genuine concern for her.

“You think I don’t know that?” she asked.

Finn had to look away; she knew - he could feel it. For an instant, he wanted to tell her everything, how Ren had changed him and why, but if he told Rey, there would be no way to make killing Ren seem unintentional. It could only be a ‘stroke of luck’ if he didn’t know any better.

“Do you?” he asked. It was more accusal than inquiry. “*Really*?”

Rey made a sound that was pure exasperation.

“*Yes*.” She replied, looking past him dismissively. “You know, this talk is going nowhere, and I think it’s time to… what is he doing up there?”

“What?”

“Irno,” Rey pointed toward the Visitor, “Our *guest*.”

“Young guest?” Finn spun around to see what she was talking about and spotted something moving around on top of the ship. “Where did...”

“Irno!” Rey shouted. “What are you doing up there?”

“Nothing...” the creature stopped moving and peered down at them, “...much.”

“That’s...” Finn’s jaw dropped in astonishment, “... a *Kourin*!”

“That’s what he tell us,” Rey replied. “You know them?”

“Yes... sort of.”

Rey gave him a curious look, then she looked back at the Kourin.

“Irno! Get down here! *Now*!”

……………

Inside the Millennium Falcon, Laci was watching in stunned silence.

Luke’s story was finished; now she knew why Josuro was chosen, why the villagers had been butchered, why she’d been taken...

… it was all about *Luke*.

As she listened while he told them about Uttey Station and the horrible message that was waiting there for him, Laci’s heart broke. The tragedy - the insult - on such a scale was unimaginable, and yet, despite all that, Luke Skywalker had been keeping it to himself.

*He shouldn’t have to bear this all alone.*

She was being quiet, trying to be strong for him, because of his sister Leia. Although Leia was devastated by the news, she was holding on, but just barely; one choked-back sob from Laci could
put her over the edge.

Luke was standing in front of his sister, holding her hands, waiting.

“Ronjir Likit…” Leia made a face as she said the name, as if the very sound of it made her feel ill. “… the cold, black heart of the Technology Guild.”


“No personally,” Leia replied, making a side glance at Dar Noaa. He didn’t know Likit personally, either, but on more than one occasion, the Technology Guild and A and A had clashed over who had authority over their acquisitions. In those fights, Dar Noaa proved to be just as big a pain to Likit as he was to everyone else. “But I know *about* him; he took control of the Technology Guild and made it his personal kingdom. High tech, low tech, it doesn’t matter; nothing new gets out unless the The Technology Guild releases it.”

“One thing did.” Luke reminded her.

“Leia had no part in that,” Dar Noaa said quickly, “she was already gone, to the Resistance, when I took the vessel. And I did not take it from the Technology Guild, I took it from the Institute, in order to search for you.”

“ThisLikit seems to think you’re important,” Luke told him. “If you won’t come along with the ship, he wants your head.”

“You cannot take the vessel,” Dar Noaa answered, “and as for my head…”

“You can’t take *either* of them!” Leia interrupted. “The ship is damaged; it can’t go anywhere. And Dar Noaa’s head is… mine.”

Luke couldn’t help it, he just had to smirk.

“I’m not taking either,” he assured her.

“What are we going to do?” Leia’s voice sounded watery from swallowed tears. “What can we fo?

“*You*,” Luke raised her hands a little bit, “and the ship, and Dar Noaa’s head, are staying right here.”

“And you?”

“I have to go back and stop it.”

“But how?” Leia asked. "You don’t know the Technology Guild; they have power and the will to use it. They’re obviously willing to spend whatever it takes to get their hands on the ship - and they have it spend, Luke. What can you do against that?”

“I’m going to *take* it, Leia,” Luke explained. “All of it. Every single ingot! If they send more, I’ll take that, too. When they can’t pay the bounties they’ve promised and I’ve dealt with the bounty hunters, word will spread across the Outer Rim so fast that no one will risk doing business with them.”

“All that?” Dar Noaa asked. "Alone?"

“I will go,” Dar Na finally broke his silence; he’d been standing behind Dar Noaa to listen, but was too respectful to interrupt the Jedi until now. That was no small feat, because in Dar Na’s eyes, the insult to Luke Skywalker was an outrage that *absolutely* required ‘dealing with’. And although he knew he had no right to speak for the others, he already knew their minds. “Poe and Finn will come, too.”

Then he fell silent and waited for Dar Noaa’s opinion.

“Our circumstances here,” Dar Noaa addressed himself to Luke, “have *changed* since you left us; you still need to hear about that. But the core problem is the same: supplies. The fewer of us that remain here, the longer our supplies will last.” He gave Dar Na a quick, proud glance before continuing. “And Dar Na will be of great value to you.”

“He already has been,” Luke replied, “Thank you, Dar Na.”

The young Sith nodded, then turned and left immediately to find Poe and Finn.


“We’re not alone,” Leia answered first. “Ren and Rey went to check something upstream and found someone living there and ...”

“He’s *Kourin*.” Dar Noaa finished for her.


“*Indeed*,” Dar Noaa growled; his tone confirming Luke’s instant suspicion. “Curious, isn’t it? All the way out here, at the very Edge of the galaxy, we somehow managed to land our Kourin-built vessel right next door to one of the Kourin that built it.”

“Very curious.”

“And this Kourin ‘discovered’ that the vessel is damaged, in a device nobody knew existed and that he – personally – built, so he can repair it.”

“How convenient.”

“The damage is real, Luke; an old Empire merrokorbonite clearing blast caught us on the Goazon. We had no way of knowing, but the vessel *did*, and we know it communicates with the Kourin. They must have guided it – and me – here. It’s not the first time the vessel has deceived me.”

“Maybe,” Leia suggested, “they just wanted to help.”

“Unlikely,” Dar Noaa replied. “The Kourin did not become our allies voluntarily; they needed us. They have their own agenda: I cannot guess what it is, but now that we’ve saved the galaxy for them, I doubt that we matter any more.”

“Then why bring us here?” Leia asked. “Irno said the ship was doomed; they could have just let us be doomed with it.”


“The Kourin,” Dar Noaa explained. “That’s his name. Ren brought him back to be a hostage; he’s in the vessel right now...” Dar Noaa paused at the realization, “… on his own.” He looked at Leia.
“We should get back there.” Then he turned his attention to Luke again. “I want you to have a look at him; you might see what I cannot.”

“All right,” Luke replied. He shifted his weight to take a step toward the door, then stopped himself. “Go ahead, I’ll follow you. I need...” he looked over his shoulder, at Laci, “… a word here first.”

“Of course,” Leia said, then she looked past Luke, at the newcomer. “Thank you for best meal we’ve had in ages.”

Laci blushed.

As soon as his sister and the Sith had gone, Luke walked back to where she was standing. When he reached her, he put his hands on her upper arms as if he was about to pull her into an embrace, but went no further. Even before his eyes took her prisoner, Laci could see how concerned he was.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “I know how you must feel right now...”

“Yes, I’m all right.” She met his eyes with a show of strength; if he was feeling guilty, she was going to set him straight. “I needed to know why it happened, and now I do. Stop blaming yourself; it was done *to* you, not by you.”

They shared a fleeting silence; he let his hands slide down her arms and she caught them with hers, then held on tight.

“And I’m *ready*,” she told him, “whatever you want to do, count me in.”

“You’re not coming along.”

With that, Luke pulled his hands from hers, then turned away and started for the entry.

“What?” Laci called after him.

Then she followed him; into the corridor, then down the ramp into the meadow.

“I want you to stay here with Leia,” he told her as he walked ahead. “You’re still recovering from your injuries... and she could use the help.”

“It’s *you* who could use my help,” Laci snapped back at him, “and you *know* it.”

That stopped him; clearly she was not going to just let him say ‘no’ and walk away. She was like Leia, as hard-headed as she was strong! Suddenly, the meadow seemed much bigger, the walk to the Visitor much longer, and he sighed loudly.

“What I know,” he turned to face her, “is where I’m about to go is dangerous, and what I’m about to do is something you do not want to be part of.”

Luke did not notice that, across the meadow, at the Visitor’s entry, Dar Noaa was standing there watching. He was following Leia into the ship when he sensed it starting, and stopped to watch out of pure Sith curiosity. How was the Jedi going to handle this unexpected turn of events? Did he even know what was happening? There was no way to tell which way it would go...

Seeing that Dar Noaa had not come inside, Leia had immediately gone to find out why, quickly
tracking him down outside the entry.

“I turned around and you weren’t there,” she stepped out beside him. “What are you doing out here?”

“I’m watching your brother lose an argument.”

Puzzled, Leia searched in the direction he was looking and saw Luke and Laci in what certainly appeared to be a ‘discussion’, if not an outright argument. Laci was speaking and Luke was standing there with his hands folded behind his back. That was his ‘patient Jedi’ pose.

“See how he stands?” Dar Noaa shared his observations gleefully. “He is not yet convinced, but he *is* listening.”

Dar Noaa was correct, Luke was listening.

“You’re wrong,” Laci had her hands open and out, as if she was pouring the words into an invisible basket to give to him. “I do want to be part of it, and not because I want revenge for Lutor and the others.” She took a breath to keep herself focused on her request, not her pain. “Nothing can bring those poor souls in Josuro back, but together, we can make sure that no one *else* follows them. That’s the only justice they can have now - but you can’t do it alone.”

“I won’t be alone.”

“You mean Chewbacca and the young men,” Laci replied, “yes, they’re good fighters; yes, they have courage, and yes, they *believe* in you. But how much do any of you really know about the Outer Rim worlds?” She took a step toward him. “You need *me*, Luke! Lutor did a lot of business on the Rim; I have contacts there. I speak all six trade languages and I know barter sign...”

“Threepio is a protocol droid; he can translate.”

“Yes, I’m sure he can, and nobody is going to notice *that* ancient thing walking around, are they?”

Luke frowned; he hadn’t considered that. Two antique droids, a Wookie and a Sith would definitely be noticed, and Likit would have made sure that descriptions of his ‘known associates’ were in the hands of his agents. They would all have been profiled except for Dar Na, who wore his identity on his face.

But that did not include Laci; she wasn’t part of anyone’s galaxy except his now.

“You *need* me,” she took another step closer to him, “I’m *nobody*; no one is looking for me; I can go where I please and do what I please, and *no* one will notice...”

Luke’s eyes widened; it was true that no one was looking for her, but anyone with eyes would notice her. Perhaps she didn’t know how beautiful she was.

 “… and anyone who *did* notice,” she continued, “would believe that I was merely visiting business contacts; it’s done all the time. Those ingots you took have value; items like those trade well on the Rim. You’ve got the resource; *I* can make it work for you. I can get supplies, information, maybe even some help.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Luke argued feebly. “What’s happening there is because of me; I’m going because I don’t have a choice. You do.”
“And I’ve made it.” Laci moved even closer; something in his eyes told her he was wavering. One more push could make all the difference. “Tell you what, Luke Skywalker, if you can look me right in the eyes and *honestly* say that I wouldn’t be of use out there, I’ll stay behind.”

She followed the challenge by leaning in and staring hard, close enough that she filled Luke’s senses. Everything about her conspired against him; her face, her breasts rising and falling with every breath, the subtle scents of her body so close to his. For a moment, he was immobilized by a feeling he hadn’t experienced in a very long time and no longer remembered how to ignore.

She was winning; she was right, she would be very useful. And he needed her.

“I can’t say that.” He admitted, surrendering.

“I know.” She answered.

Across the meadow, Dar Noaa and Leia had been following the action as if they were at a sporting event. They saw Luke’s hands separate, then drop to his sides.

“*There*!” Dar Noaa made the call. “See? His arms are down! She has him now.”

Leia was quiet for a second or two before she replied. She’d seen something else in the little pantomime display between her brother and the newcomer.

Confirmation.

She’d sensed it when Luke introduced her to Laci, and then again when he took that bowl from her. He could hide it from himself, but not from his twin sister.

“Yes,” she said; there was a trace of hope in her voice. “I believe she does.”

…………

To be continued...
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stone meadow highlands, The Edge.

There were times when no amount of experience with humans was enough to make a Wookie understand them.

From his self-imposed confinement in the Millennium Falcon’s cockpit, Chewbacca had an unobstructed view of the meadow and everything happening there. He was a seasoned veteran in reading body language, and his excellent hearing made it impossible to avoid overhearing what was being said. Chewbacca had long since abandoned efforts to block it out in favor of simply taking it all in and never mentioning it afterwards.

Except occasionally to Maz Katana, and that was always in private.

There were many times when Han Solo would show up before a story was finished, and he never failed to notice the sudden silence his arrival caused. Then Han would say something like “You’re talking about *me* again, aren’t you?” and Maz would laugh and laugh.

None of the voices drifting from the meadow at the moment were theirs, though; Chewbacca would never hear their voices again, except in memories. That knowledge weighed on him heavily.

Chewbacca watched Finn and Poe go to the other ship, then he watched Finn and Rey share a short tense walk that ended abruptly when she spotted something on top of the Visitor. Chewbacca didn’t know how he had missed the creature that was up there, but Rey’s calls to it sounded annoyed, not alarmed, as if she knew the creature, so there was no need to rush to her aid. The creature slid down the side of the Visitor’s hull and landed at her feet, then it led them, or they herded it, to the ship’s entry and inside; Chewbacca couldn’t tell which.

Then Dar Na crossed the meadow; he walked fast, purposely, and went directly inside the Visitor.

Shortly after that, Chewbacca watched Leia and Dar Noaa walking back to the ship together. They were holding hands. Chewbacca had no ill will against the Sith; Dar Noaa stepped in to fill the emptiness in Leia’s life that would not have been there if Han Solo had not abandoned her.

Han abandoned Leia.

It was a harsh indictment, but Chewbacca had no illusions about it.

Han was always leaving Leia.

Chewbacca remembered countless goodbyes: Han restless and ready, eager to get going; Leia pretending that it didn’t upset her. She’d put on a brave front, smiling and waving as they rose into the sky, but she wasn’t doing that for Han; she was doing it for the boy.

Han was always leaving Ben, too

Chewbacca remembered countless times when he wanted to say something about it to Han, but in
the end, he never did. He kept telling himself that, in time, Han would find a way to bridge the
growing chasm between himself and his son. But in the end, Han never did.

And now, he never will. Kylo Ren saw to that.

The meadow became still, but there was no peace in it for Chewbacca; without a distraction, his
thoughts kept going back to the fight between Ren and Finn. It was a *perfect* opportunity; all he
had to do was run to the Falcon entry and he would’ve had a clear shot from the top of the ramp. But
when that moment came, he felt invisible hands shoving him down into the seat and holding him
there. He had no way to tell who was holding him down; it could have been Luke *or* Leia, or the
Sith.

Or Ren.

By the time he was able to make himself move again, the opportunity was gone.

Voices on the Falcon’s ramp pulled him back to the present; it was Luke and Laci this time, and it
sounded like the disagreement he knew was coming had finally begun. Chewbacca snorted softly;
he’d known since Luke spoke with him about returning to the Rim that the Jedi’s plan to leave Laci
here with Leia would *not* be well received. Luke never asked Laci if she wanted to come here; he
just brought her along. Now he was planning to leave her behind without asking. And, as
Chewbacca expected, Laci had objections to that.

The brief confrontation out in the meadow was amusing and informative. Laci showed herself to be
much more than a pretty face and a good cook; her arguments for why she should come along made
so much sense that Chewbacca didn’t understand why it was taking Luke so long to change his
mind. Maz would complain about him being ‘stupid and stubborn’, but Chewbacca never saw him
that way before.

Perhaps he was alone on that island too long...

Finally, Chewbacca heard Luke give in, then he watched the Jedi resume his walk to the Visitor
alone.

Laci returned to the Falcon.

Hardly a moment later, she appeared at the cockpit entry. Her face was flushed and she was wearing
a victorious grin.

“Chewbacca,” she said, “Come eat; there’s plenty left.”

Without waiting for an answer, she whirled around and headed off to the galley.

Chewbacca was on his feet instantly to follow her; for the time being, all other thoughts except
finishing off those leftovers vanished from his head.

……

In the little ship across the meadow, it was getting crowded fast.

Poe Dameron was walking the corridor toward the cockpit when he heard the commotion just
outside the ship. His little talk with Ren had taken an unexpected turn, then ended abruptly when Poe
heard the entry slide open behind him. Ren didn’t tell him to leave, but the message of that open door
was clear: Get Out. Poe didn’t need any more encouragement than that, either; he left without another
word. He could hear Rey and Finn’s voices getting louder, which meant they were coming back to
the ship, and Poe was not where they would expect him to be. He managed to get to the cockpit and plop into the pilot’s seat only seconds before they got there.

“Hey,” he turned his head to greet them, only to find himself looking directly into a pair of large gray eyes set against a lighter gray face.

“Hey.” Irno said back. He was instantly more curious than afraid because unlike the Force-sensitives, this being was incredibly easy to read, in fact, this being was actually *attractive*, even more than that Rey was. Irno wondered why.

“Poe,” Rey came up behind the gray creature that was staring at him intently, “this is Irno. Irno, this is our friend Poe.”

“Where’d you come from?” Poe asked.

“I live here.”

“You… live… here?”

“He’s Kourin.” Rey injected herself into the conversation, taking it over. “He lives upstream, by the waterfalls.” Her eyes moved from Poe to Finn to make sure they were both listening, “It’s a nice home and a very nice *workshop*. And guess what? Irno is one of the Kourin who *built* this ship.”

Poe and Finn exchanged a look, silently consulting one another and coming to a shared conclusion.

“That’s interesting,” Poe took the lead; the Kourin was showing all the symptoms and, for once, his curse might be useful. “You’re a builder?”

“No. I make things.”

Irno’s reply was quick and revealing: he disliked the label ‘builder’, but didn’t have another label to put in its place.

“An engineer, then?”

“No. I *make* things.”

Poe was was getting nowhere; he needed a little help.

“*Viz*,” he consulted the ship without looking at the waveform. “Who is this?”

“Kourin technician,” Viz replied, “ID KT1097M…”

“Not anymore.” Irno corrected the ship. “Irno. Ir… *No*.”

“… Ir… *no*…” Viz corrected its database before continuing, “… Systems Integration Division… Specialization code F1….”

“F1, that’s as black box as it gets,” Finn said. “He’s First Order property.”


“I think,” Poe kept his eyes on Irno as he replied for him, “he’s like *you*, Finn.” He leaned in a tiny bit to study Irno’s face. “He didn’t like being ‘property’, so he left.”
“Yes,” Irno agreed loudly. He liked this one. “Exactly. I *left*.” Then he looked back at Finn nervously. “First Order?”


“Tell me,” Poe pulled Irno’s attention back with a light touch on his grip hand. “what were you doing for them?”

“*He* makes little things,” Rey replied before Irno could. She put a hand on his shoulder, partly to encourage him and partly to signal Poe to keep going. “*Important* little things.”

“Is that so?” Poe asked.

Suddenly, Irno’s eyes narrowed. He leaned forward, his face coming close to Poe’s.

“Who’s asking?” He challenged.

Poe was opening his mouth to introduce himself when movement at the entry caught the edge of his vision and he reflexively looked that way. Everyone else turned to look, too.

It was Dar Na.

Poe knew him well enough now to see that Dar Na was excited, but the glow in his eyes was not the faint, flickering kind that accompanied the young Sith’s laughter; it was the other kind, steady and hot, like the blaze of a star destroyer’s primary engines just before a jump. A fight was coming. Finn only needed a glimpse, too; he shot a glance at Poe for confirmation, then turned his eyes back to Dar Na. Rey’s face revealed only her pleasure to see him, and that was interrupted when Irno looked, then let out a strange whining sound. It was quiet, but high-pitched, not exactly a growl, but alarm nonetheless.

“That’s Dar Na,” Rey patted Irno’s shoulder reassuringly. “Another friend.”

That quieted irno, but it didn’t relax him; the Kourin’s eyes were fixed on the intruder as if he was a target. Dar Na returned the direct stare, but only for a second before he gave them the news.

“The Jedi is going back,” he announced, “I am going with him.”

Finn and Poe exchanged another look; once again, for confirmation. They hadn’t discussed the possibility because it was completely unnecessary; they both knew what the other would do if the opportunity arose.

“When do we leave?” Finn asked.

“I do not know,” Dar Na replied, “Soon.” He took a step closer, peering down at the Kourin with curiosity. “What is this?”

“*That*,” Finn pointed boldly; the gesture was unexpected and Irno jerked his head back defensively. “is a *Kourin*.”

“Yes...” Dar Na replied, studying Irno intently. “It is as you told us... gray.”

More movement at the entry stopped the inspection. This time the faces appearing there were familiar, and Irno was visibly relieved to see that one of them was Dar Noaa. The anxiety that had been churning inside him calmed as his mind instantly turned to the one thing he was bred for.

The work.
“You’re *back*.” Irno pushed himself past Rey, then between Finn and Dar Na, eying the latter cautiously until he got past, then stopped in front of Dar Noaa and Leia. “Good, I…” He looked back at the others and, suddenly realizing there was an audience listening, he reconsidered what he was about to say. This would not be a group project; all he needed was Dar Noaa. He made a side-step and planted himself directly in front of the Sith to symbolically exclude the others. “We need to talk…”

“I found him,” Rey cut him off quickly, “*outside*; he was climbing on the hull.”

Dar Noaa reacted, but didn’t reply; he just looked down at Irno expectantly.

“I was…” Irno chose his words carefully, “… checking the coatings.” It wasn’t a lie; he was checking; he just wasn’t checking for the reason he was sure Dar Noaa would assume. And the Sith needed to hear the story from the beginning with *every* detail because anything short of that was going to infuriate him. “You and I,” he urged, “… we *need* to talk.”

“We will,” Dar Noaa said. There was a dark undertone to his words; as if the Sith was already angry about something. “But first things, first…” He looked back, into the corridor, at someone else who was just about to come through the entry, “This is our friend, Luke Skywalker. He’s very curious about *you*.”

“Hey.” Irno said meekly, using the greeting he’d just learned from Poe. There was something different about this one, and it frightened him; he just didn’t know what or why. And there really wasn’t time for any of this…

Irno watched everyone step out of the way so this one called Luke could come forward. There was no escape.

………

Across the meadow, in the Falcon’s galley, the work was almost done.

Chewbacca was lingering over the last tidbits of food, politely listening to Laci’s victory speech. She was quickly picking up the nuance of Wookie, so he was able to participate as well as listen; and they both knew barter sign, which was enough on its own for communication.

“*I was* *so* lucky,” she widened her eyes for punctuation, “that Luke didn’t remember that you know barter sign.”

Chewbacca mewed agreeably; Laci was luckier than she knew. While Luke was not remembering Chewbacca’s barter sign skill, he was also not remembering that he *himself* spoke three trade languages fluently, and the other three passably well enough to get by. Luke also failed to remember that he knew barter sign, too. Chewbacca was sure Luke had his reasons for that, and he saw no value in mentioning any of it now. He put the only remaining bowl to his lips and sucked out the last of the food with a suitably appreciative slurp, partly because Laci took it as praise and partly because she *deserved* praise; she was the best cook the Falcon ever had. Chewbacca was an authority on that subject.

“How soon,” Laci asked, “do you think we’ll be leaving?”

One, then two, furry fingers that were gripping the bowl straightened. Chewbacca could never be sure of Luke’s mind on anything, but the Wookie already told Luke about the worrisome waste nebulizer that was probably clogged and in need of cleaning again. That task would easily consume half a day or longer.
“One or two,” Laci said, “then, he’ll have time to visit with his family.”

Chewbacca set the empty bowl down so she could take it for cleaning.

“Tell me something,” Laci reached for the bowl, only to stop when her hands landed on it. “Luke’s family...” she pulled the bowl slowly towards herself, keeping her eyes down, on it, as she spoke. “…if they’re all *here*...” She and the bowl stopped while she took a deep breath. “Doesn’t he have someone… somewhere?”

Chewbacca grunted ‘no’. It was the second Wookie word he’d taught her.

“No?” She picked the bowl up, and looked at him.

Chewbacca met her gaze with the barter sign for ‘never’.

“Oh.”

For a few seconds, she seemed to stare right through him, and Chewbacca knew what that meant; she was having a private conversation with herself regarding what she’d just heard. He watched her face skillfully, making sure not to intrude and distract her, so her eyes and expressions would tell him what she was thinking. It was a display he saw often; she was arguing both sides of a question to herself - a bizarre ritual that humans performed in order to convince themselves that they were giving something they really wanted to do rational forethought, usually right before they did it anyway.

*Han Solo did it. All. The. Time.*

That was one of the most endearing and infuriating things about him; no matter how recklessly wild Han Solo’s ideas could be, Chewbacca always went along for the ride because, just like Han, the Wookie simply couldn’t resist an adventure. The memory surprised him; for the first time since Han’s death, Chewbacca was remembering him without instantly drowning in sorrow. That was because of Laci. Ever since the night Luke Skywalker emerged from darkness with this woman in his arms, Chewbacca had a new purpose: helping her.

*Whatever she needs; wherever, whenever. Whoever...*

Chewbacca saw her pout; he saw her eyes narrow with doubt, then relax. It was always the same; they always talked to themselves but they *never* listened.

*And now, he thought, the adventure begins...*

Aware again, Laci immediately masked herself behind a smile.

“Thank you, Chewbacca,” she said, “for helping me.” Her eyes widened as if she’d just revealed something she hadn’t meant to and she quickly added, “… clean up.”

Pretending not to notice the flush of red that was peeking out from behind Han Solo’s old shirt and quickly spreading up her neck, Chewbacca signed ‘Thank you, best food’ and added a satisfied grunt. Then he signed again, ‘Name for, friend’.

“*Chewy*.” She said it the way she’d heard Luke say it. Then she signed ‘Friend.’

Chewbacca purred back affectionately. He wasn’t sure where this adventure was going, but he was sure of one thing. He was coming along for the ride.
Across the meadow, the Visitor’s cockpit had cleared out.

Dar Na summoned Finn and Poe to join him outside with a quick jerk of his head in the direction of the corridor before leaving. Finn was already back there, so he followed immediately, but Poe, was trapped in the pilot’s seat now by the Jedi and the Kourin. He solved that problem by climbing over the back of the seat. Rey slipped quietly between Leia and Dar Noaa, then hurried to catch up because she wanted to hear what Dar Na had to say.

They were just outside the entry, standing together in the ship’s shadow. The sun was hovering just above the mountains; a few minutes more and that shadow would be gone, lost in twilight as evening fell onto the stone meadow highlands. Poe and Finn listened silently while Dar Na reported what had been said in the Falcon’s galley with their hands folded behind them in military fashion. Rey tried to do the same, too, but couldn’t keep herself from gasping when the worst of it was revealed. She clamped a hand over her mouth and left it there.

The afternoon breeze died out just as Dar Na finished, and the quiet in the meadow quickly became unbearable.

“So,” Finn spoke first; his voice broke the silence like a hammer on glass. “What’s the plan?”

“We find those responsible,” Dar Na replied, “and deal with them, all of them, as we did at Uttey Station.”

Poe and Finn nodded; there was nothing to say. They were going to war, but this would be no stand-up fight; it would be dangerous and dirty and if they survived, they would be changed forever. But as sure as they were that it would be terrible, they were also sure that they were going.

“And when we have done that,” Dar Na added, “we will go to Coruscant.”

“Coruscant?” Poe asked.

“Coruscant,” Dar Na repeated the name, confirming it, “is where we will find one called Likit. Then we will deal with him.”

“He means,” Poe translated for the others, “kill him.”

“Likit is already dead,” Dar Na replied coldly. There was absolute certainty in his voice. “He just doesn’t know it yet.”

Rey had heard enough; gesturing weakly with her hands, she excused herself and went to tell Ren.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes
Dammit. Blending two stories isn't as easy as I'd hoped it would be. I thought I could jam it all into this chapter, but I can't make it fit without making it awful, so... there's one more little chapter before I can get back to the sex and violence we all crave. There's an important reveal coming, too.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Stone meadow highlands, the Edge.

It was going to be a stunning night.

Evening descended on the meadow like a thief; it moved silently up from below without being noticed, taking the light a millimeter at a time until there was none left to take. Bushes merged into black mounds at meadow’s edge and beyond them, high-climbing vines and the trees they held captive became twisted and tangled sculptures standing black against the last of the twilight glow. Above, a few members of the Edge’s sparse star population were already visible; aged and bloated red giants that flashed orange, then white, then orange again, in the cooling air.

None of it mattered; Finn, Poe and Dar Na returned to the Millennium Falcon without looking.

They walked up the ramp, entered the ship, went straight to the communal room and found places to flop. Poe climbed into one of the bunks and turned on his side so he could see Poe and Dar Na, who sought refuge around the Dejarik table.

“Where do you think we’ll go first?” He asked. “The Rim’s… big.”

“The Jedi will choose,” Dar Na answered.

“I know what I’d do,” Poe said.

Finn’s spot at the table was tight; he had to wiggle, then twist his body around on the seat so he could see Poe. Hours spent venting his rage in in the Resistance rehab produced impressive results, giving him powerful muscles that would not yield much to pressure.

“What would you do?”

Laci walked into the communal space just as Finn was asking; she stopped in the space directly between him and Poe to intercept the question.

“I’m thinking Sonidan or Bah’arhoon,” she didn’t look at either of them as she spoke, instead, she stared off, as if she was talking to herself. “They’re not on the primary trade jump routes, but a lot of secondary traffic flows their way.” She turned to face Finn as she continued. “Sonidan has been a trading center forever; lots of choices there. Bah’arhoon is much younger; smaller population, but it’s got few regulations, scant supervision and almost no enforcement; fewer choices there, but a lot less risk. And I have good contacts there.”

“Sounds like you’ve been giving this,” Finn replied, “a lot of thought, Laci.”

“You’re coming with us?” Poe asked. He did not sound surprised.

“Yes, I am.” Laci’s eyes went from Finn to Poe, then back to Finn and then to Dar Na, searching for reactions. “You’re going to be very busy with… what you do… so from now on, think of me as your business agent. You tell me what you need and I’ll do the trading. Hmmm…” She paused and put a
finger to her lips. “...Bah'arhoon. Yes. *Definitely*. They’ll melt and recast those ingots for a percentage...”

Her voice trailed off as she began to walk again, lost in thought, oblivious to the three young males she was leaving behind.

They watched her disappear into the corridor, then exchanged looks.

“Bah - ar - hoon.” Finn said.

“Yes.” Dar Na agreed.

“*Definitely*.” Poe concurred. “I guess we’d better go look it up.”

…………

Across the meadow, in the Visitor cockpit, Luke Skywalker had met his match; Irno was transparent, which made him impenetrable. The Kourin kept insisting that he couldn’t remember anything, so every question Luke put to him revealed nothing, and there was no way around the wall of amnesia because Irno, like Jabba the Hut so long, long ago, was immune to his Jedi mind tricks.

“I made things for the First Order,” Irno explained wearily. “That’s why *they* took me; so I would make things for *them* instead. I don’t remember coming here, but I know *they* brought me. I don’t remember what I make, unless I see it again, and then I only remember how I made it.”

“Did you know this ship was coming here?”

“No!” Irno insisted. “I wouldn’t know *now*, except that Ren and Rey were *mating* on my roof. Bump and scratch and moans and groans... do you have any idea how *annoying* that is?”

Luke glanced up at Leia with a sly grin; she blushed and looked away. There was a time when Leia and Han Solo were always finding new and inappropriate places to make love, and more than once Luke’s bond with his sister made him an unintentional - and involuntary - witness to it. When he found out that Force discretion could be used to keep out as well as in, Luke made learning it a priority, and life got much less annoying. It amused Luke now to see that even after all these years, Leia was still embarrassed about it.

“I’m sure it was *very* annoying,” he told Irno, “and yet, you took them in.”

“Yes, I did.” Irno admitted, then he frowned in bewilderment. “I don’t know why I did that...” When no reason came to mind, he shook his head, then glared at Luke defiantly, “and look where I am *now* because of it.”

“I am sorry about that,” Luke replied sympathetically. “But it won’t be for much longer. Dar Noaa says that as soon as Ren...”

“*Ren*...” Hearing the name made Irno remember; the fingers of his tech hand automatically went to the pocket where he’d put the energy sink module he’d just removed from the hull coating. It was still there. He looked up, past the one called Luke to Dar Noaa. “We have to talk.”


“Yes, I am,” Luke announced. It was pointless to continue; the Kourin was distracted now and unlikely to be cooperative until he got his way. Letting it go for the time being made sense, and it would give Luke an opportunity to do what he really came to do. He straightened up and turned to
Leia. “I’ll see Ben now.”

“Now?” She asked. Her voice was steady, but her eyes betrayed her; she was afraid. “He’s probably asleep...”

“He’s not asleep.”

Leia pouted; it was a foolish lie. He was awake; she could feel it, which meant Luke could, too. Luke wanted to do what she’d been *asking* him to do, but now that the moment had finally come, her mother’s instincts were screaming ‘no!’! Ren was still so new, so *fragile* - and Luke was was still so full of bitterness from rage gone cold with time. She tried not to imagine what might happen if things went wrong between her brother and her son, but the images in her head just would not stop.

Luke reached for her hand, then held it gently.

“Trust me, Leia.” He whispered. He was looking deep into her soul with those ageless eyes that never failed to reassure her, and Leia’s heart melted; she sighed loudly, then took a deep breath.

“All right, then” she said, “but I’m coming with you.”

Dar Noaa watched them walk out together; it was difficult to stand by and stay out of it, but he knew where his place was. When the time came that she needed him to get involved, if it came, she would let him know. And he had faith in her; if there was anyone who could find a way to heal her family’s wounds, it was Leia Organa.

“So,” He turned to the Kourin, “talk; I’m ready to listen.”

“I know,” Irno replied, “why you wanted the sensors adjusted.”

“Why?”

Irno went to the waveform and touched its surface. In seconds, he had the display long up and running.

“See this?” He tapped the image with his grip hand. “This is now.” He put his fingers together and slid them along the wavy white line. “This is Ren. And you. And that Rey. And that Leia.” He leaned close to examine something. “And that Luke, too.”

“Yes. What of it?”

“This,” Irno tapped the line, “is all of you. Together.”

“So?”

Irno’s tech hand fingers tapped quickly on the waveform and another line, this one red, appeared in the display. It was maxed out along the top of the image grid.

“*This*,” he tapped the red line, “is from earlier. Watch.”

Irno tapped the waveform. The white line vanished as the red display began to playback the log recorded during the incident outside. Dar Noaa watched in silence as it reset repeatedly, then crashed.

“That’s *Ren*.” Irno said. “*Just* Ren. His reading is so high, the rest of you don’t even register.”
He slid his fingers to the crash point. “And right *here*, it became too much.”

“For the monitor...”

“And for Ren, too.”

Silence.

Dar Noaa was standing there, perfectly still, staring at the display. Irno knew that sometimes humans would become paralyzed by information they could not comprehend; those idiots in the First Order did it all the time. But he was genuinely surprised to see it in this Sith, who seemed to be educated and more experienced with the unexpected.

“If this keeps happening,” Irno offered the benefit of his insight slowly, just as he would have done with the First Order, “the midiclorians in every cell in his body are going to explode.”

He paused to give Dar Noaa time to absorb what he’d just said. It was probably hard for the Sith to accept the fact that someone he seemed to care about would soon be a steaming puddle of inanimate goo, so Irno could be patient. He tapped the waveform, dismissing the playback.

The white line in the current display had changed; the registers were higher than before.

And they seemed to be climbing.

....

Not far away, in his quarters, Ren was listening quietly as Rey finished the story of why Luke had come back so soon.

His head was already aching from Poe’s visit, and he’d shifted his arms and knees, then leaned his head forward as if compacting himself into the smallest space possible might lessen the pain. She’d returned in a great rush, so distressed that when she dropped to her knees beside him and began to speak, he just let her pour it all out.

It was quite a story, too.

Likit’s approach was brilliantly brutal; the sheer horror of it would be enough to paralyze anyone into obedience. But Likit’s plan had one glaring flaw: he should have never tried doing something like that to Luke Skywalker. Not even Snoke ever dared to consider attacking the last Jedi in such a manner for fear that it would provoke *instant* retaliation - and no one in galaxy knew just how powerful Luke Skywalker was or how extreme his retaliation might be.

Obviously, Likit had no understanding of - or respect for - a true Master of The Force.

Ren once believed he had both understanding and respect, but he learned otherwise during that confrontation in the rain on Ahch’tu. Despite all Ren’s training and preparation, the old Jedi was still able to put him down with one unexpected move.

*Kylo Ren died that night. Luke Skywalker killed him to save Ben Solo.*

Thinking about it now, Ren felt a flush of admiration for his uncle; Luke Skywalker always had a special talent for coming up with the unexpected. Ren recalled Ben’s time at the academy: Master Luke would rarely conduct training himself, but when he did, the result was always pandemonium. Students hoping to show off their ability would eagerly take their turns sparring with the Jedi, only to be tripped up in ways they *never* saw coming! Ben would watch from a distance in respectful
silence but inside, he would be bursting with laughter and pride. In those days, he wanted to be just like Luke Skywalker.

*Then Ben... then I... destroyed it; the academy, my uncle, my mother, all of it. And yet, Luke...*

*Luke*.

Ren felt it before Rey did; she was just coming to the part about how Master Luke was going back when the entry door slid open and the Jedi and the General walked in. Ren raised his head, but didn’t look in their direction. Rey didn’t look, either; she’d been so focused on telling Ren the story that she’d been taken by surprise, but that wasn’t why she didn’t turn her face away from him. He glanced her way and she caught his eyes just long enough to offer a supportive smile before he looked away again.

A slow, deep breath of preparation, then Ren was ready; he turned his head and looked up to face Luke Skywalker.

…..

In the cockpit, nothing was being said; they were both staring at the waveform display. The white line was creeping higher on the graph.

“The register is climbing.” Dar Noaa knew he was stating the obvious; Irno didn’t need to be told, he knew it all too well. The Sith hoped he was misinterpreting; he’d just heard some very disturbing news and was upset; perhaps the change was due to that. “Is that because of me?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Can you isolate the source?”

Irno tapped something onto the waveform and the display changed. Now it was showing a series of five lines, each a different color, each moving along on its own level. Except for small displacements, all but one were stable.

“I’m not sure who’s who down here, but I can tell you...” Irno poised his grip hand over the image, “… that *this*...” One finger touched the surface, intercepting the highest line; the red line, the one that was climbing away from the others. “… is *Ren*.”

…..

Not far away, in Ren and Rey’s quarters, things were moving agonizingly slow.

Luke walked to his nephew and stood looking down at him for much too long, but Ren didn’t flinch. He was a Knight of Ren; he kept his eyes open and looked straight ahead while he waited, as the Code required. The discipline he displayed seemed to interest the Jedi, probably because it was something that Ben Solo always lacked, but Luke Skywalker’s amusement was brief.

“Your mother,” Luke began. Ren winced slightly at the words, and Luke saw it. “tells me me that you are feeling better.”

“Yes.” Ren looked up at his uncle. “Sir.”

“Dar Na says it was the Drop; Dar Noaa says not so. What do you think?”

“The Drop? No.” Ren replied. “And not like...” He hadn’t had a seizure of any kind since he went
to the Knights, but there was no forgetting the fear and humiliation of the ones he experienced at the academy. The Jedi was probably thinking this one was like those, but it was not. “… before.”

“Give me your hand.”

Ren obeyed without hesitation, offering his right hand, the hand that had offended the Jedi, as the Code required. Luke didn’t grasp it; he laid his living hand down on it palm to palm, then wrapped his fingers around the back and hooked his thumb around Ren’s.

Then he closed his eyes.

Ren felt Luke flowing into his body, channeling up his arm, then into his chest and then finally, into his head, but he didn’t resist. There was no malice in the touch, just interest and concern. It was too much; more than Ren could bear. Feelings he’d denied for so long escaped the graveyard in his mind; memories flashed like daggers, cutting deep, freeing more memories. Luke Skywalker had always been a kind and encouraging uncle; he was the one who took Ben in when even his mother had turned away...

... and Ben betrayed him.

“I know,” Ren told the Jedi, “it makes no difference...”


“… but I want you to know,” Ren persisted. It was as if someone else was speaking, not him. “… I never went inside the academy. I was *outside* the entire time. I didn’t know.”

Luke stared at him; Ren saw hurt, then anger. And then, something else, that he couldn’t believe. Forgiveness.


But it was too late to be quiet.

_Suddenly Ren was standing in the Academy Common, surrounded by dead and dying instructors, staring at the hideous funeral pyre that had been the Academy. Something was moving inside the flames; in the glare, it was no more than a shadow, but as it emerged from the fire and started walking toward him with its arms outstretched, Ren finally saw the monster for what it was – Kylo Ren!_

_Kylo Ren was born that night._

Ren opened his mouth to scream, but nothing came out. Then he felt himself going stiff and everything went black.

…..

Not far away, in the cockpit, whatever was being discussed was forgotten instantly when the monitor crashed.

Dar Noaa and Irno were watching the waveform when the display went down; both froze for an instant, then they turned to one another. Nothing was said; they could see on each other’s face that they were both thinking the same thing.

Then Irno bolted.
He ran to the entry and through, then raced down the corridor, heading for the sleeping quarters with Dar Noaa following right behind him. Voices coming from Ren and Rey’s quarters told them exactly where to go. As they arrived, the entry door slid open, and Irno crashed into Leia, who’d run there to call for help.

“It’s Ren,” she told Dar Noaa quickly. “He’s having another seizure.”

While Dar Noaa was reaching for Leia, Irno squeezed past her and went inside. Ren was at the far end of the room; he was lying on his back on the floor jerking rigidly. Rey was kneeling at Ren’s side, and that Luke was hovering over Ren, holding one of his hands.

Irno’s feet hardly touched the floor as he sped to join Rey. He dropped to his knees beside her, grabbed the pouch that was dangling from her belt with his grip hand and ripped it free. She gave a quick side glance, but didn’t seem aware that he was even there; then she turned her eyes back to Ren. Irno fumbled the pouch open; he knew what was in there because he’d found the pouch among Rey’s things that first day while he was drying them. He flipped the pouch over, letting its contents fall out.

The little dagger hit the floor with a solid clank.

Irno tossed the pouch aside and picked the dagger up; at the same time, his tech hand was fishing the energy sink module from his pocket. For a second, he wasn’t sure where to go next, and as he was searching for a place – anyplace – Rey suddenly wailed out.

“He’s…” Her head was turning wildly this way and that as she looked at everyone and no one in her desperation. “… not breathing!”

The distraction proved invaluable; Irno looked down at Ren’s chest, then noticed that his left arm was lying on the floor with his hand palm up. It was as good a place as any, and *right* in front of him.

He slammed the little dagger down, stabbing it into, then *through*, the center of Ren’s hand.

Then he pulled the dagger out.

As blood began to fill the palm of Ren’s hand, Irno quickly moved his tech hand over it to center, then drop, the module. But before the device disappeared into the pool of blood, Irno placed his grip hand on top of it, then pushed hard to drive it in deep.

Silence.

But something was happening - Rey and the others suddenly jerked backwards as if they’d just been hit by a powerful blast, but Irno was bending low, pressing, so he didn’t see that. And he was immune to the Force, so he couldn’t feel the invisible column of energy that was shooting up out of Ren’s hand through his.

“I can’t sense it!” he shouted. “Is it *working*?!”

“Yes!” Luke shouted back; although closest to disturbance, he was first to recover from the shock. He dropped Ren’s hand, then put his own hand on Ren’s chest.

No movement; Luke’s hand was deathly still as it sat there. Ren wasn’t breathing.

Closing his eyes to focus, Luke spread his fingers wide and then slowly started to lift his hand up and away - and Ren’s chest expanded as if it was being pulled up behind it. A few seconds passed, then
Luke snapped his hand into a fist, releasing his nephew. Free now and filled with air, Ren’s lungs triggered his diaphragm to push it all out in a long, loud sigh.

And then, after an eternal second or two, Ren took a breath on his own.

Everyone had their own reaction; a gasp, a squeal, a grunt escaped relieved lips in wordless celebration, then they fell silent when they realized that it was not over yet. Ren was breathing, but he was still unconscious.

Luke leaned over and put his hand on Ren’s forehead. Everyone watched and waited.

Except Irno.

When the Jedi leaned down, he’d blocked Irno’s view and the Kourin brushed against him as he pushed forward, trying to see Ren’s face. If that Ren failed to wake up, this would have been a complete waste of time and he’d probably never get to go home...

The Jedi noticed.

“Don’t be afraid, my little friend,” Luke said, “And don’t worry; he’ll be all right.”

Irno believed him.

……

Across the meadow, in the Millennium Falcon’s communal room, a small struggle was taking place.

The instant Finn jerked himself out from behind the Dejarik table and stood, Poe leaped from the bunk and tackled him. Finn was still caught in the first rush of the Force sensation and failed to see Poe coming, so they collided hard; tangled legs sent them tumbling to the floor with a tremendous crash.

Poe landed on top. He held onto the high ground by climbing onto Finn and sitting there. He glared down at Finn’s shocked face.

“Not. This. Time.” Poe said.

It was an order, not a request; there was no way Poe was going to let Finn continue to go running off to Ren every time he felt something happen. He shifted his weight forward and dropped his hands onto Finn’s shoulders to hold him down; to keep him here; to keep him safe...

And to Poe’s surprise, Finn *let* him.

The Resistance fighter was staring up at him with wide, startled eyes. Poe had expected to see rage in those eyes, which would be followed instantly with an angry shove from those huge arms that would send him flying across the room, but Finn’s expression was something else entirely.

Awareness.

For an instant, everything else dimmed and faded; Poe saw nothing but Finn’s face. Finn’s dark eyes were locked onto his; they were filled with the excitement of discovery. Finn was feeling something for the very first time, and Finn was feeling it for *him*! Poe blushed; his cheeks were positively burning, but he couldn’t look away.
It was like watching a star being born.

…….

Across the meadow, time had become elastic.

Minutes were passing mercilessly slow as they waited for a sign. Ren was lying peacefully in Rey’s arms; she was bent forward over him, watching closely, aching for the sound of his voice in her head. Leia was on the floor beside him, carefully winding a bandage around his hand. As she finished the task, she looked back over her shoulder toward the open entry.

In the corridor beyond, Dar Noaa and Luke were listening intently while Irno explained what he’d just done.

“You put a hole in *this* vessel?” Dar Noaa roared. “Without asking first?”

“I had to dig it out somehow.” Irno replied. “And you weren’t here.”

“You put a *hole* in this vessel!”

“What’s the problem?” Irno asked angrily. “It’s not like you’re going anywhere.” He squinted as he waited for a reply, but it didn’t come fast enough. “And it worked.”

“He’s got you there, Noah.” Luke said.

“Yes,” Dar Noaa glared down at Irno with fierce glowing eyes. “But for how long?”

“I don’t know.” Irno conceded, then he made his appeal. “That’s why you have to let me go home, so I can make one we can trust!” Hoping that he’d just earned an ally, he glanced at Luke for support before going on. “I can fix the coating. I can fix the resonator. I can fix *Ren*. I can fix *everything*.... but only if you take me home.”

Dar Noaa sniffed loudly, then looked to Luke for advice.

“I don’t think you have a choice here,” Luke tilted his head and grinned slightly. The reassuring gesture had an immediate effect on Dar Noaa; his eyes flickered, then dimmed. “And I’m sure,” Luke continued, ”that you’d love to have a look at his workshop.”

“True.”

“And if it’s a matter of trust,” Luke looked down at Irno as he spoke. The Kourin wasn’t paying attention now; he was looking back into the sleeping quarters with confused and curious eyes. There was more than interest on Irno’s face, he was looking at the group inside with longing, as if he wanted to be in there with them. Luke nudged Dar Noaa to make sure that the Sith saw it, too, then added quietly, “See for yourself.”

Dar Noaa nodded in agreement.

A burst of female happiness came bubbling through the open door, indicating that something good had just happened and Irno instantly abandoned the Jedi and the Sith to see what.

Rey was holding Ren, looking down at him with a huge smile on her face.

He was looking back.
Irno ran fast, so fast that he couldn’t stop in time to avoid sliding into that Leia, but she received him with open arms followed by a smothering hug.

......

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

I need one more chapter at the Edge, and I *swear* it will be short. It just takes so much longer to write than it does to watch...
Stone meadow highlands, The Edge.

The meadow at night was a truly dark place; a rare thing in a galaxy so loaded with life. Since there were no cities, no villages, no moons to cause air glow, land and sky merged into solid black, and any being standing in the meadow would only be able to tell up from down by the faint light of the Edge stars above and gravity below.

There was something very special about the vastness above; with few stars and little gas from the galaxy to interfere, seeing what lay beyond the Edge was easy. The black was peppered with glowing clouds of all sizes and shapes; those were other galaxies, some faint and fuzzy, some bright enough that arms and cores and star clusters were plainly visible. One or two even displayed spectacularly bright points of light; supernovas that served as reminders that the Universe was an unpredictable and often violent place.

The Jedi and the Sith were standing together in the middle of the meadow, in the shadow that marked where the Visitor and Millennium Falcon’s lights fell short of each other. They’d come out together for a walk that both knew would stop half-way between the here and there; it always did, and tonight’s walk would be no exception. Half-way was where they were safe from accidental eavesdropping and unintended consequences.

“These Kourin,” Dar Noaa complained, “I don’t understand them. I don’t *trust* them. Did they guide us here because they’re still allies, or for some other reason that we know nothing about? And why do they remain silent? Why haven’t they contacted us?”

“Maybe they can’t,” Luke suggested. “If the First Order suspects their involvement in the Holonet’s destruction, making a move right now would put them in danger of exposure. And if they they guided you here, then they know that we’re out of danger for the time being.”

“Or out of the way.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure,” Dar Noaa was staring up, at intergalactic space, “but I am sure that our Kourin friends are up to something that involves *us*, and they’re not telling us because we aren’t going to like it.” He lowered his eyes from the sky to look at the dim red glow coming from the Visitor’s open entry. “And whatever that something is, the vessel is a big part of it.”


“I wish I knew.” Dar Noaa replied. “There’s so much about the vessel that I don’t know yet; I was only just starting to understand how its systems work when I had to steal it for the second time, so I could search for you.” Dar Noaa paused, troubled by the uneasy feeling that he’d forgotten something about that, but dismissed the thought and then stretched his arm out toward the Visitor. “Look at it, Luke; no conventional engines, no fuel stored for flight. The batteries are only used when the ship is idle – and those are kept charged by un-making, then re-making, water through a process no civilized society would even *think* of. Kourin technology defies logical engineering.”

Luke’s response was a quiet “Hmmm.”
“And at the heart of it,” Dar Noaa continued, “there’s the Kyber crystal cluster; it’s as beautiful as it is perplexing. The vessel is the prototype for something unprecedented; there has never been anything like it before.”

“No wonder Likit wants it so badly.” Luke said. “Why does he want you?”

Dar Noaa made a sound that was part groan, part snicker, with an undertone of darkness to it.

“Three reasons.” He replied. “The first is: I acquired the vessel, so I have the most experience with it. The second is: no one at the Institute was able to get it to do anything. The vessel decides who can touch it and when and for what, and it wanted no part of them, so they kept me there because it accepted me. Likit would want to have me in case the vessel rejected the Technology Guild as well, which it would.”

“Interesting. What’s the third reason?”

“The third reason,” Dar Noaa breathed the words out in an embarrassed sigh. “The Technology Guild came around one day to press for dismantling the vessel so they could analyze it piece by piece, which was idiotic because we were making progress with it intact. I was expressing my opposition to the idea and Likit cut me off by wagging his hand in my face.”

“And…?”

“I broke two of his fingers.”

“That would do it.”

“No.” Dar Noaa shook his head. “Likit is a cold-blooded animal; there is no passion in him; everything he does is *calculated*.* He only wants to be sure that if I don’t come along with the vessel, I won’t be alive to steal it again.”

“What do you know about him?”

“He’s smart, but he’s arrogant; he thinks he’s so superior to others that he can do as he pleases with them.” Dar Noaa’s contempt was obvious; he said the words as if they tasted bad in his mouth. “And he has resources; Leia was right about that. The Technology Guild’s power comes from their wealth; when they need loyalty, they simply *purchase* it.” He turned to Luke and his tone became serious. “That means this war between you and Likit may last a long time, Luke; a very long time.”


“Then stay the whole day tomorrow,” Dar Noaa requested, “even if Chewbacca finishes the maintenance early. Spend time with Leia; it would mean so much to her. She needs that, and so do you.”

“I know.”

“Good! Then you and I should give our old bones some rest, so…” Dar Noaa started to turn away, then stopped. “Wait; one more thing…”

“What?”

“About Ren,” Dar Noaa said, “and your academy; I believe he was telling you the truth.”

“I know he was.” Luke replied.
“How so?”

“I saw it.” Luke explained. “When I heard the news, I returned as quickly as I could.” He looked away, into the dark, remembering. “The academy and everyone inside were nothing but rubble and ashes, but the instructors were all outside. And they were all killed the same way, by a lightsaber blow.”

“They burned the academy to hide their work, but left the instructors untouched?”

“They left them untouched to make sure that I would see *how* they died. Someone wanted me to know that Ben was there so I’d blame him – and I did blame him.”

“You believed he acted alone.”

“At first,” Luke nodded. “And I blamed myself, too; I *taught* him, so I was as guilty as he was. My punishment was that I had to make sure that Ben could never do anything like that again, and I went looking for him. The search led me to Maz Katana; she was the one who told me that he was with the Knights of Ren - with Snoke - and everything fell into place. That night at the academy, the Knights of Ren kept Ben distracted from what they were doing by leaving him outside *alone* to fight the instructors while they butchered the students inside.”

“A vicious and pointless attack; you weren’t even there.”

“It wasn’t about *me*, Noah, it was all about Ben.” Luke was beginning to sound weary of the tale. “They would’ve tried to kill me if I’d been there, but that’s not what they came for. They came to my academy to make Ben fall. And he did.” His voice became ragged as he forced himself to go on. “And after that...”

“Ben believed there was no way back, not from that,” Dar Noaa concluded the story for him, “so he submitted to his new masters completely.”

“Yes.”

“Tell Leia; the more she knows about what happened to Ben, the more realistic she will be in her expectations about Ren.”

“True,” Luke agreed somberly, “and I should talk to Ben, too.”

“Don’t,” Dar Noaa replied. “Ren isn’t up to it. Let it wait until you come home again.”

“Home?” Luke asked. “Is that where we are?”

“Perhaps; I don’t know,” Dar Noaa shrugged. “It doesn’t matter; wherever Leia and I may be, you will find us – and that will always be your home.”

There was a moment of awkward silence. Neither of them knew what to say, so they spent the silence on gazing up at a sky filled with possibilities.

“The whole day.” Dar Noaa said.


………..
The night passed peacefully.

It was still dark on the stone meadow highlands when Laci Kin opened her eyes. Years of waking before all the others in order to get the first meal of the day ready was almost instinct; she woke from habit and could not fall back to sleep. She had big plans for the morning: make enough food for today, then some to put aside for the journey back to the Rim before everything was transferred to the Visitor.

And she wanted to make today as special as she could because tomorrow they would be gone, perhaps forever.

She sat up to stretch and saw that Luke was in the room with her. He was dozing in the chair, sleeping watch over her.

Again.

He’d been there regularly since she came aboard.

He didn’t wake her when he came into the space during the night, but that was how it was with Luke; he was able to make himself undetectable, coming and going unnoticed, like the morning mist on the meadow.

She’d turn around and he’d just *be* there.

The odd thing about that was how little it bothered her; being startled by Luke Skywalker was a pleasant surprise and Laci liked the feeling that he was never far away. And it wasn’t just because he’d rescued her from certain death - she *liked* him. When he was there, she felt good, and when he was not there, she spent too much time wondering when he would be back.

He was sitting in that chair with his arms folded across his chest and his head drooping heavily onto his scuffy beard as if it was a pillow.

*Look at you…*

It looked like punishment; sleeping in that position would be hard on anyone, even him – especially him - and he’d probably be grumpy all day because of it. That was not part of Laci’s plan for the day, so she swung her legs over the edge of the bed to get herself moving, stood up, and went to him.

“Luke?” She said his name, but that didn’t rouse him, so she put her hands on his shoulders and gave him a little shake. “Wake up, Luke.”

The Jedi stirred; opened one eye, then the other, then squinted at her sleepily.

“What?”

“Get up and go to bed.”

“What?”

“Get up now,” she tugged on his clothes gently, “It’s time for bed.”

Luke forced his eyes open wide.

“Laci.”
“That’s me,” Laci tugged harder this time and he pushed up off the chair stiffly. “Come on.” She pulled him the short distance to the empty bed, turned him around, then pushed down to make him sit. “Lie down here for awhile.”

Following her instructions without protest, Luke toppled over onto his side like a falling tree, then crashed silently into the soft mattress. Laci helped by getting his legs to follow the rest of him, and when he looked settled, she leaned over, getting close to his face.

“I’ll wake you when its time to… Luke?”

Luke didn’t answer, so she checked. He was already sound asleep.

Laci hovered over him long enough to brush his hair off his face. He didn’t react to her touch at all, but Laci felt that he knew she was there and he was content to let her fuss over him while he slept. That pleased Laci enormously.

“Look at you.” She whispered affectionately.

Satisfied now that Luke was comfortable, Laci pulled herself away from the distraction sleeping on the bed, got dressed, then headed for the kitchen.

She had work to do.

…..

Across the meadow, it was quiet in Visitor; almost everyone was still sleeping off yesterday’s events. Only Ren was awake.

He was lying on the floor wondering if his headache was actually gone or just lost somewhere in the ache coming from his left hand. Whatever the Kourin had jammed in there kept stabbing him with little electric shocks that made his fingers twitch, which made his hand ache. He tried laying it palm-down on the floor; he tried placing it on his chest; he even tried holding his arm up, but nothing he did made any difference. Earlier, the General had offered him a shot of Undin, but he refused it because he’d been free of that kind of thing since Ahch’tu and didn’t want to risk it. She understood and didn’t suggest it again, but he saw how she suffered every time he winced while she was wrapping his hand. Thinking about it now set off a chain reaction in his mind. Guilt. Shame. Anger...

I keep *hurting* her.

The thought had not even finished when he felt the jolt from his hand; this time, it was much stronger than before. His fingers twitched furiously, then stopped. As the pain was subsiding, Ren realized something amazing.

He felt better.

He was sad, but calm; the volcanic emotional explosion that should have come by now hadn’t materialized. Nothing had been slashed or shattered; no one had been harmed – not even him.

Ren looked around.

Rey was lying on her stomach on the sleep platform; she had her arm over the edge, hanging over him, ready for anything, but she was far away, in a dream. Part of him was there, too, sharing it with
her. Irno, however, was not on the platform with Rey; tonight, he was sleeping on the floor right
beside Ren.

Ren watched him for awhile; the little grunts and snorts that Irno made in dreams, or whatever a
Kourin did when it slept, had a soothing rhythm, and without even realizing it, Ren drifted off to
sleep.

……

Little or none of the morning light was actually able to touch the sleepers inside the two ships on the
meadow, so in one ship, the Visitor, they woke by habit. In the other, the Millennium Falcon, they
woke when they smelled breakfast. Laci held off the hungry horde long enough to put some aside in
a bowl for Luke and then fill a larger container that she would take across the meadow to the Visitor.

“Don’t make a mess,” she warned pleasantly, then she picked up the container and headed off,
leaving them to it.

Rey met her at the Visitor’s entry and happily took charge of the container so Laci could get back to
the Falcon and oversee the morning’s business, which was the orderly transfer of the stockpile from
one ship to the other. By the time she returned to the kitchen, Chewbacca was already gone, but the
three young males were still there polishing off the last of the morning’s offering.

“Whenever you’re ready…” she commanded with a sweeping gesture toward the pile along the wall.

That got things started.

Finn, Poe and Dar Na made quick work of it, too; for a while the meadow resembled an insect
colony as they carried containers and sacks to the Visitor, handed them off, then returned for more.
Laci supervised the transfer as best she could, but her carefully sorted inventory was snatched up
faster than she could keep track of and she was sure the Visitor’s crew would have to sort it all again.

That would be *their* problem, though.

Smiling to herself, she abandoned the project and went to wake Luke.

……

The transfer was almost finished when it suddenly came to a complete stop.

Irno was missing.

When she noticed that fact, Rey assumed he had gone back to Ren. She checked and found Ren still
sleeping, but no Irno. She immediately walked through the ship searching for him, then went outside
and walked around the ship calling for him. When she returned to the entry, Poe and Finn were just
arriving with another round of supplies.

“Have you seen Irno?” She asked.

“Yes,” Finn replied. “He walked to the Falcon with us.” He looked back the way they’d just come.
“I thought he was going to help.”

Rey didn’t bother to wait for more information, she hurried to the Falcon, ran up the ramp and went
inside. She was about to check the cockpit when she heard Chewbacca’s voice coming from the service tunnel in the rear of the ship. That was followed by the unmistakable voice of C-Threepio.

“Not *that* one,” the protocol droid said, “He says it’s the next one down.”

It was exactly what Chewbacca had just said. Threepio was translating!

Rey hurried back there and found Chewbacca and Threepio standing beside an open grate in the floor, looking down into it with interest. Suddenly a stone-sized metal object came flying out of the pit and Chewy caught it, examined it for a moment, then tossed it aside and chortled loudly.

“Chewbacca says,” Threepio pronounced each syllable with just a trace of joy, “this filter is trashed; stay there while he gets another one.”

“All right.”

Irno’s voice. Rey joined Threepio to have a look; the Kourin was down there, all right. She wasn’t angry; she wasn’t even annoyed.

Irno simply couldn’t resist something needing to be fixed...

....

The day flew by much too fast.

The sun was hanging low over the mountains when Luke and Leia finally got a chance to share some time alone. They walked to her favorite rock and sat there together for a long time. The conversation started out with carefully chosen mundane subjects that were safe, but didn’t matter. She thanked him for the supplies; he wished there was more; she said it would do. He asked how she liked this place and she listed what was good about it. She told him how much they enjoyed Laci’s cooking and how much she liked her. Then she said that Ren was resting comfortably. He told her that he was glad that the Kourin’s device seemed to be working.

“What he said,” she spoke slowly because she knew she was venturing into dangerous territory, “about the academy...”

Luke put his finger to her lips and stopped her.

“I already knew about that.” He told her. ”I’m sorry I never told you.”

“Luke...”

“Shhh,” He urged her to stay quiet. “Let me tell you now. It might help you understand.”

Leia nodded.

Luke told her everything he knew about that night, then he told her everything he knew about how Ben ended up with the Knights of Ren. Leia the General listened calmly while Leia the mother cried inside, and when Luke was done telling the story, he held her in his arms until the tears she’d been holding back finished flowing from her eyes.

....
Day was done. The whole day.

It was a success in many ways; the supplies all got moved; everyone *loved* the food; Luke and Leia shared some private time. Irno met a Wookie. Even Rey and Finn managed a few good laughs with one another before it was time to go.

Ren slept through it all.

Twilight fell like a curtain at the end of a play: the evening meal served in the Falcon’s galley was over and the last, desperately cheerful conversations had ended. The only thing left to do was embrace each other, make a wish, then let go.

It was harder than they thought it would be.

It was hardest of all for Luke and Leia, but when he finally walked away, Dar Noaa was there at her side. He held her hand while they watched the Falcon shrink and vanish into the dark. They felt the jump; a tremor in the Force told them that Luke was gone.

“He’s on his way.” Dar Noaa tugged her hand to turn her, then pulled her close. “Are you all right?”

“No,” Leia dropped his hand and leaned against him, seeking comfort. “But I will be.”

They wrapped themselves around each other. He nuzzled her in just the right spot.

“Would it help,” he whispered, “if I took you to bed?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered back, “But I’m willing to find out.”

Dar Noaa laughed softly, then he led her inside, away from the sadness, out of the dark, back into the shelter of his love.

…….

He was looking at the mountains again.

*The storm was raging there, as it always was; lightning flashes made the angry clouds stagger like drunken party-goers and the distant thunder grumbled louder with every step the drunkards made. He wondered why he couldn’t feel the wind that was blowing the storm his way.*

“Wake up, child!” Maz Katana’s voice rang in his head. Her spirit, but not her body, was there with him. “Quickly now,” she urged, “or you’re going to *miss* it...”

Dar Noaa opened his eyes.

He was where he expected to be, on the sleep platform next to Leia. Going to bed had helped them both and now she was sleeping soundly beside him. He was relieved to see that his dream had not touched her.

Quickly now...

He eased himself free of Leia, then sat on the edge of the platform. ‘Quickly’ was not one of his stronger skills any more, and he resented Maz for using the word, but he did his best as he snatched
up his pants, shoved two tired legs into them and stood to pull them up.

*Miss what? Where?* He thought. *Why can’t a Force ghost ever just come out and *tell* you what they want you to do?*

He would have to go look.

He found his boots and stepped into them, then headed for the entry door. He ignored his tunic but grabbed his robe as he passed it, then put that on as he trudged into the corridor and looked both ways; first to the back, which was quiet and dark, then to the front. A dim, flickering light was coming from the cockpit. The strobe effect of the changing light made his steps seem like staggers, and the corridor became a disturbing variation of the storm in his dream.

When he reached the entry, he saw exactly what he expected to see there.

The Kourin.

Irno was standing at the waveform, staring so closely at something on the display that his face was almost touching the surface.

“*Irno,*” Dar Noaa growled. “Do you know what time it is?”

“Sit down.”

The Kourin said it without looking.

“*Why?*” Dar Noaa walked up beside Irno, then peered over his head to see what had the Kourin’s attention. Numerical strings were streaming so fast that he wasn’t able to see one completely before another took its place. “*What’s this?*

“I *mean* it,” Irno finally turned his head, just long enough to make eye contact before he went back to the display. “Sit down.”

“All right,” Dar Noaa replied. He was too tired to argue, so he flopped into the pilot’s seat. “I am sitting down. What have you done now?”

Irno pulled his face back, away from the display, took a deep breath, then turned to look at Dar Noaa.

“Hold on to yourself, Sith,” he advised excitedly. “When I was helping you with your register question, I saw that you made an error, and it got me curious…”

“I did not… what error?”

“You used Canto’s constant in your Force-to-Field conversion string.”

“Of course I did; what of it?” Dar Noaa asked. “Canto’s constant is a critical factor in Force-real space field generation. You have to know that; I’m sure you’ve made many things for the First Order that use it.”

“I can’t remember,” Irno replied, “but I know I did make them. And none of them work; not really.”

“What?”

“Using Canto’s constant in a Force computation,” Irno used his ’First Order Idiot’ voice, “is like putting a pin hole in a bucket; what comes through is a little drizzle of energy, not the full flow.”
“But,” Dar Noaa protested, “Canto’s constant is one of the fundamental rules...”

“The Force isn’t part of real space,” Irno cut him off, “it doesn’t follow the rules. Canto’s constant just makes it look like it does.”

“And the Kourin knew this? All along?”

“What do you think?”

“No wonder none of my theorems worked,” Dar Noaa mumbled. “Kourin treachery...”

“Forget about them,” Irno backed up, clearing the view of the display, then pointed to it. “*This* is what matters! I waited until you left, then I fixed your submission – and that’s when the ship showed me a list of everything you ever submitted that contained the error.”

Dar Noaa remembered the submissions. Not long after he delivered the vessel to the Institute, they insisted on sequestering him inside it for security reasons. It was both privilege and prison because Dar Noaa got to analyze the vessel without interference but was not allowed to leave the Institute. There was nowhere to go, anyway; he knew Leia had gone on a mission, so he dealt with idle time in his isolation by working on problems in Metaverse theory using the vessel’s unique programming. The First Order had made significant advances in Force-real space field applications using Kourin programming, but no matter how many variants Dar Noaa tried, every one of his theorems failed miserably and he gave up in frustration.

“I corrected one,” Irno said, “and resubmitted it.”

“Which one?”

“*Wait* for it.” Irno wagged one of his grip hand fingers, almost teasing the Sith. “The ship chewed, swallowed and digested it all, then it came back with *this*...” He tapped the waveform and the display reset. One completed theorem appeared. “Do you recognize it?”

Dar Noaa got up and went to the waveform. The equation was long and complicated; some of it made no sense to him at all, but as he followed the math in his head, it suddenly became clear.

“My theorem on folding space!”

“Yes, and guess what?” Irno asked. The question was purely rhetorical; a revelation like this required immediate action. He widened his eyes, stared intently at the Sith, then lowered his voice to add to the drama of the moment. “It *works*.”

“What?”

“Only needs five components,” Irno explained excitedly, “a Kyber crystal cluster, a full set of resonators, your formula, an interface and someone who can use it. The interface? Easy; I can make it; but then there’s the question of matching it to its live counterpart...”

Dar Noaa held his breath. He knew where this was going.

“... and when it’s matched to a powerful Force-sensitive like yourself, or better yet, that Ren,” Irno continued, “this ship will be able to fold space. Point Zero to Point Anywhere. *Instantaneously*.”

Dar Noaa’s head was spinning; too many things were coming together.

He had to sit down.
Intermission.
Chapter 21

Genigarde Maintenance Center, geosynchronous orbit, Coruscant.

It was a perfect shot.

The protein pearl flew gracefully; it soared over unread and unsigned reports and requisitions with ease, crossed the room, hit the clock on the wall, bounced off and then dropped into the waste container below.

Rolan Lexde was killing time.

He was in his private quarters, waiting for word from Genigarde that the Transport he was still ‘temporarily’ in command of had been assigned a service number in the queue. The Genigarde Maintenance Center was the largest orbiting station in the Coruscant system; it was also the busiest, so any ship that had only a registration number, not a name, painted on its hull would have to wait and wait.

And then wait some more.

The Resistance was never officially recognized by the Republic and now, even as all-out war with the First Order was unavoidable, nothing had changed. As an noncommissioned vessel in need of emergency repairs, the Transport had to get special permission from the Emergency Council, but the Council was much too busy with ‘more important’ matters than signing the requisition form that would give the heroes of Starkiller a place in line at the station. Until they had those orders, the Transport would sit idle; drifting along in the same stationary orbit that kept Genigarde locked in place above Coruscant.

Lexde made a few adjustments to the slingshot he’d fashioned out of desk supplies and boredom, then reached for another protein pearl because the solid little balls were much better suited for target practice than nutrition. He’d loaded and lined up and was just pulling the elastic band back when the comlink sounded and broke his concentration. The shot went wild, and Lexde expressed his disappointment by slapping the comlink hard.

“What?” He snarled.

“Sir?” A confused voice asked.

“Sorry,” Lexde changed his tone instantly, “I was in the middle of something. What is it?”

“We just received a message from Genigarde, sir; we’ve been bumped to the front of the line. We’re directed to proceed immediately to Slot 48 for repairs.”

“Did they say why?”

“No, Sir; but they did say that we can expect to be ready to depart in four shifts.”

“Four shifts? That’s impossible.”

“That’s what they said, sir; four shifts. They guarantee it. And we’ve got clearance to depart immediately after they sign off on the work.”
“Depart for where?”

“They didn’t say, sir. May we proceed to docking?”

“Yes, let’s get there quick, before they change their minds.”

…

In another part of the galaxy...
Millennium Falcon, en-route to Baharhoon, Hyperspace.

Luke Skywalker disliked secrets; they kept him awake.

He was lying on the bed in Laci’s quarters because she kept pestering him to ‘go get some rest’ and it seemed the only way to make her stop was to do as she asked. He was tired, and the bed was much more comfortable than any of the others places he’d been sleeping, but when he dropped his boots to the floor, then stretched out on the bed, a faint lingering trace of the fragrance she wore made it impossible not to think about her.

“Look at you…”

Her voice, her words, her fingers in his hair; just as it happened. The memory slipped into fantasy; he imagined she was here with him right now... that he wasn’t Jedi...

… that he wasn’t old…

Stop.

The fantasy evaporated instantly.

For a moment, Luke felt cheated, like a child who’d just been told to put his toys away. Something about Laci Kin kept calling for attention; but it wasn’t just because he’d rescued her from certain death and so now he felt responsible for her. He liked her.

She was easy to be with.

That was no small thing to Luke; he’d been alone on that island for so long that he’d lost the need for companionship, and now that he was surrounded by others again, he was uncomfortable. When the ‘crowd’ started to get to him, Luke knew he could find sanctuary with old friends; Chewy and R-two always welcomed his company and never seemed to mind when all he wanted was silence.

And now, there was Laci, too, but with her, the attraction was different; Laci had questions, and those questions were always about him. For some reason, he was willing to answer and then she would have a question about his answer. He’d answer that, too, and then the ones after that. It was probably just her way of showing an old man her gratitude for being rescued, but he had to admit that he enjoyed every minute of it. He’d even caught himself, more than once, wondering whether she had time for him now...

Stop.

It was unsettling; Laci had been here such a short time, and already she knew more about him than anybody, mostly because she asked completely personal questions. Luke welcomed that; in a galaxy
where everyone was interested in Luke Skywalker the Jedi, it was paradise to be with someone who was interested in Luke Skywalker the man...

Stop.

He made himself think about something else.

Secrets...

Luke had two new ones; both were concealed inside his robe, which at the moment was draped carelessly over the chair where he often slept.

The first secret was Finn’s lightsaber, which Dar Noaa passed to Luke when they were saying their farewell. The Sith didn’t say anything; he just pressed it into Luke’s hand and stood in the others’ line of sight long enough for Luke to tuck it inside his robe.

The second secret was a data cartridge, which Leia pressed into his hand as she moved in to give him one last hug.

“Give this to the Resistance,” she whispered in his ear, “if you have a chance.”

Luke wondered why they hadn’t talked about it, then he wondered why Leia had been so subtle in giving it to him. Perhaps with everything that happened, she simply forgot about it, then recalled it at the very last minute, then did what was most expedient. He’d know more once he examined the contents.

Laci.

He sensed her before the entry door slid open and revealed her there. She was carrying a bowl filled with several somethings that filled the air with the aroma of just-baked deliciousness as she crept quietly across the room toward the little table that sat by the chair.

Luke didn’t move, but he did open one eye to watch.

When she arrived at the table, she had to push the lower arm of his robe off in order to set the bowl down, but she did it with a slow and gentle sweep of her free hand as if the material was explosive and might go bang if it flopped free too fast. She waited until it stopped swinging before she set the bowl down, then she held onto that for a second as if it was going to make noise if she didn’t keep it in its place. Luke waited until she was confident enough to lift her hands off of it before speaking.

“Thank you.”

She stiffened, then turned around.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, “I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“You didn’t disturb me at all,” he replied, “I wasn’t asleep.”

“I’m sorrier to hear that,” she pouted a little, “Is something wrong?”

“Just thinking.”

“What about?”

Hearing that as an invitation of sorts, Luke sat up and shifted his legs over the edge of the bed and Laci’s pout dropped into a disapproving frown.
“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I need to get my robe...”

“Stay right there,” she raised one hand at him while the other pulled the wayward robe off the chair. “I’ll bring it to you.”

Luke didn’t protest; Laci was already in motion, so the robe would be in his hands before he could get a complete sentence out. He was surprised when, instead of just carrying it over and dropping it in his lap, she sat down next to him.

“Here,” she passed the robe to him. “It feels heavy.”

Luke started to roll the robe up, but stopped when he reached the pocket that held the lightsaber, then pulled the weapon out to show her.

“That’s because Dar Noaa handed this to me right before we left.”

“Oh, Finn will be so relieved!” Laci rejoiced. “He’s been moping about not getting it back ever since we left. Why did Dar Noaa give it to you instead of him?”

“He thinks I should decide when Finn’s ready to have it again.”

“Makes sense; Finn’s here with us,” Laci nodded her head slightly as she said it; the blonde curls of her hair danced on her shoulders. Luke made himself look away. “He’s letting you know that he trusts your judgment.”

Luke gave the hilt a casual inspection. It was a thing of beauty; Dar Noaa’s skill in design and construction was evident in every polished millimeter. But it lacked experience; there were no fine scratches, no dings, no record of its history to be found there. In their conversations, the subject of lightsabers never got past how Dar Noaa loathed them, so Luke had no idea how much skill he had or if he’d ever been in an actual fight. It was entirely possible that the Sith never used it beyond training exercises.

“I think what he’s letting me know,” Luke laughed, “is that he wants me to train Finn.”

“Which you will... right?”

“Yes,” Luke replied with resigned reluctance. A long time ago, Ben Kenobi put a lightsaber in his hand, promised to teach him ‘the ways of the Force’ - and then promptly got himself killed before fully training Luke how to do anything. Luke stubbornly held onto that lightsaber and Obi Wan’s words, and doing that cost him a hand and almost, his life. Older, sadder and wiser now, Luke knew that sharing what he’d learned through bitter experience could save Finn from making the same mistakes. “I will.”

“Who taught you?”

Another question. Laci always had another question.

He risked a glance in her direction, and saw interest in her eyes. If he answered this question, she’d stay here and ask more. He’d tell her about Ben Kenobi. Then he’d tell her about Bespin and his hand. And somewhere in all of that, he’d begin to tell her the truth about Darth Vader.

That was, after all, the *real* story...
In another part of the galaxy, a new day had just started.
Stone meadow highlands, the Edge.

Leia Organa stirred, then reached for Dar Noaa but he wasn’t there. That wasn’t unusual; his restless nature made sleeping late almost impossible. Leia, on the other hand, reveled in the luxury of no longer having a rigid schedule, especially since Dar Noaa’s fierce enthusiasm in bed would leave her utterly exhausted. He’d set her spinning out of control, then join her there in mindless passion that went far beyond mere physical pleasure. Afterwards, he would often doze beside her until she fell asleep, then leave her to go wrestle with whatever problem or idea that was nagging him. And every time, he would touch her face before he left; his fingers would brush her lips gently like a kiss.

Now that it was morning, the first thing Leia had to do was tell him what she’d done, so she used the sanitary station, dressed quickly and went to find him. It wasn’t a search; Dar Noaa was in the habit of taking his morning ration in the cockpit so he could review the overnight logs. If she was lucky, there would be a bowl sitting there waiting for her, too.

As she reached the entry, Leia saw that he was standing at the waveform watching something on the display intently. When she walked in, he didn’t turn to greet her, so she made her way forward to join him. She saw Imo slouching in the copilot seat; he looked up at her with dull, tired eyes, so she gave him a little smile before stepping up behind Dar Noaa and placing her hand on his back.

“Good morning,” she said.

He grunted.

Leia knew that sound. It was instantly irritating because it acknowledged her presence and dismissed it at the same time. Leia usually would just laugh it off, but this morning, she was hungry and in no mood for it. She decided to say what she needed to say and then go get something to eat.

“I gave Luke the data cartridge.”

That got his attention. He whirled around to face her.

“You did what?”

“The Resistance has friends all over the Rim,” Leia explained, “so I asked him to pass it on if he got the chance.”

He stared at her in silence.

“I meant to to tell you,” Leia continued, “but then everything happened and it slipped my mind until he was leaving and there wasn’t any time left for discussion.” It didn’t sound like an apology, because it wasn’t. “The Republic needs those navigational charts desperately; they could mean the difference between staying free and being crushed under the First Order.”

“You left all that behind,” Dar Noaa replied. “You made a choice.” A flicker in his eyes betrayed the calm in his voice. “You chose me; you chose your son, *over* them… Remember?”

“I didn’t think you’d approve…”

“And I *don’t*.” He confirmed her fears. “The war is far away. We’re *here*; we have… things…
to deal with, right here.”

“I know.”

“Why can’t you let go?”

“Because I *care*, Noah; the friends I left behind matter to me! When I think of the lives that could be saved if...”

“What about your *brother’s* life? When you handed him that data cartridge, you did it knowing that if there was a chance - any chance at all- Luke will take the risk to deliver it, for your sake. What if he *dies* trying?”

Now it was her turn to stare at him in silence.

It was a stunning blow; Leia swayed as if he’d just punched her, but Dar Noaa didn’t see the injury. He stood there waiting for a reply, but when it didn’t come, he turned away from her and went back to watching the waveform without another word.

Leia retreated; she went back into the corridor, walked as far as the entry door, then turned and walked out of the ship and vanished into the morning mist.

...

Not far away, Ren and Rey were getting dressed, and Ren had just finished putting his pants on when he felt it.

_Mother._

His reaction was instant; he was at the entry, then through it before Rey could even ask what was the matter. He started out for the cockpit, but stopped when he passed the open entry. The morning mist disguised everything outside, but he could feel her.

_Out there..._

Ignoring everything except her presence in the Force, he walked into, then through, the mist until he saw her. She was standing at his favorite rock with her head bowed and her hands pressed down on it as if she needed its support. The sight frightened Ren, so he broke into a run to reach her before she could fall. She sensed him coming and stood up, then turned to face him.

“General?” He asked, “Are you all right? I felt...”

“It’s nothing.” Leia gave him a forced smile that only made things worse. “Dar Noaa and I had a disagreement about something and I’m a little bit upset.”

Ren didn’t believe that explanation; as a lifelong witness to her many ‘upsets’ with his father, he could sense her real feelings no matter how hard she tried to hide them. And the worst of them, the ones that cut like razors, were always their fights over him.

“Was it about me?” he asked.

“No, not at all.” she assured him.

“What can I do?” he asked.

“Stay out of it,” she advised. “We’ll get over it.”
“All right, if you say so.”

“I *do* say so,” Leia’s smile softened as she took stock of her son; he was standing there in his pants and nothing else. “I’m a general, I can do that.” Her little jest made him relax; the corners of his mouth curled up a tiny bit. She decided to change the subject. “How’s your hand?”

Ren raised the white bundle at the end of his arm, placing it directly between his face and hers as if to show her.

“It’s a little bit twitchy...” Ren peeked around it so he could see her, then added, “... like its owner.”

Leia stared at him.

“That,” he confessed encouragingly, “was a joke.”

Leia’s face brightened the way he’d hoped.

Then they laughed together in a gentle, silly way, like they used to so long ago, and by the time Rey appeared with Ren’s tunic and boots, the mist between them was almost gone.

Not far away, in the cockpit, Irno had run out of patience.

When he told Dar Noaa the good news about the theorem working, the Sith had not reacted as Irno expected. Although it was a real accomplishment for any being who was not Kourin to come up with a solution that had, until now, evaded, well, every being, Dar Noaa’s reaction was not victory but suspicion. He demanded to see the log. Waiting while the Sith went over the data line-by-line was boring and insulting, too, because Dar Noaa knew the ship well enough by now to know in advance there were no errors to be found.

They were almost finished when that Leia came in. Irno didn’t know what she said that merited the Sith’s instant hostility, but he did know that she was very upset when she left and Dar Noaa resumed his review of the logs as if he didn’t care. Irno didn’t like that at all, and he didn’t hesitate to say so.

“Why did you do that?”

“What?”

“Don’t you *know*?”

Dar Noaa turned around.

What?”

“That Leia,” Irno pointed two accusing fingers of his grip hand at him, “I think you made her cry.”

“I did?” Dar Noaa asked, then went quiet to go over it in his mind. And then, his expression changed from confusion to realization. He sighed loudly in self-contempt. “I did.” He looked at the Kourin, who sat there giving him a disapproving look back but offered no advice. “I must find her.”

“I heard her go outside.”

“Oh.”

Dar Noaa made a gesture which could have meant ‘thank you’ or ‘goodbye’ or even ‘drop dead’ for
all Irno knew, then hurried off. The Kourin stayed in the seat until he was sure the Sith was not coming back, then he got up and went to the waveform where the log was still glowing in the display.

He deleted it.

…

As soon as he stepped out into the meadow, Dar Noaa saw Leia coming toward him. Ren and Rey were with her, and all three seemed to be in good spirits until they saw him there and stopped. Leia assumed command at once, stepping ahead of them to lead. Ren and Rey stepped to one side, out of the way, then waited uncomfortably, unsure whether to stay or go on.

Leia walked right up to Dar Noaa, stopped and stood there.

“‘We,’” she told him with a quiet calm that revealed absolutely nothing, “are heading for breakfast. Will you want something to eat?”

“Leia…”

Leia knew that silence. It was the sound of Dar Noaa hesitating. He knew he’d hurt her, and he was sorry for that, but not for what he’d said, and he didn’t know how to apologize without taking it back. The fact that he was right only made things worse; Leia *had* acted recklessly, and she knew it. She tried to rationalize it by telling herself that Dar Noaa didn’t understand why she did it because he had no split loyalties to live with, but that didn’t make him any less right. The smart move would be to acknowledge that first, then talk it out, but the hurt was still too fresh and she was too hungry to deal with it.

He looked too tired to be reasonable right now, anyway.

“This can wait,” she got a final dig in, “until later.”

Then she stepped around him and went inside. Ren and Rey quickly followed her, passing Dar Noaa without comment, keeping their eyes and opinions to themselves.

Dar Noaa didn’t follow her.

She was right; it could wait. He’d been awake for hours looking at those numbers, and he was drained from the effort, but he couldn’t shake off the feeling that he kept missing something important. It was there, he could feel it, but he just couldn’t see through the wall of fatigue. That fatigue and the frustration it fueled made him deaf to his own words earlier with Leia. She wanted no more of that, and who could blame her?

There was nothing to do now but go get some sleep, then try again later on both fronts.

As he stood there mentally signing terms of surrender, Dar Noaa noticed that the meadow was free of mist now and the view was clear all the way to the mountains. Steep and jagged, the dark gray giants in the distance stood against the pastel morning sky like the decaying spires of some ancient metropolis. It would have been a peaceful sight, except for one thing.

A storm was rising.

………..
In another part of the galaxy…
Millennium Falcon, en-route to Baharhoon, Hyperspace.

The Dejarik table had become Finn’s personal domain.

Everyone else was either asleep or off working on some project, so Finn resorted to playing the game against the game itself. But he wasn’t giving it the attention it required, so every game ended the same way, with the last of his players getting smashed, crashed or eaten and the game snorting victoriously.

Finn gave up the pretense and turned the game off, then put his arms on the table and slumped onto them in an attempt to sleep there. That was pretense, too; his closed eyes only served to make the theater inside his head vivid and merciless. The fight with Ren, what Ren said, and then Finn's lightsaber flying across the room into Dar Noaa’s hand cycled over and over there like a malfunctioning holoview feature.

He missed his lightsaber.

The weapon was the most precious gift he’d ever received and not having it in his possession now was almost physically painful. Finn had Ren’s knowledge and experience to draw on, but no way to exercise it.

*I have to train, to make it real, to make it possible…*

Suddenly, the sound of something hard and metallic landing on the table right in front of him jolted Finn to full attention. He saw his lightsaber lying there and automatically moved to grab for it, but before his hand reached it, the lightsaber lifted off and floated away. Finn’s eyes followed it, watching as it traveled the short distance to Master Luke’s waiting hand.

“You *want* this.” Luke held the weapon up. “But do you understand the burden that comes with it?”

“Yes.”

“Get up.”

Finn slid out from under the Dejarik table and stood facing Luke, who stretched his hand forward, offering the lightsaber.

Finn took it.

Luke reached under his robe; his hand returned holding his own lightsaber.

“Then,” he said, “Let’s begin.”

………

In another part of the galaxy…
Genigarde Maintenance Center, Slot 48, geosynchronous orbit, Coruscant.
Rolan Lexde was busy.

Word of repairs and impending departure spread throughout the Transport fast, and every crew member on the leave list instantly requested that it be granted now. Added to that, every crew member who was already on leave had to be contacted with orders to return immediately. The process was going to be chaotic and unfair, but there was no alternative.

There was also a constant stream of messages from the crew regarding the mass arrival of the Genigarde repair crews. That was nothing short of an invasion; every crew arrived with a shuttle full of equipment that needed unloading, an electronic mountain of forms to be filled out, signed and returned, and attitudes that quickly wore off any welcome they might have expected. Lexde had already been called out to negotiate disputes three times and they’d only been in the Slot for an hour.

He groaned loudly when the comlink sounded again.

“What is it *now*?” he demanded.

“You have a visitor, sir.”

“I have no time for visitors, Corporal.”

“But sir, it’s the Director of the Technology Guild.”

Lexde grimaced so hard that it hurt, but it was not an expression of surprise. He knew someone was behind the sudden open slot, but he was hoping it would not turn out to be Ronjir Likit.

“Send him down.”

He passed the minutes waiting for Likit’s arrival in speculation over what the price for the ‘favor’ the Transport was receiving would be. He knew Ronjir Likit better than most; they volunteered for service in Coruscanti Tactical at the same time. That was a long time ago, back when they shared the same values and ideals, before the poison that was CT corrupted them both. Lexde finished his tour with CT then fled back to the sanity of the Republic Fleet. Likit finished his tour and left the military altogether, going first to a government position, then to the Guild.

Now, a decade later, Likit was sitting in one of the most powerful seats in the Republic and Lexde was second in command of a nameless Transport because he, like it, was on unofficial loan to the Resistance. One of them still had values and ideals, but it wasn’t Ronjir Likit.

The Admit light flashed, and Lexde tapped it to let his visitor in.

Lexde made his first escape attempt while Likit was still walking toward him.

“It’s good to see you, Ronjir,” he offered, “but I’m really busy right now and...”

“You’re welcome, Rolan.”

Lexde looked up and sighed audibly, then regarded Likit cautiously.

“And what am I to do for you in return?”

Likit arrived at the desk where Lexde was sitting, but showed no interest in taking either of the available seats there.

“In a few shifts,” he said flatly, “this transport of yours will be the warship of your dreams; I’m giving you the best we’ve got to offer. Some of it hasn’t even been shown to the Emergency Council
yet.”

“Why us?”

“I need you on the Outer Rim.”

“I? As in you?”

“I, as in the Technology Guild,” Likit corrected himself. “The Council has agreed to commission this transport for use under our guidance.”

“What’s the mission?”

“You will locate Luke Skywalker for us.”

Lexde laughed out loud.

“Locate Luke Skywalker?” He mocked Likit's words. “For you? And how am I supposed to do that?”

“The Guild will send orders once you are underway.”

“The Guild? What does the Guild want with Skywalker?”

“Nothing that affects you, Rolan.” Likit replied. “The less you know, the better.”

“And if I decline?”

“You won’t.” Likit’s smile became savagely tight. “You won’t decline, because if you do, we’ll send someone else; someone who doesn’t have your… ‘professional’ standards. You know all about the Three C’s...”

Lexde felt his stomach churn. Likit’s words were straight out of the CT manual and the threat they carried was real; ‘professional’ was code for ‘moral’. It was common knowledge that when the Technology Guild wanted something, they didn’t let little things like morality or ethics get in the way. And the Three C’s; cost, crises and casualties; was code for ‘whatever it takes’.

“Damn you, Ronjir.”

Likit’s eyes narrowed, but his smile remained; the face staring down at Lexde seemed frozen in that one expression, like a mask.

“I’ll take that,” Likit said, “as a ‘yes’.”

…………

To be continued...
Baharhoon, somewhere in the Phihar system, Outer Rim.

Phihar was a main sequence, middle-aged star not big enough to do more than grow old.

This was a good thing for the three planets orbiting the star inside the temperate zone; they could look forward to millions of years before the end would come. Intelligent life evolved; civilizations rose and fell, then rose again in predictable cycles until the outsiders started to show up. The concepts of first interstellar, then intra-galactic, trade were new but not difficult to grasp because ambition and greed were literally cosmopolitan and 'the right price in the right purse at the right time' smoothed the transition from local government to whatever government was in power.

The First Order had representation, but no real presence in the system at the moment; they preferred to use the local system’s established trade hierarchy to obtain what they wanted, which was mostly mineral ores. That was why the furthest out of the three temperate worlds held no interest for them, because Baharhoon’s mineral wealth was long-since mined out and it was no longer considered part of the primary trade route.

Not even the long, sticky fingers of the Trade Guilds touched Baharhoon very often.

As a result, the planet’s population was relatively free to go about their business as they pleased, which was agriculture and trade. They experimented with anything that came along; if it could be cultivated, raised and harvested, then traded, one could expect to find it on Baharhoon.

For a price. No questions asked.

That made it a perfect first stop for the Millennium Falcon.

Luke Skywalker had just returned from his turn in the shower when he discovered that someone had stolen his robe. He’d worn the rest of his clothes to the shower room, but left the robe behind on the chair.

Now it was gone.

On the table beside the chair, Luke saw the contents of his robe pockets neatly placed, including the data cartridge that Leia had given him, and that told him that the robe was not actually stolen but ‘borrowed’. And there was only one individual aboard the Falcon who would do such a thing without asking first.
“Laci…”

She’d been way ahead of him this whole trip. As soon as they dropped out of hyperspace into the Phihar system, she was in the cockpit with Chewbacca, using the comlink to see if anyone she used to do business was still around. Several dead ends later, she managed to connect with someone who did business with someone who might know where so-and-so was these days and four calls after that, Laci was speaking with business contacts who were also friends.

And then things sped up considerably. The friends had contacts who could offer the Falcon safe harbor in the Hub, a busy portal site where the ship would be one of thousands coming and going to make deliveries and pick up goods for transport. The product of countless generations’ efforts, it was a monstrosity, a maze of buildings and covered parking spread over kilometers and rising at least five stories in some places.

Underneath all of that was the central transportation system accessible to anyone who could cough up the fare. That could take someone into the city proper by cramming them into long pneumatic tube cars that shot between stations at truly nauseating speeds. There was much to see and do in the city, but if all one wanted to do was trade, there was no need to leave the Hub at all. Anything could be found in the Hub if one knew who to talk to and how much to pay.

Luke didn’t find Laci in the sleep quarters; he didn’t find her, or anyone else, in the communal room, and when he arrived at the cockpit entry, he saw only Chewbacca and Dar Na. Chewbacca had been expecting him and answered the question before it was asked.

“They went out.” He mewed and signed simultaneously.

“They?”

“*She* went.” Dar Na answered this time. “Poe and Finn went after her.”

“She took my robe.” Luke complained loudly.

“She was wearing it when she left.”

Luke stifled a groan; by taking his robe, Laci had effectively confined him to the Falcon until she returned. She probably took the robe merely to conceal how she was dressed because an outfit consisting of well-used, vintage male clothing on someone who looked like her might draw unwanted attention, but he needed the robe, too, for similar reasons. Laci wanted to hide her body; Luke wanted to hide his face.

“Did she say where she was going?”

“To meet a friend,” Dar Na replied. “Poe has a comlink; he said everything is all right; they have joined her and will be posing as her servants.”

“He also said,” Chewbacca added, using a reassuring purr that he knew wouldn’t work, “not to worry, they would take good care of her.”

Luke looked out the window toward the hanger bay’s wide open exit portal, at the continuous flow of crowded, busy beings all of whom there in search of a deal inside a labyrinthine monument to cutthroat commerce.

“Who’s worried?” he asked.
Laci Kin was in her element again.

Her long time business associate and friend Philrian was native Bahar. They were a race of tall, tan humanoid beings known for their long necks and lustrous black hair, which only grew in a narrow, straight line along the center of their heads. Starting just above their eyes, the mane ran up, over, then down the back. The hair was perfectly straight, but long and so shiny black that it diffracted sunlight and flashed different colors as it moved. The Bahar made the most of it, too, braiding the hair so it would fall to one side or the other in intricate patterns, intensifying the effect, especially when they engaged in spirited conversations.

Philrian was stunning to look at, and dressed in a fashion that strongly suggested ‘female’, but because the Bahar had no obvious external signs of gender, there was no way to be sure of that. For the Bahar, gender was as personal as it could be; potential mates could not be coy at all because not even they could be sure, so they would have to announce their interest from the start.

It would be considered the depth of rudeness for an outsider to ask, but Laci already knew.

After a few minutes of greeting and polite conversation, she pulled open her robe to show her friend what her problem was. Philrian gasped in mock horror, then grabbed Laci by the wrist and pulled her into the stream of bodies.

As Poe and Finn bumped and elbowed their way through the flow to catch up, they realized that this was going to be a long morning.

Back at the Falcon, Luke Skywalker was trying, and failing, to be patient.

*Laci.*

He told himself that he was worrying unnecessarily. Laci Kin was not a child who needed continuous protection; she was an adult who was strong, smart and experienced, who knew what she was doing. And Poe and Finn were with her.

*Out there.*

Luke wondered if Laci was truly ready, though. He imagined her being jostled along with the crowd, being bumped, being touched, by strangers. Most of it would be innocent, accidental, but there was always someone lurking in places like this who would wouldn’t hesitate to seize an opportunity to molest an unsuspecting, beautiful woman.

*If anyone touches her, I *swear*...*

The anger came from someplace deep inside him. It was dark and primitive, but very powerful; Luke felt an intense desire to just go out and find Laci. He was walking toward the ramp corridor when reason returned and he stopped to reconsider.

*There’s another way.*
He took a deep breath, calmed and centered himself, then reached out using the Force to see her...

She’s gazing up at him contentedly; her hair is a tangled mess; her body is stretched out beneath him as she basks in afterglow. The animal fragrance of desire fulfilled, some hers, some his, fills the air around them. It’s a perfect moment, so much more than he’d imagined it could be.

She raises her hand to his face, then traces the smile on his lips gently with her fingers.

“Look at you...”

Luke ripped himself out of the vision and stood there with his living hand pressed tightly against his forehead as if his head might drop off and fall to the floor unless he kept it there.

Stop. He thought. This isn’t real.

He tried to convince his body that what had just happened was a fantasy, an old man’s mind playing tricks on him, and not a look into the future.

His body insisted that it was *absolutely* real. Or would be, could be, absolutely real - if he wanted it to be.

The future...

Luke dropped his hand, then turned around and headed back to the sleep chamber and the chair.

... is always in motion...

He needed to think.

.....

Out in the Hub, Poe and Finn were learning a hard lesson: waiting wasn’t easy.

Every time Laci made a stop, the two of them were delegated to stand watch outside with the growing pile of bundles. They had no issue with it because it was why they’d come along, but they also had to remain unnoticed, so they learned how to act by observing other waiting servants and aides and copying them. Some were obviously body guards, some were restless, irritable, even openly resentful, but most seemed to be simply bored stiff.

Finn and Poe chose something half-way between body guard and bored, pretending to ignore everyone who passed by, while noting every detail. Finn was particularly good with ‘body-guard’; anyone unfortunate enough to lock eyes with him received an icy stare so full of ‘casual’ menace that it sent them hurrying on as fast as they could.

Poe preferred to stick with ‘bored’.

As the morning aged, the crowds thinned, then slowed, and during one particularly long stop, Finn saw an opportunity to bring up something that had been bothering him.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”
“What?”

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

“No I haven’t.”

That was a total lie, of course; Poe had been finding reasons to stay busy and away from Finn ever since the moment on the floor. Finn’s sexual awakening was a good thing, a wonderful thing; it meant he was finally free of all the First Order suppression drugs. It also meant that Finn, like so many others, could be affected by Poe’s unexplainable attractiveness, which put Poe in the decidedly *unattractive* position of protector. Finn had been cheated out of his sexual rights once before, and there was no way Poe was going to let anybody cheat him now.

That included Poe Dameron and his unexplainable attractiveness.

“I’ve been busy.” Poe spun a web of excuses and diversion, “The Falcon's an old ship; she needs constant care. And Chewy can’t be everywhere, so, if he needs me in the cockpit, I’m going to be there.”

“You’d be there anyway.”

“That’s true,” Poe admitted, then saw his chance to make the turn, “but you’re the one who’s been off by yourself brooding, even after you got your lightsaber back. What’s that all about?”

The statement took Finn aback; it was true. He had his weapon back but now, Master Luke was insisting on training him. That meant Finn would have to pretend he was still a novice even though he now possessed everything Ren knew. Finn hated the idea of deceiving the Jedi Master and doubted he could it for very long because Luke Skywalker trained Ben Solo.

He would see Ren in Finn’s movements. He would *know*.

That thought, and the darker thoughts behind it consumed every idle moment Finn had. He knew he should tell Master Luke what *really* happened in the stone meadow, but if he did, then his alibi for killing Ren when the chance came would be worthless. Poe didn’t need to know that.

“Nothing,” Finn lied, then made the lie easier for Poe to swallow by adding, “I feel like a fool for letting Ren get to me, that’s all.”

“Ren gets to everybody,” Poe replied. It was true; Ren had certainly gotten to Poe in their confrontation-that-wasn’t. Finn didn’t need to know that. “You know what? Maybe once we get Lady Laci back to the Falcon, you and I can go find someplace to have a drink.”

“*Lady* Laci?”

The tone in Finn’s voice and the giveaway head tilt indicated that he wanted to hear more, but Poe cut him off before he could ask.

“Speaking of...” Poe pointed.

Finn turned to see Laci and her friend Philrian coming at them with more bundles, and he could tell by the happy chatter that they weren’t anywhere *near* done yet.

It was going to be a long afternoon, too.

........
It had been a very long day for Luke Skywalker.

Chewbacca and Dar Na spent most of it in the Falcon's cockpit because the young Sith had asked to be taught how to fly the ship and Chewbacca approved. Luke believed Chewy found comfort in the teaching because it gave him and the Falcon purpose and helped ease the pain of losing Han Solo. And Dar Na was a good student; he paid respectful attention and learned quickly and *quietly*, which made him a nice contrast to Dar Noaa. That alone would have made him an asset on this mission, but Dar Na had many fine qualities that went beyond being a good fighter.


The flight school in the cockpit meant Luke was left to his own pursuits, and for a long time, he managed to avoid thinking about Laci by studying the data cartridge that Leia had given him. There was a small workstation in the sleep quarters that provided some degree of privacy, so he assigned himself to it until he knew what was on the cartridge. From the start, it was obvious why she wanted the resistance to have it; it was loaded with navigational charts of the Unknown Regions, all of which were military treasure. The First Order had marked everything from the most common shipping lanes to hazards like asteroid fields and plasma eddys. Best of all, the Order had dutifully indicated where *every* military station was located - with notations on armaments and troop numbers. It was virtually a ‘how to’ manual for invading First Order space!

Luke considered the problem.

Dar Noaa’s estimate of how long it would take for both sides to rebuild their fleets gave him plenty of time to decide what to do, whether he should try to make contact with the Resistance here on the Rim or wait until he went to Coruscant. This was something Laci might be able to help with, too, since it was possible some of her contacts might be Republic sympathizers.

*Laci.*

He felt her before her heard her. Heard *them*, actually.

They came stomping up the ramp and inside like rampaging tauntauns, then paused at the entry just long enough for Laci to shout out names.

“Luke!” She called for him first. “Chewy! Dar Na! We’re back!”

Luke didn’t move.

Whatever she wanted, she would have to come to him. Here. With his robe.

Only a few minutes later, Laci staggered into the sleep chamber carrying three, maybe four bundles; Luke could not even see her because she was hidden inside his robe.

He did not get up to assist her.

“I called...” she started; her cheerful tone irritating him instantly. “Didn’t you hear me?”

“I heard you.”

Laci struggled to the bed and dumped the load there, then stood with her back to him, pretending interest in it. She pushed the pile apart, into two separate piles.
“I know you’re angry with me,” she said. “I know I should have talked to you first, but Philrian called while you were in the shower and I didn’t want to bother you.”

“If you didn’t want to bother me,” Luke replied, “you wouldn’t have stolen my robe.”

“I didn’t steal it,” Laci turned around to look at him. “I *borrowed* it.” She threw the hood back, pulled her arms out of the sleeves, then draped it over one arm. “I didn’t think it would take as long as it did.”

Luke didn’t reply; he wasn’t listening, he was staring.

Han Solo’s old clothes were gone; they’d been replaced by a long tunic with loose pants. Both were made of fine woven fabric dyed a delicate pink. A wide, matching belt that was almost a corset was making it impossible not to notice her tiny waist and perfect breasts. Her hair had been groomed and her face lightly painted with cosmetics she did not need…

“What?” Laci asked nervously.

She was staring back at him, confused by the silence and the look on his face. Then she hurried over and transferred his robe from her arm to his lap.

“It went *very* well,” she offered a report in lieu of an apology, “We’ve got a burner who’s willing to smelt our ore ingots into something more palatable for trade on the Rim. They’ll keep thirty percent, but since they are taking a risk in helping us, I figured you wouldn’t mind.” She rummaged under her tunic, found the pants pocket and pulled out a small fistful of circular ore flats, which she offered to Luke, “and they do fine work.”

Luke took them without comment.

“Now,” Laci moved closer, working hard to win him over, “this is the *good* part: according to them, our ore ingots are the first they’ve seen, and they would know, because new material *always* comes their way. That means we got here *first*.”

Luke made no reply; she had more to tell him, he could feel it.

“And everyone I spoke with,” Laci continued, “has heard rumors about strange and terrible things happening on Qir; that’s not far from here. I put out word that someone was very interested in ore ingots and will pay for news of any new arrivals who have them. If ‘they’ come here, Luke, we’ll know before their engines cool.”

Luke closed his fist around the ore flats.

“And we’ll be ready,” he said.

........

To be continued...
Chapter Notes

A quiet chapter about little things that matter; the calm before the storm. Literally.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stone meadow highlands, The Edge.

Ren was anxious, but he didn’t know why.

He was sitting on his favorite boulder watching twilight cover the mountains. It was the same show every evening; twilight would fall, the light would die and the storm that was raging there would die with it. It was an unusual phenomena because the ‘storm of the day’, as they’d come to call it, never left those mountains and never came this way. There had not been one drop of rain on the meadow since their arrival here, but the meadow was green because the morning mist would drench it thoroughly.

Evening dew would provide a second, lighter, drink to the plants and insects that were all perfectly suited to it, which Ren was not. His boots were designed to shed water, but his clothes weren’t, so his time sitting out was limited to how quickly his clothes became damp enough to be annoying. Back on Dagobah, he was always a little bit damp, but the air was warm.

Here it got very cool, very fast.

A slight tremor in the Force told him that Dar Noaa was on his way, so he slid off his boulder and turned to greet him.

“How is your hand?” Dar Noaa asked.

“I’m getting used to it,” Ren looked at his hand; the General’s latest bandage only covered his palm now, and he could see his fingers making tiny random movements. “It’s good enough.”

“Close your fist.”

Ren bent his fingers slowly, from the top joint down; it took effort, especially with his knuckles. One more painful clench got the fist made, but at a cost; Ren grunted in pain and Dar Noaa heard it.

“No,” The Sith passed judgment, “it’s not.”

“I’ll manage,” Ren countered. “I’ve had worse.”

“We’ve all had worse,” Dar Noaa said, “and we’ve all ‘managed’. Irno’s in there screeching to go home, and I’ve decided to take him back in the morning.”

“I’ll be ready.”

“You’re not going.” Dar Noaa replied. “I cannot risk you falling off that Kourin speeder in flight.
Rey’s going; she’s been there, too, and I’m told that Irno won’t ride without her. We’ll take him home, gather everything he needs and return here. He’s agreed to it.”

Ren gave his bandaged hand a resentful look, then yielded to logic; flying a speeder properly required both hands, and he would be a liability on the mission.

“Understood.”

“Knowing that you are here with the General,” Dar Noaa added, “will make things much easier on me. Leia and Rey are both strong with the Force, but they’ve had little training and no *real* experience using it.” He paused for a second to look back at the Visitor, then returned his gaze to Ren. “Not like you and I have. If Rey comes with me and the General stays here with you, we remain strong in both places.”

“Understood.” Ren’s eyes narrowed; Dar Noaa was choosing his words carefully, but there was a definite undercurrent of apprehension to them. “Are we expecting company?”

“No,” Dar Noaa replied; he seemed lost in thought now; talking to himself, not Ren. He looked into the distance, toward the mountains. “So far, they’ve kept their distance, but taking Irno home, then bringing him back here again might… provoke them.”

“Provoke them to what?”

“What?” Dar Noaa asked.

“You just said…”

“Oh, that,” Dar Noaa replied, “it’s nothing; I am over-thinking things again.”

“Understood.”

Ren understood, all right; Dar Noaa was worried about something, but he wasn’t going to reveal what that something was. Then Ren heard a familiar voice whispering from the dark and shadowed places in his mind; words from the past, now a warning for the present:

*I’ve got a bad feeling about this.*

Ren understood that, too; Han Solo was never wrong, at least, not about that.

………

It was a restless night for everyone; Dar Noaa wanted to start out at first light so they would have plenty of time to travel there, load up and return, and everyone was ordered to settle in and get some sleep early.

Leia went first, and was already lying down when Dar Noaa joined her. They hadn’t really talked about the data cartridge yet, and it was unlikely they were going to do so now, either. Something was bothering him, but he had not shared what and it stood like a stone wall between them. He sat on the platform, but didn’t lie down beside her. Leia watched him take several long, deep breaths, then become very still, and she knew he was reaching out, seeking something. She gave him the time, although it seemed like forever, and didn’t disturb him.

He sighed softly.
He was back and she knew that he’d not found what he was seeking there.

Suddenly the distance between them became too much for Leia to bear; she stretched her arm and touched his back gently. He turned his head and looked at her.

“Did I wake you?” He asked.

“No,” she replied. “I was waiting up for you.”

“You shouldn’t have.”

“We need to talk,” Leia pushed herself up on an elbow, “Avoiding me is not going to help.”

“Avoiding you?” He seemed surprised by her words. “Is that what you think I’ve been doing?”

“Isn’t it?”

“No, not at all.”

“Then what?”

“What,” he twisted his body to reach over and touch her, “is nothing; not really. I was tired and spoke harshly to you. When I realized it, I went to find you, to apologize, and somehow I accidentally deleted a file I’d been reading instead of saving it. When I went back to finish reading it, it was gone.”

“I’m sorry. Was it important?”

“It’s not your fault,” he assured her, “it’s *mine*. And I’m not sure if it was important or I just thought it was.”

The statement absolved her of blame, but it had an undertone of hostility that made Leia uneasy because it sounded so… Sith. She saw that as an indication that perhaps what Dar Noaa needed right now was not talk, but affection.

And sleep. If she could get him to sleep.

She let herself fall back onto the platform and opened her arms to him.

“It’s late,” she told him, “and you have a long day tomorrow. Lie down awhile.”

He ran his fingers up and down her arm for a moment, considering, but then he pulled his hand away.

“Not tonight.”

It was the first time he’d said that since they’d been together and Leia had no reply. It wasn’t that it was shocking; they’d been doing things nobody their age would have imagined possible, and anyone else would have been completely worn out by now. If not for the incessant trickle of sexual energy coming from the far end of the corridor, they would have been spending most of their time together reading or taking naps. This was perfectly normal.

But this wasn’t about that; she could feel it.

He got up, then turned and leaned over the platform, stretching to give her kiss.
“Goodnight.” He said.

“Goodnight.” She replied.

Then he left.

Leia listened to the sound of him walking back to the cockpit, where the Waveform was waiting up for him, too.

.....

Not far away, Rey and Ren had resigned themselves to another night of Irno-sitting, so she took the platform and he was on the floor. The Kourin started out on the platform with Rey, but not long after she was asleep, he climbed down and curled up next to Ren.

Ren sensed him there, roused just enough to verify it, then went back to sleep.

....

They were up and active before dawn.

Breakfast was whatever they could get down quickly, followed by a large drink of water. After that, there was the usual check and re-check that they had everything that they wanted to take along. After that, a final check of the speeders; Dar Noaa needed to make a few adjustments to his seat, but everything else looked fine.

All that remained was last minute thoughts and goodbyes.

Dar Noaa took Leia’s hand and led her away from the others, out of earshot.

“There’s a chance,” he told her, “that once the Kourin is back in his own space, he may become reluctant to return with us, and if he does, we will be delayed.”

Leia glanced over at Irno, who was waiting by the speeders with Rey and Ren. She was grateful to the Kourin for helping her son, but even so, she couldn’t trust him; everything about Irno’s presence suggested that something more than luck was involved.

“I’m not really expecting trouble, but if we do run into it,” he lifted her hand to his face, then kissed it, “you’ll know.”

Leia smiled weakly; it was true, if anything went wrong, she’d feel it. There was nothing reassuring about that knowledge, though.

“Just...” she wrestled the words out, “… be careful. You’re too old for this kind of thing... so don’t do anything... *stupid*... out there.”

Dar Noaa laughed.

Back at the speeders, Rey was busy giving Ren instructions.

“We won’t be gone long,” she lectured him. “so, don’t touch your bandages; I’ll change them when I get back. And don’t forget to eat, and don’t try to do... anything.”
“Understood.”

Rey looked over at Leia and Dar Noaa.

“And, about the General,” she added, “try to spend some time with her.”

Ren’s expression answered for him; the calm facade vanished and the anxious face that replaced it revealed just how nervous he was about ‘spending time’ alone with his mother.

“Understood.”

He did understand, he just didn’t know if he could do it. Rey moved against him to get a hug; he held her close.

“Come back to me.” He whispered.

Rey sighed sweetly; it was the most romantic thing Ren had said to her. He was making progress.

Standing nearby, Irno decided this goodbye ritual was taking much too long.

“Are you two finished?” he complained loudly. “Can we *go* now?”

The departure was quick. The speeders vanished into the brush and were gone in seconds; the two remaining occupants of the meadow walked back to the Visitor, leaving it silent.

But not empty.

……

The morning passed slowly.

Leia was sitting in the cockpit, indulging in a warm drink and one of the small, sweet buns Laci had left for them. Monitoring the Waveform systems display was more pastime than task; the periodic updates came with a single ding, she would tap ‘accept’, then the update would be archived and Leia would have peace again. System reports about everything from the ship’s temperature, interior and exterior, and that the water supply had been fully restored were reassuringly boring, giving Leia plenty of time to think.

Noah...

She was worried about him. Ever since Luke left, Dar Noaa had been at the Waveform; most of the time, he’d be looking at displays or entering line after line of mathematical equations, and once when she brought him something to eat, she walked in on an intense conversation between him and the ship. She didn’t catch a word of that, though, because they were speaking in *Sith* and it stopped the instant he noticed her there. He took what she brought him, thanked her, then went back to work without another word.

*He’ll tell me when he’s ready. I hope.*

She was lecturing herself about patience when a flutter somewhere deep inside her announced Ren’s
arrival. She turned to look.

He came through the entry, then stopped where he was. Leia didn't need to see the fingers of his bandaged hand twitching to know how nervous and tentative he was about approaching her; his eyes said it all. He was looking her direction, but not *at* her as he spoke.

“Am I disturbing you?”

“Not at all,” She answered with measured cheerfulness because she feared too much or too little might scare him away. She waved him forward. “Have a seat.”

He nodded once; it was quick, and rigid, exactly what one would expect from a Knight of Ren who was acknowledging a command. It meant that she was still ‘the General’, not his mother, but the fact that he wasn’t being military about it was an encouraging sign.

This wasn’t a meeting; it wasn’t a report; it was a *visit*.

He came forward, then sat in the other seat, took a breath, then turned his face to look at her.

She met his gaze kindly, then broke off part of the sweet bun and offered it to him.

“Try this.”

He took it from her hand carefully, as if it might explode if he moved too quickly. Holding it delicately between two fingers, he lifted it up to inspect it before biting off a tiny bit to taste it. Then he made a face, first surprise, then serious contemplation.

“It’s…” he stared at the remaining morsel intently. “… sweet.”

Leia saw an opportunity and seized it; it was dangerous, but she had to make the effort.

“You loved sweets.” She said. “Remember how I was always hiding them?”

“I remember,” Ren studied the morsel still between his fingers, “how I always found them.” He looked past the morsel, at her. “Except for that one…”

“You,” Leia’s words blended with a gentle laugh, “tore the place apart looking for that one.”

Ren’s expression changed; Leia saw the anxiety and acted quickly to reassure him.

“Want to know where I hid it?” She teased.

His expression changed again. For an instant, Leia saw her son there; his eyes were filled with childlike anticipation at the thought of finally having that mystery solved.

“Yes,” he said. Very much.”

“In your room,” Leia shared her long-held secret, “under your pillow.”

Ren let out a groan, but that was followed by a little, embarrassed grin.

Leia smiled.

He looked away, his eyes went back to the morsel.

Leia forced herself to remain quiet. This tiny thing, this bit of sweetness that wasn’t even a swallow’s
worth, loomed between her and her son like one of the meadow boulders. A minute ago, it was
simply food, now it was a memory from a time when Ben Solo and his mother were close. The Kylo
of Ren was conditioned to reject distractions like taste and texture; the child Ben Solo was always
enchanted by both. Ren was both of them, yet neither, so Leia waited breathlessly for a sign.

Ren closed his eyes and popped the morsel into his mouth.

“It’s…” he spoke with it still in his mouth. “… good.”

A tiny thing, but so important; hope urged Leia to try again.

“Want more?” She asked. “There’s some left.”

The instant the words left her lips, she knew she’d gone too far. Ren’s expression changed again; a
flash of uncertainty, then cool resolve.

“No.”

He refused politely, but firmly, and she could feel him slipping away from her. A few minutes of
awkward silence later, he stood up and looked toward the entry.

“I want,” he said, “to have a look at the hole our guest put in the coating.”

“If you’re going to go climbing the hull,” Leia replied, “I’m coming along to watch, just in case.”

“Understood.”

A short time later, Leia found herself standing in the meadow a good four meters from the ship. In
order to keep Ren in her sight, she’d had to keep stepping back, so now she could see him up there,
but beyond that, she was of no practical use to him at all.

“How does it look?” She called up to him.

“Little.” Ren replied loudly. “No breach, but he’d better have a way to reseal it or your Sith is going
to eat him alive.”

Leia was considering whether she should say anything about his referring to Dar Noaa as ‘your Sith’
when something tiny zipped past her face. Then something zipped behind her head, then she caught
glimpses of more somethings swirling around her legs.

She was being swarmed!

“*Ren*… !”

“Stand still!” He half-slid, half-jumped from the hull and was already running toward her. “They’re
not going to hurt you.”

“What are they?”

“Spies.” Ren answered. He stopped about a meter from where she was, then raised his hand and
gestured toward her and the swarm. “Stop!”

The swarming ceased instantly; every member was frozen in place, suspended in the air. Leia was
finally able to get a good look at them, and to her amazement, they weren’t insects at all.
They were *things*! Little flying things.

Ren crossed the remaining distance between himself and his mother, grabbed one of the suspended flying things with his good hand, then turned his hand over and opened his fingers, making a platform out of his palm with the little flying thing lying in the center.

“Leave. My. Mother. Alone.” Ren glared down at it. “I am tired of these games.”

The little thing on his palm buzzed, lifted off and sped away into the brush.

Ren released the rest with a wave of his hand. The swarm buzzed in unison, shrank into a tight cloud, then departed in the same direction as the first flying thing had gone. Ren watched them go, then turned to Leia and touched her arm.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine.” Leia assured him. She was much more than fine; she’d just heard her son say ‘mother’. Leia wasn’t sure Ren even knew he’d just said it, and she was not going to spoil a good moment by mentioning it. “You said they’re spies?”

“Kourin spy drones.” Ren explained.

“Why the sudden interest in me?”

“I don’t know,” Ren replied.

“Where did they go?”

“That way.”

Ren pointed toward the brush, then raised his hand higher, toward the mountains beyond. A huge storm was enveloping the peaks with angry clouds at frightening speed. And, for the first time since they arrived at the meadow, the storm appeared to be leaving the mountains and coming their way.

At that moment, mother and son shared the exact same thought:

*I’ve got a bad feeling about this.*

……………

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Missed deadline this (last, now) week due to craziness at work. Hopefully, it's settling down now.
Upstream falls, Stone Meadow Highlands, The Edge.

Irno was home.

From the moment he touched the entry panel and allowed the Sith to enter, he regretted coming back; Dar Noaa took one look around and began asking questions. How did Irno get here? How long had he been here? Who built it? How often did Irno see ‘them’? Did he have a way to contacting ‘them’ when he needed to? It was annoying because Irno had explained that there was only one answer he could give.

“I don’t know,” he replied, “I can’t remember.”

Repeatedly.

It was getting to the point where Irno was ready to throw something at the Sith when he finally heard a question he could actually answer.

“Where is your workshop?”

“Below.”

“That is where we will find what you need, yes?”

Irno sniffed loudly in annoyance, then walked to the back wall and put his hands on the wall to open it without saying anything. The fan-like opening had impressed that Ren and Rey, and Irno expected it to do the same for the Sith.

“Interesting,” Dar Noaa said, “unexpected and efficient.”

That was not nowhere near as satisfying as Irno had hoped it would be, and a resentful little grunt rumbled under his breath.

“Follow me,” He said.

A few minutes later, the three of them stepped out of the lift and the automatic lights came on, revealing the extent of Irno’s workshop to his newest guest. Once again, Irno expected the Sith to be impressed.

What he got was silence; absolute, jaw-dropped silence.
The workshop was so large and so full that Dar Noaa needed a moment to take it all in.

It was a monolithic assembly of shelving; some were so tall that they required a ladder to reach the highest shelf, and the sheer ‘sameness’ of each row of shelving made them seem more like lines drawn on paper than three-dimensional objects. There were no signs, no labels, nothing that served to indicate what was where, and anyone who didn’t already know where to look for something would be facing hours, even days and days, of searching for it. The place was so frustratingly difficult to comprehend that there was no mistaking it for *anything* other than Kourin design.

“They built all this,” he asked, “just for you?”

“Yes,” Irno replied with no small amount of pride. It was true that he was the only one who worked here, but he was the only one because he was, in fact, the *only* one; there were no others like him. The Sith was not aware of that. “This is my workshop.”

“How do you know what to make?”

“They come,” Irno answered. “They tell me what they want and I tell them what I need; at least I think that’s how it goes.” He walked to the nearest worktable and fingered the devices lined up there. “Sometimes, I’ll be working on something and have a question, and I hear words in my head, *their* words, answering me.”

“But you never see them?”

“Oh, I see them; I just don’t remember it.” Irno picked up one of the devices with his grip hand and looked at it. “I know when they’ve been here because I’ve set tripwires at all the entries, a gossamer thread activates a log recorder...” He brought the device close to his face and stared at it. “… when I see the tripwire broken, I check the log.” He closed his three fingers around the device, grasping it tightly. “That’s when I see them. They come... and they go... as... *they*... please...”

A sudden surge of rage possessed him; he turned and threw the device as hard as he could.

It flew up and over the first few rows of shelving, then disappeared into the shadows beyond. A second later, they heard the muffled sound of impact; composite and metal shattered somewhere in the dark, then spilled onto the floor with a crystalline burst. The sound flowed back toward them like an echo; it washed over Irno’s feet and died there.

Silence.

Rey stepped close to Irno and petted his head gently.

Dar Noaa watched the two of them; he was seeing the Kourin in a new light. Until now, he’d only regarded Irno for what he was, not *who* he was. Irno’s ‘home’, his workshop, was really a prison where he lived in solitary confinement, condemned to endlessly producing on demand for jailers who wouldn’t even permit him the comfort of remembering them. That was probably due to their paranoia about being exposed, but the price Irno was paying for their obsessive secrecy was unbearable isolation and loneliness. Dar Noaa knew something of the damage isolation and loneliness could do; he understood the rage of captivity all too well.

“Irno?”

“Yes?” Irno only gave him a side glance; he was embarrassed by what he’d just done and didn’t want to see the Sith’s contempt. But he didn’t see contempt; he saw something new and unexpected.

Understanding.
“When we have repaired the vessel,” Dar Noaa told him, “we can leave this place.”

“So?”

“He’s asking you,” Rey put her hands on Irno’s shoulders, “to come with us.”

Irno looked up at Dar Noaa, who nodded.

“I can only promise you,” Dar Noaa raised his hands to stress the uncertainty, “a place with us for as long as you want it. And when you’re ready, you’ll be free to go where you want and do as you wish.”

_Free_.

The word rang inside Irno’s head; so many words forgotten, so many words taken away, any and all but that one. That one word whispered to him while he worked, while he slept; it sang in the waterfall, it hissed from passing breezes. And then it called to him from above, from the roof. It was there he first saw that Ren, the one with the scar on his face and curiously compelling brown eyes. And Rey, whose gentle touch was encouraging him now. Not that he needed it.

_Free_.

He straightened up and regarded Dar Noaa with renewed energy.

“Let’s get started.” He said.

……..

Back in the stone meadow, Leia and Ren were watching the storm.

It had filled the mountain valley, and was rapidly enveloping the closest mountain in thick, dark clouds that flashed violently with lightning; they could hear a low frequency hum, the menacing sound of thunder still far away, but coming ever closer. Shadowy curtains of hard, torrential rain filled the air beneath the clouds and obscured the lower slopes and the scarp below.

“The rain...”

Ren was thinking aloud, and Leia heard him. She turned and saw that he was reaching out, trying to see the storm through the Force. She was prepared to wait until he was done, but then he surprised her by reaching for her hand. It was an invitation to share his vision. She felt it.

No hesitation; she put her hand into Ren’s...

_The rain was surging down the slopes of the mountain, finding, then filling, every crevice with water. The descent merged the streams into one huge wall of water that raced toward the upper edge of the scarp and poured over it, into the air. It dropped like a bomb, a tidal wave from above, heading for the lower slopes, where the waterfalls were..._

Ren had to warn Rey; there was no time to explain it to his mother first.
In Irno’s workshop, things were going quickly and well.

He cleared a worktable, then gave directions so Rey and Dar Noaa could retrieve what he wanted to take back with him while he assembled a collection of parts. Rey climbed to grab a roll of virgin gossamer. Dar Noaa was sent for the energy sink modules, but came back with his arms full of energy probes. The Visitor only had two of them left, and the little spheres were precious because they could be programmed for anything, and although intended for non-intrusive survey, they were amazingly effective weapons if one knew how to tweak code.

Dar Noaa released them gingerly onto the table, then went back to find the energy sinks.

Rey returned with the gossamer and Irno pointed to a row of shelving.

“That row,” he instructed, “three levels up; red metal cans,” he used his hands to show her the diameter, “about this big. Two.”

“What’s in them” Rey asked.

“Cohesion flux,” Irno replied, “but it’s not marked.”

“Got it.”

Rey headed for the row, passing Dar Noaa on the way. He deposited what he believed to be six energy sink modules on the table in front of Irno.

“Is this them? He asked.

“Yes.”

“Is six enough?”

“Yes. For now.”

“What’s next?”

“The resonator... “ Irno pointed to a nearby shelf, but then his fingers turned up, toward the top. “There. You’ll need the ladder.”

Dar Noaa found the ladder, then pushed it into position and climbed four steps up to have a look. Pushed far back from the edge of the shelf, he saw piles of resonators, all the same. He didn’t need to count to see how many there were; multiple piles of ten or more, four rows wide, that went as deep as the shelf. The count had to be in the hundreds.

“Are you sure,” he called down to Irno, “**these** are the resonators you want?”

“Yes, why are you asking me that?”

“There’s more than one of them here.”
“Really?” Irno sounded surprised. "That’s good; we'll have spares. How many do you see?"

“Don’t you know?”

“No, that never stays with me.”

Dar Noaa took six, one after another, dropped them into a pocket of his robe, climbed back down, then returned to the worktable where Irno was arranging his growing collection into neat rows. He put them down right in front of the Kourin.

“Six?” Irno immediately began to line them up, too. “That’s more than enough.”

“Tell me, Irno,” Dar Noaa asked, “how long will one of these resonators last?”

“In the prototype?” Irno’s reply was quick because a question about the ship’s design was one he could answer. “Forever. It’s almost indestructible; it will outlast everything but the Kyber crystal assembly, unless someone like *you* is flying it. You managed to hit it with one of the only things in existence that could actually damage it.”

“That was unavoidable.”

“So you told me.”

“Irno...”

“What now?”

“Go look on the shelf where you sent me to get these.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

Although his first thought was to refuse because he didn't want to waste time, Irno was intrigued by the Sith’s request. He was getting used to Dar Noaa’s ways now, and sensed that there was something up on that shelf that Dar Noaa wanted him to see without any presumptions that might influence him. That made him even more curious, so he did as the Sith requested. Getting up to the shelf was easy because his grip hand was strong enough on its own to lift his whole body weight from step to step. As his head cleared the shelf, he turned to look down at Dar Noaa, who was standing below.

“What am I supposed to...”

He turned his head away from the Sith, and looked into the shelf space - and saw what was there.

Silence.

“Irno?”

“Yes?”

“Why did you make so many?”

“I don’t know,” Irno reached for one of the devices, then studied it, but it offered no insight. “I made them for the prototype; no other ship has them.” He put the resonator into his pocket and climbed down to join Dar Noaa. “Why would they want so many? There’s enough of them up there to
supply an entire fleet…”

They locked eyes.

It was a preposterous idea, but they both had the same thought, the same question: could it be possible that the slaves of the First Order built *more* ships than just the Visitor and the Ren Transport? The Kourin were able to infiltrate the First Order’s technology and manipulate it to work against them; they’d managed to hide at least one Force-sensitive in plain sight for years; they’d sabotaged the galactic Holonet. All that was certainly impressive, but being able to acquire materials, then build starcraft on their own without being discovered seemed impossible…

“Dar Noaa!”

Rey was hugging two cans and running toward them as fast as she could. She stopped just short of colliding with them. “Ren says there’s a flash flood coming; we have to get out of here *now*!”

“That can’t be right,” Irno replied, “It never floods this far down the mountain.”

That’s when they heard it; the terrifying sound of tons of water slamming down onto the roof of Irno’s home.

……

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Monday August 21st is the Great American Eclipse, and I am sooooo going to watch it. And then I’ve got a horrendously busy week, so the next chapter is going to be late, but no worries, okay?
Chapter 25

The Force Bond.

As far as anyone knew, it had existed since the beginning, but there was not enough evidence to tip the scales one way or the other and for thousands of years, secrecy and superstition kept things that way. But time was relentless and patient; with every new civilization that rose to power in the galaxy, the nature of the Force and those sensitive to it became less ‘mystical’ and more ‘natural’. In the most recent centuries, the Force became an object of intense scientific research, but research quickly became fierce competition because of the widely-held belief that whoever controlled the Force would control the galaxy, and that quickly turned competition into outright war.

Knowledge was gained, but at a terrible price.

There were two types of Force bonds: the ‘natural’ bond and the ‘personal’ bond. The natural Force bond was only found in Force-sensitive families; it usually manifested as parent-child, but sometimes it could be found between siblings, especially among twins. This natural bond had no language component; it was comprised entirely of shared feelings. The personal Force bond happened between consenting – and trained – Force-sensitives. It was composed of both shared feelings and psychic communication that mimicked speech.

Both types of Force bonds were able to connect over vast distances instantaneously. Across the room, across the planet, across the stars, across the galaxy, it didn’t matter; ‘words’ thought by one would be ‘heard’ by the other as if the distance did not exist. The study of this phenomena led to the realization that the Force must exist outside of normal space-time, and that set many things in motion, not all of them right.

Leia Organa knew some of that.

She learned about natural Force bonds when she learned she had a twin brother; that was when many of the mysteries in her life finally began to make sense. When she was a child, the princess of Alderaan would sometimes experience powerful feelings that she knew were not her own. Moments of unexplainable happiness or fear, even pain, would suddenly take hold of her, paralyze her with confusion for a few seconds, then vanish again as swiftly as they came. Leia would rush to wherever her father was and tell him all about it, then he would hold her and tell her that it was only her imagination and nothing to worry about, and then he promised her that one day, she would outgrow it.

And she did outgrow it; she learned to reject the feelings as childish fantasy and ignore them until destiny intervened and she found herself high up between the trees of Endor listening to Luke Skywalker explain about Darth Vader.

“I know.” She told him. “I’ve always known.”

It was the same way with Ben. The bond between mother and child, forged while he was growing inside her, was strong. Their bond made some things easy and other things terribly hard for them both, and in the end, the hard became the only thing they shared. Then she sent him to Luke, and from that day on, Ben simply faded away. She wasn’t sure when she lost him; she only knew that she had.

She resigned herself to it, telling herself that it was a good sign; he was grown, off on his own, and no longer needed her the way he once did.
She could not have been more wrong...

Stone meadow highlands, The Edge.

Rey? What’s happening there?

Leia was listening.

Ren had pulled her into it so she could follow what was being said, but his Force bond with Rey was their private space. Leia knew about personal Force bonds, but she never sought the knowledge of how to forge one. She’d spent her whole life either denying or avoiding what she was and Force bonds, like all the other things Luke wanted to teach her, were strictly off limits to someone trying to live a ‘normal’ life. She could not have been more wrong about that, either, the fact was that her life could never, ever, be normal.

Rey?

Ren made no attempt to conceal his feelings and Leia was feeling the exact same way. The storm on the mountain was over; the rain had stopped and the clouds were already evaporating, so they had a clear view. The face of the scarp had changed; the smooth, solid wall of rock now had a narrow channel carved into it that marked the flash flood’s course. Leia felt a chill of dread; the flood had taken so much rock with it that anything below would be buried under tons of landslide.

Buried. Rey… *Noah*.

Rey?

This time a reply came, and joyously, it was annoyed in tone:

We’re a little busy here…!

They were alive.

………

Far away, in another part of the galaxy, the crew of the Millennium Falcon was bored.

The Hub, Bah’arhoon, the Outer Rim.

Waiting for news of their quarry’s arrival was stressful boredom; with little more to do than standing watch over Laci on her shopping excursions, both Finn and Poe had quickly become restless and irritable, so Luke reluctantly agreed to letting them go out on their own more often. Although he gave them the same dire warnings every time they left, Luke knew that his words of wisdom were only being partly absorbed. So far, they had gone out and returned without problems, but sooner or later, something was bound to go wrong.

He let them go again today.

Dar Na couldn’t go with them; the bright markings on his face proclaiming what he was were now holding him captive inside the Falcon. Unlike the two Resistance fighters, Dar Na’s frustration was difficult to see, even for Luke, because he was a trained Force-sensitive and also a veteran warrior.
Even though he was young, Dar Na seldom shared his experiences; his tableside stories were brief and almost always about others and not himself. And when Dar Na did make it personal, Luke never asked questions.

There were two reasons for that.

There first reason was that, despite Luke’s protests, Dar Na regarded him as ‘Lord Vader’ and would submit to any ‘command’, no matter how casual the request, without hesitation out of respect, and that gave Luke almost absolute – and terribly unfair - power over him. The second reason was that if there was anything Luke actually understood about the nature of life, it was that many of the things one had done in the past were best kept to oneself.

The more time he spent with Dar Na, the more Luke liked him. And one thing Luke truly admired about Dar Na was the quiet dignity he maintained in any situation he found himself in.

Like right now.

Dar Na was sitting in the Falcon’s cockpit, in the copilot’s seat, silently enduring an experiment in cosmetic application. Laci had come back from her latest excursion with ‘something special, just for Dar Na’ and that turned out to be several jars of makeup that, according to her, ‘all the whores in the Hub swear by’. When she herded Dar Na into the cockpit to ‘try it out’, Luke considered intervening, but then he decided to stay out of it because there was a chance Laci might be onto something that could prove useful if it worked.

He followed them into the cockpit and to watch.

Chewbacca was already there, but as soon as he understood what was about to happen, the Wookie remembered he had a few chores to get done someplace else and left.

Laci hovered over the young Sith, painting his face with her fingers, carefully covering the designs he was so proud of with a thick, creamy layer of something that was doing a surprisingly good job of it. As the minutes passed, Da Na’s face went from fearsome to fair, and without the distraction of the designs, he was quite an attractive young man who could easily pass for human under casual scrutiny. Laci rummaged through the sack of supplies she’d brought and pulled out a thin, but nicely-made, imitation mustache and beard and applied them carefully. The facial hair gave him an edgy, exotic look that Laci hoped would make wearing the disguise more tolerable for him.

“There!” She announced the task complete, then looked at Luke for his opinion. “What do you think?”

“Might work…” Luke inspected Dar Na’s new face, “…if keep your hood up and your face in shadow, or only go out at night. How does it feel?”

Making faces, one after another, Dar Na thought for a moment.

“Stiff.” He reported.

“I’m told it sets a little,” Laci studied her work, looking for flaws that weren’t there, “but it won’t go dry and crack.” She looked over at Luke for a sign of approval, but got none, so she looked back at Dar Na. “Go have a look at yourself.”

She stepped back, clearing the way, and Dar Na was out of the seat, then out of the cockpit without another word. Laci watched him leave, then started repacking the containers. Luke walked to where she was, and she turned abruptly to look at him.
“Don’t *start*,” she said defensively, “Dar Na needs to be out and about, just like Poe and Finn. He’ll go crazy if you keep him penned up in here and only let him out to go... fight... for you. He’s not an animal, you know; it’s not fair...”

“I wasn’t going to ‘start’,” Luke interrupted her, “I was going to say ‘thank you’.”

“Oh.” Embarrassed, Laci covered her mouth with her hand, silently repeating her words to herself, and then she dropped it. “I’m sorry, I don’t know where that came from.”

“It’s all right,” Luke put his hand on her shoulder. And kept it there. “Waiting is hard on all of us. It always is; you never get used to it.”

Laci reached up, across her body, to put her hand on his. And kept it there.

It was a strange, but thrilling moment; their hands felt so right together that neither of them wanted to be first to pull theirs away. Suddenly shy for very different reasons, they didn’t dare to look at each other’s faces, so they stared at their hands in silence. A few seconds later, the cockpit comlink began to signal an incoming call, and that broke the spell. Laci took her hand back in order to answer it.

It was Philrian, and she had news.

“The item you were asking about has arrived.” Her words were purposely vague because commercial comlinks were often monitored by rival enterprises seeking inside information. “You can pick it up at Flinzor’s Herbals; he’s located on service lane five, where the freightliners dock. He says you need to come tonight; he’ll be expecting you.”


“I’ll be there,” she replied, “Thank you, Philrian.”

“My pleasure,” the voice from the comlink replied, “Let me know if the item is satisfactory.”

“I will.”

The comlink chimed that the caller had disconnected, so Laci switched it off.

“Tonight.” She said.


“Dar Na can go with me.” She suggested.

“Dar Na can go with *us*.” Luke corrected her.

............

Upstream Falls, Stone meadow highlands, The Edge

The thunderous roar ended as quickly as it started, but although Irno’s workshop seemed untouched, they hadn’t had time to check, and there was no way to tell about his living quarters on the upper level without going up there. The workshop’s overhead lights flickered wildly for a few seconds, but remained on; now their deceptively reassuring glow made the low frequency groans of the metal and
stone surrounding them under stress less terrifying.

It was Irno who sprang into action first; he raced to the lift and tapped the control panel mounted next to it. A small interface display lit up, and Irno quickly went to work there. By the time Dar Noaa caught up to him, a status report was already being generated on the display and the two them became completely absorbed in it.

Rey was following Dar Noaa, but she didn’t race to get there because she was already engaged in a status report of sorts herself; with Ren.

**What hit us? It didn’t sound like just water.**

**The flash flood tore part of the scarp loose directly above you.**

Another low groan rumbled; Rey realized what it meant and started to walk faster.

**We’re buried here. We’re all right for now; the power’s still on and Dar Noaa and Irno are over at the lift checking something. I’m almost there.**

And as she arrived at the lift, Rey heard Ren say something very odd:

**Tell Dar Noaa I think we’ve provoked them.**

----------

In another part of the galaxy, on Bah’arhoon, in the Hub most of the respectable businesses were closed for the night. In service lane five, only one vendor’s shop was still lit inside, but the door was locked because a very private meeting was being held in the back.

“Is this what you are seeking?” the proprietor placed an ore ingot in Luke’s hand.


“He came from one of the freightliners, but I don’t know which one.” The proprietor was folding up the last of the day’s orders as he shared the information. “Placed a special order and paid for it with that.”

“We’ll have to search the docks then.”

“No you won’t,” the proprietor replied with a sly grin. “He ordered two doses of Tusu.”

“What’s that?” Laci asked.

The proprietor’s grin widened, showing two rows of tiny pointed teeth.

“It’s a sexual performance enhancer.” He leered suggestively at her, then at Luke. “*Very* potent. But it needs a night of fermentation, so he must return to pick it up tomorrow morning.” He patted his pile of orders with affection. “And he will be here when I open; believe me, I know the type.”

“And then,” Laci said, “he’ll be looking for company.”

“Indeed!” The proprietor laughed at her choice of words. “And one of the red-ribbon lovelies here
will earn a day’s pay the hard way.”

“A red ribbon...” Laci said quietly, thinking out loud, but then she spoke up. “If he’s burning the way you say he is,” her eyes went from the proprietor to Luke, “he’ll jump for the first red ribbon he sees...”

She’d expected Luke to reject the idea immediately, but he didn’t. He was standing there, looking at her in the strangest way, and it made her feel so… she didn’t know. She heard the proprietor chuckling softly, but she didn’t know why he found it amusing.

“We’ll talk about it.” Luke said. Then he stepped past her, handed the proprietor the ore ingot back, then added a pouch that was bulging with many more before he turned to leave. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure, indeed!” The proprietor jiggled the pouch happily, enjoying the weight in his hand. Then, as Luke and Laci were going out the door, he called to them, “You two come back when you’re ready; I’ll be here!”

They both stopped, but only for a second, then they continued on their way out, where Dar Na was standing watch and enjoying the freedom of the night.

.........

In another part of the galaxy, the seriousness of the situation was being determined.

Stone meadow highlands, The Edge.

Ren hated waiting.

It was something that neither Ben Solo or the Kylo of Ren had to do often; both were used to constant attention and instant obedience. That was no longer the case.

Rey related his words to Dar Noaa, whose reply was “Wait.”

Ren was aware that Dar Noaa and Inno were watching a status report as it was being generated, which would take time. He understood how important it was that they knew exactly what they were dealing with, but until they had an answer, his own situation was impossible. He should be on his way up there to help them, but he’d have to do that on foot, which meant leaving the General behind alone, which he was not about to do. But, if he stayed here with her, it meant leaving them on their own up there. The fingers of his left hand were starting to twitch as his frustration grew; here he was, possibly, probably, the most powerful being that ever existed in the galaxy – and he couldn’t do a damn thing!

But wait.

Leia was feeling frustrated, too; her first impulse was to make Ren go to them, but he’d silenced that idea with a single look. Now her mind was being battered by both his feelings and the pulses of vented Force coming from his hand, and she realized that what Ren needed from her right now was support, not an argument. She reached for his left hand, taking hold of it gently, her palm resting against his, letting the Force flow through her, too.
He looked down at her with an expression that, for an instant, made her think he was about to start crying. He didn’t, but Leia could sense the depth of affection directed her way. Ren or Ben, names didn’t matter; he was her child and he loved her.

He. Loved. Her.

That alone made the waiting worthwhile.

......

Upstream, in Irno’s workshop, they’d just gotten the the grim news; the status report was done and it was as bad as they feared it would be.

They were definitely buried.

The structure’s security program could only estimate the volume of rock and dirt covering the roof, but it was clear about the weight: the roof was so close to maximum load that even one boulder more would result in collapse.

“Listen,” Irno offered weakly, “it’s not *all* bad news. We still have power because that’s coming from a Kyber crystal assembly embedded in the rock below, so we won’t be sitting here in the dark while we figure this out.”

“What about ventilation?” Dar Noaa asked. “Without that, we’ll be sitting here in the light watching each other die of suffocation.”

Irno quickly submitted a query.

“Vents and filters are all still online,” he reported, “I don’t know the mechanics that well, but if it didn’t go down when we got hit, it’s not going to go down. There is no immediate danger; we have air, water; there’s plenty of food...”

Dar Noaa and Rey exchanged a look; they didn’t need a Force bond to be sharing the same thoughts. They’d just survived having a mountain dropped on them, and not only that, they had everything thing they needed to keep on surviving until they found a way out.

It was all too miraculous, too much lucky coincidence. Too *convenient*.

“Tell Ren,” Dar Noaa said, “this was a trap, we’ve been *caged* here – and tell him to be ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“He’s going to have visitors.”

.........

_Time is a funny thing._

_For one thing, it isn't actually real. You can’t hold it or eat it or bank it; all you can do is measure it in some way that makes sense to you. And it’s elastic; it drags or flies depending on how good a time you’re having. It’s only an illusion, but it hits as hard as a supernova when it doesn’t go your way. And it doesn’t follow the ‘rules’, because there aren’t any rules for something that isn’t real; a day here and a day there are different, minutes and hours seem the same - but that’s an illusion, too, because another thing about time is that it’s always *local*._
The Hub, Bah'arhoon, the Outer Rim.

The captain and owner of the freightliner Tismo was looking forward to an exciting day.

His name was Gizmol Ruin, but he usually went by Giz.

He’d sent his men out in to search for an easy kill; he preferred a village that was somewhat isolated both physically and socially because that meant fewer complications could arise, which meant less expense and more profit. It would be at least a day before they reported a target selection, so now that he’d finished with the business of paying for docking space and supplies, Ruin had not only some free time, but plenty of hard-earned ore ingots to spend as he wished. And the Hub was a perfect place to spend them because one could obtain anything there.

He’d just come out of an exotic herbal vendor’s establishment with a freshly-made batch of Tusu when he heard the delicious sound of a woman’s voice. It alerted him to something else he wanted to buy today, and when he looked and saw where the voice was coming from, he instantly knew she was what he was looking for. Her face was half-hidden inside the hood of a cape, but Ruin caught glimpses of golden curls in motion and a promising profile. But it was that voice that drew him forward; even amidst an argument, there was an enchanting melody to it.

She would be beautiful; he knew it.

He stalked her from behind, coming slowly and listening carefully to what was being said between her and a very angry fruit vendor.

“Thirty!” the vendor demanded as the two of them tugged on a small bundle. “No less!”

“But,” the golden voice pleaded, “I only have twenty with me; I can bring the other ten to you later if you’ll only...”


The unseen beauty shrugged and released the bundle, then turned to leave, and Ruin finally got to see his quarry’s face. As she passed, she gave him a quick, embarrassed look before continuing on. Ruin was used to getting what he wanted, so he wasted no time; he grabbed the bundle from the vendor’s hands, tossed an ore ingot at him and left to pursue the woman who would be his pleasure of the day. She was moving quickly, so he had to hurry to catch her, and literally jumped in front of her to offer her the bundle.

“You forgot this.”

Startled, she looked at the bundle, then at him.

“You didn’t steal it, did you?” she asked warily.

“No,” he assured her, “I have plenty of money, but, alas... no one to spend it with.”

She pushed the hood back, revealing herself. His body pulsed with excitement when he saw that her hair was pulled up and loosely tied high on the back of her head with a red ribbon! She was everything he wanted, and more; whatever her price was, he would pay it.
She eyed him up and down, assessing him thoroughly.

“I think,” she changed her tone, “I could be persuaded to help you with that.”

Ruin reached inside his vest, pulled out a handful of ore ingots and opened his palm to show her. She inspected them, then scooped them all up and deposited them one by one into the cleavage made by the tight-fitting bodice that barely contained her breasts.

“Where should we begin?” She asked coyly.

“With a tour of my ship,” Ruin answered suggestively.

“Of course,” she hooked her arm inside his, “whatever you want.”

In his hurry to take his pleasure back to his ship, Ruin had to elbow past an old man who was blocking the way, but he didn’t notice anything beyond a bumbling and bent-over obstacle in a vintage cloak.

Luke Skywalker straightened up and followed, staying far enough behind to be invisible in the mob, but close enough to act if a need arose.

But so far, Laci was doing just fine.

……

Almost an hour later, the tour was still not over.

Even though it was an old and showed the marks of too many hard landings, Gismol Ruin was proud of his ship, so the questions she asked in every section he took her through didn’t bother him much at first. But he hadn’t brought her here for a talk, and now that he’d paused the tour on the excuse that he needed to use the sanitary station and once there, gulped down a dose of Tusu, the tingling between his legs was becoming a throb. The pressure was becoming uncomfortable, so he sped through the rest of the tour, bypassing some sections entirely, until he’d brought his pleasure to the final feature in the tour of his ship.

His private quarters.

He opened the door and she walked inside in front of him, then stopped to look around.

“Modest quarters,” she remarked, “for someone like *you*.”

“It’s temporary,” he replied, “I will be trading up very soon.”

“Really? Business must be good.”

“Business...” He began to close in on her, “is both good and easy; all I do is transport ‘workers’ from one place to another, get the job done, then move on.”

“What’s the job?”

“Extermination.”

“That sounds brutal,” she frowned, “what do you exterminate?”
“Terrorists.” He said it with pride, moving closer, losing interest in the conversation. “We hunt Skywalkers; have you heard of them?”

“Yes,” she answered, “I’ve heard of them.”

“The Republic wants them gone, but they’re too soft to come out here and do it themselves.” He was really feeling the effects of the Tusu now. “It’s a job for hard men, which *I* am - and for that, I am being paid a fortune.” He was right in front of her now; his hands skimmed over her shoulders and down her arms. “Speaking of business...”

“Before we go any further,” she replied coolly, “there’s something you should know.”

“I don’t care,” he closed his hands around her wrists, “I’ll give you whatever you want...”

“What I want,” she breathed the words into his face, “is information.”

“We’ll talk all you want. After.”

“No, we won’t.”

He jerked his head back.

“What did you say?”

Laci smiled at him sweetly, then looked past him. His eyes and his head followed her lead and he saw somebody standing in the open doorway behind him. He spun around to confront the intruder with fists ready.

“Who are you?!” He demanded.

“He’s a Skywalker,” Laci’s voice came from behind him, “just like *me*.”

The intruder walked toward him, and Ruin saw his face. His fists opened; his arms fell to his sides. He’d been given the warning when he signed the contract, but he hadn’t taken it seriously.

Luke Skywalker was supposed to be a *myth*.

........

To be continued...
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Hub, Bar’harhoon, The Outer Rim.

Laci Kin was standing out of the way, watching, learning.

Except for a few moments at the very start, when she showed Luke her ‘costume’ for the day, the plan had worked perfectly. Judging by the expressions on Finn, Poe and Dar Na’s faces as she walked into the Millennium Falcon’s communal space, her outfit was exactly what it needed to be, but Luke’s expression was impossible to read. Aside from an almost imperceptible widening of his eyes, he seemed utterly unimpressed and approved it over the objections of the young men. All she needed to add was some makeup on her face and a shameless red ribbon in her hair and the freightliner captain didn’t stand a chance.

But her job was done; it’s was Luke’s turn now.

For all his swagger, Ruin turned out to be a sniveling little maggot that turned on everyone he worked for without much resistance. Luke didn’t have to push him very hard because Ruin’s years of hearing the legends of Luke Skywalker had already done most of the work for him. Ruin went to his private workstation, logged on, then showed Luke his passwords and codes and served as tour guide through his financial records, even going so far as to point out the ‘big payouts’ earned as his ship traveled from world to world along the Outer Rim.

The numbers were damning.

The payouts were huge for just one group of raiders, which meant the body count was huge as well. According to the financial display, the ship had already earned ten thousand in bounties paid for Skywalkers killed, and now in its refrigerated holds there were enough recently acquired ‘proofs’ to bring another five. The contract was twenty thousand for two hundred proofs, with a five thousand bonus for meeting the delivery deadline. One hundred had already been turned in, and fifty were in the ship, that meant that right now, Ruin’s raiders were out scouting for fifty more, the last fifty, the ones that would put the bonus in hand.

The thought sickened Luke; time was running out.

“Look,” Ruin said nervously, “we can make a deal, I...”

Luke felt a surge of rage so dark that he couldn't control it; Ruin’s feet left the floor and he gagged, then gurgled as his body slowly drifted toward the far wall of his quarters. He was turning blue when he hit the wall.

“Luke! Stop!” Laci shouted, “We *need* him!”

Her voice cut through his rage, breaking the darkness like the full moon breaks the night; Luke caught his breath, then, in control again, he released his grip and Ruin slid down the wall to the floor gasping.

Laci ran to Luke and grabbed his forearm.
“It’s not too late,” she squeezed him a little as she spoke, demanding his attention, “He told me they’re in no hurry - we can still get ahead of them.”

Luke brushed her hand from his arm, then walked toward the wall and Ruin, stopping only when his boots were looming in the still prone Ruin’s face. Ruin lifted his head, then turned it to look up.

“Where are your workers?”

“Scouting,” Ruin struggled to get the words out, “when they’ve chosen a location, they’ll check in, then wait for go time.”

Luke reached out, this time his rage was expressed as a controlled - and painful - intrusion deep into Ruin’s mind.

“Three hours before dawn.” Luke recited what he saw so Laci could hear it. “They’re all asleep… no resistance… quick and quiet with no messy complications…”

“… best for everyone,” Ruin mumbled weakly, finishing for him.

Luke made a gesture and Ruin’s head hit the floor hard.

For a second, Laci was paralyzed by the shock of what she’d just seen, then she gasped out a question she dreaded to ask.

“Did you just *kill* him?”

“No.” Luke turned and walked back to her. “We still need him for check-in time.”

“And after that?” Laci asked.

For a moment, he stared at her as if she was a stranger, but then his expression softened.

“We’ll see.” He told her.

Then he went back to the workstation, sat in Ruin’s chair and began to search the files for anything and everything that might be of use.

………..

In another part of the galaxy, things were starting to add up and nobody liked the conclusions they were coming to...

Stone meadow highlands, the Edge.

Leia was listening to Ren listening to Rey repeat what Dar Noaa was saying.

**He says we’re hostages. They don’t want to hurt us, they just want some leverage over you; that’s why he’s sure they’re on their way there.**

Ren considered for a second or two, then replied in a tone that gave Leia shivers.
Leverage? I’ll show them *leverage*.

The threat in his words didn’t go unnoticed upstream, either. There were a few seconds of silence, then this:

**Dar Noaa says don’t make things worse than they already are.**

Ren’s expression changed. Dar Noaa was right; choosing confrontation first was an unnecessary risk.

*There’s another way.*

He broke off the conversation so abruptly that Leia needed a few seconds to recover, and by then, he had already crossed the meadow back to the Visitor’s entry and was going inside. She chased after him into the ship, where she stopped to choose a direction. Then she felt it.

*The waveform…*

She arrived at the cockpit entry just in time to see Ren placing his hand on the waveform to activate it.

It rejected him.

Vicious sparks flew in all directions, but had absolutely no effect on Ren. Leia could sense the surge of energy coming out of his left hand as the confrontation escalated, so she hurried to his side and reached for his hand, but he waved her off, so all she could do was remain at his side and watch the sparks fly.

“Accept me,” Ren commanded in a cold, calm voice, “or I will *fry* every circuit in your system.”

The waveform went dark and silent. Then it gave a single ding and presented a command display; the white display that Irno had been using.

The Kourin display.

“Good.” Ren told it. “Now tell them I will speak with them.”

The waveform replied; a single ding. Round one was over.

As soon as he’d made his demand, Ren took his hands from the waveform to close the session. He turned around and leaned his backside against it, then looked at Leia, who was standing there waiting for an explanation.

“How we wait.” He told her.

“For how long?”

“As long as it takes.”

Leia walked to where he was, stood in front of him and looked up at his face.

“Dar Noaa said…”

“Dar Noaa,” Ren replied, “is not here, *I* am.” He caught a fleeting look of fear in her face and started to reach for her hand to reassure her, then reconsidered and pulled it back. “I know what I’m doing, General; I need you to trust that. I’m not concerned; the Kourin been interested in me for quite
awhile, and now it’s time to find out why.” He reached again for her hand; this time, taking hold gently. “What I *am* concerned about is their sudden interest in *you*.”

“Me? Why?”

“I don’t know why,” Ren admitted, “but I’ve got a bad feeling about it. Promise me that you will stay out of the way.”

“You really think they’re coming?”

“I can feel them,” Ren held her hand tighter, “They’re almost here.”

At that moment, the ship sounded a single ding, drawing their attention to the waveform, where the white display had activated on its own. Ren turned around and looked; no proximity alerts had sounded, but the display indicated that something new was now in the meadow. It was sitting precisely where the Millennium Falcon had been, but it was not the Falcon. Aside from an ovoid shape, the display was unable to relay any detail about it at all. Ren looked down at Leia, who had leaned around him to get a look at it.

“It’s them.” He told her.

Then they heard a voice come from the ship’s comlink, but it was not the ship addressing them. The voice was eerily disturbing, yet coolly compelling, as it delivered a two word message:

“Come outside.”

…..

The Hub, Bar’harhoon, The Outer Rim.

Laci Kin was slowly going crazy, and she was driving everyone and everything still on board the Millennium Falcon crazy with her.

Too much happened too fast and now nothing was happening fast enough.

The check-in call had come just after sunset; his workers gave him their precise location, a “head” count based on surveillance of the village in question, and confirmation of go-time. There was an excellent chance that they could make it to the village and be there waiting when the raiders arrived, but only if they moved fast.

“What about Ruin?” Laci asked.

There was no more use for Ruin now; he’d surrendered everything he had to offer. Luke would have simply ended the wretch, but Laci’s presence made him reconsider; Ruin made his living butchering the helpless, but Luke was not about to copy that vile behavior in front of Laci, who was waiting anxiously to hear the answer to her question. For a moment, he was at a loss, but then he remembered why Ruin had been so easy to find and trap and a wicked smile bloomed on his face.

“I’m going to make sure that he gets everything he wanted today.”
“What?”

“What did he put that Tusu?”

“Tucked inside his vest.”

“Get me some water.”

While Laci was doing that, Luke went to Ruin and helped him to his feet. The captain was still
groggy from Luke’s interrogation, and he stared at the Jedi with confusion. Laci returned with a
small cup of water, and Luke reached inside Ruin’s pouch, pulled out the remaining dose of Tusu,
then emptied it into the cup.

“Here,” he pushed it at Ruin, “drink this.”

Ruin accepted the cup and raised it to his lips.

“Luke,” Laci whispered loudly, “he’s had one dose already; that’s going to...”

“Yes, I know.”

Ruin finished drinking, then belched, and Luke raised his hand to make a few ‘suggestions’...

A short time later, they delivered Ruin to one of the biggest whorehouses in the Hub, where a
handful of Ruin’s own ore ingots paid for one deluxe full night of services. The red-ribboned
beauties there would do a thorough job, and by the time Ruin recovered – if he recovered – he’d
wake up to a terrible headache, a bad case of the ‘hards’ and absolutely no memory of Laci or Luke.
Or anything else, for that matter.

Once back at the Millennium Falcon, Laci used Ruin’s comlink to call Philrian, who was not only
able to quickly provide a local transport skiff for them, she hired it from the same service that had
already hired one out to the raiders. And, for a price, the service also provided the company’s secret
tracking frequency of the raiders rental. Since skiffs served mostly as taxis to areas outside the city’s
services, they were compact, quick and plentiful, which meant that one more skiff in the air wouldn’t
draw much attention. They also had limited seating, so even if Ruin’s fourteen workers picked up a
local stringer or two for the job, their number would not exceed twenty and neither Luke nor Dar Na
seemed concerned about the count. So, while the raiders were eating their dinner and pumping
themselves up for pre-dawn butchery, Luke, Finn and Dar Na would enter the village and alert them
to the danger. Then Finn would escort the villagers to safety while Luke and Dar Na remained
behind “to deal with” the raiders.

When Luke said that, Laci didn’t give it much thought because everyone agreed without comment.

It was later, after she’d wished them all luck and then watched them head out from the top of the
ramp that Laci thought it over and started to worry. Her memories of the night Luke saved her were
fuzzy at best; she knew he’d done it all by himself, but she could not remember how he’d done it.
What she did recall with horrible, perfect clarity was the savagery of the raiders that night; how fast
and brutal they were; how everyone else died...


She busied herself in the galley first; soon the counter there was filled with work in progress. Then
she busied herself in the communal space by giving R2D2, Threepio and BB8 thorough and totally unneeded polishings. Then she busied herself by visiting Chewbacca and Poe, who were sitting watch together in the falcon’s cockpit. They were polite, but distracted, and their assurances that everything was going to be fine had the sound of practice. Laci wondered how many times they’d repeated those exact same words before tonight, and how accurate all those assurances then turned out to be.

But she didn’t ask.

Instead, she returned to the galley to make sure there would be something warm and ready for Luke, Finn and Dar Na when they got back, but she couldn’t keep her mind on what she was doing. Echoes of that night in the village whispered in her head; shouts and screams and hideous laughter, and then the sound of Luke’s lightsaber…

**Luke.**

He moved through her thoughts like he’d moved through the dark the night he saved her; his quiet confidence, his patience, his wonderful stories, the way he found ways to make her laugh, the way he looked at her with those sad blue eyes that made her want to put her arms around him and hold him until the sadness went away…

“Laci? Did you hear what I said?”

It was Poe. He was standing at the other side of the counter, and seeing him there filled her with dread.


“No,” Poe replied apologetically, “But he will. I just thought you might want some company; I mean, this is your first time.”

“My first time?”

“Waiting,” Poe explained kindly, “for someone to come back.”

Laci gave him an embarrassed little laugh, then sighed loudly.

“Is it always like this?” she asked.

“Yes, it’s always like this.”

Laci looked at Poe; he was a seasoned fighter who had gone or waited many times. She’d seen how calm he was when he was saying goodbye today; he sent them off with smile on his face, but now, waiting here with her, that smile was gone. For some reason, she saw a kindred spirit in Poe, and it all came pouring out.

“I didn’t want them to go,” she confessed, “but I didn’t say so. Now that he’s…” she paused to correct herself, “… they’re… gone, I can’t stop thinking about what I should have said, what I could have said, while I had the chance. What if…”

“You can’t let the ‘what ifs’ in,” Poe replied, “they’ll drive you crazy.”

“Then what do I do?”
“You love him while you can, then let him go.” Poe advised. “Then you wait.”

He reached across the counter and touched her hand.

“And then you make sure,” he continued, “that you’re there when he comes back. That’s all you can do.”

“You said ‘love’.”

“Yes, I did.” Poe answered quickly, then continued on. “It’s up to you to decide if you can accept that kind of life; that’s the only power you have, and you’ll have to make that decision every time he comes back to you.” He paused, then sighed in the strangest, saddest way. “Because one day he won’t.”

The words left her stunned and silent.

“I know a lot about love,” he closed his hand around hers, “I know it when I see it; and you, my dear lady, are in love. Will you take advice from someone who’s been where you are right now? *Do* something about it.”

He gave her hand a tiny squeeze, then released it.

Then he left.

Laci stood there for a long time doing absolutely nothing.

Poe’s words were not just advice; they were a warning. This new reality she’d found herself in was a place where nothing would ever be certain or secure; every goodbye could be the last one ever. And there was a tremor, the tiniest thread of sorrow and regret, woven into the fabric of what Poe said; Laci felt sure that Poe was speaking from personal experience. Perhaps that was why he’d left so abruptly after telling her she should do something.

*Do something about it.*

Laci looked at herself; she was a tired mess.

She left the galley, went straight to the sleep chamber for the new sleep shift she had yet to wear, then hurried to the shower. She let the red ribbon that had been holding her hair high and out of the way all day remain while she rinsed body and mind free of doubt, and by the time she was finished and standing in the warm air dryer, Laci had made her decision.

She loved Luke Skywalker.

……

In another part of the galaxy, out on the Edge, the discussion was taking a turn from who to why.

Up at the lower falls, Rey was waiting.

Ren had cut her off without explanation and hadn’t replied to any of her repeated attempts to reach
him since. That didn’t mean anything in itself because it was just how he was, but quite some time had passed since he’d gone silent and she was starting to worry.

Dar Noaa and Irno were oblivious to that, though; they were locked in verbal combat. Dar Noaa was insisting that the Kourin had deliberately dropped a mountain on Irno’s house to trap them there, but Irno was resisting the idea and the two of them were growing less tolerant of each other with every exchange. Rey didn’t understand why, so she was listening intently now.

“We’re not *really* hostages,” Irno argued, “we’re in no danger; there is no way they’d hurt any one of us because they need every one of us.”

“Why do they need us?” Dar Noaa asked.

“You have to ask?” Irno replied angrily “You’re the one who showed me those resonators. Don’t you get it?”

Dar Noaa just stared at him.

“Remember what I said about your formula? I said ‘All you need is an interface and a powerful Force-sensitive and the prototype could fold space’.”

“Fold space?” Rey asked. She knew what the words meant, and she also knew that it was impossible, so she addressed her next question to Dar Noaa. “What’s he talking about?”

Irno looked at Dar Noaa suspiciously.

Didn’t you tell them?” he asked.

“No.”

“Tell us what?” Rey asked.

“It’s too soon,” Dar Noaa was explaining to Irno, not Rey, “There’s been no time to analyze the data, or duplicate it, so there was no need to bring others into it.”

“Did you tell that Ren?” Irno asked.

“No.”

“That Ren doesn’t *know*?” Irno’s rage was both instant and unexpected. “They’re *coming*! I’ve told you over and over again – they want something! They *always* want something! Do the math, you stupid Sith!” Irno screeched. “They want that *Ren*!”

Rey didn’t understand, but that didn’t matter; Ren was in danger and she had to warn him.

**Don’t trust the Kourin!**

But no reply came.

……..

In another part of the galaxy, the waiting was finally over.

The Hub, Bar’harhoon, The Outer Rim.
Laci was lying on the bed with her eyes closed, pretending to sleep when the comlink chimed and she heard Poe’s voice.

“Laci?”

“I’m awake!”

“Finn called. They just turned the skiff in and they’re on their way back here.”

“Poe?”

“Everyone’s fine, Laci.”

She tapped off the comlink, then sat up. Then it hit her; a deliberate deep breath was no use, though - she burst into tears and cried it out.

……

Luke Skywalker entered the Falcon’s communal space like a sleepwalker.

Poe and Chewbacca came from the cockpit to greet him, but Luke didn’t stop; he didn’t seem to see or hear them, or perhaps he didn’t want to. The Jedi walked across the communal space and disappeared into the corridor that led to the galley and the sanitary station. Poe started to follow, but Dar Na grabbed his arm as he passed, stopping him.

“Leave him to Laci,” Dar Na said quietly, “She will care for him.”

Poe looked at Dar Na, then past him at Finn.

“It was *bad*.” Finn told him what he already knew from their expressions. “The villagers are safe now, but it was bad. Especially for Luke; he hasn’t said more than ten words since we left there.”

“What happened?”

“I didn’t see it,” Finn answered. “Ask Dar Na.”

……

Not far away, someone was desperately seeking solitude.

Luke was alone again.

The mission was successful; this gang of killers would never kill again. There was no satisfaction in that knowledge, though, because although he knew what he’d done was both just and necessary, the truth was that Luke Skywalker hated every second of it.

One of the reasons he went to Ahch’tu and then remained there, alone, was because he could no longer bear the burden of being a Jedi. For every mission accomplished, there would be ten, a hundred, a thousand, more missions waiting for him. Every one of them would be just and necessary, and every one of them would require the sacrifice of lives. Sometimes it was friends, sometimes it
was enemies, but the dying never ended.

Luke was tired. He was empty.

He was alone.

He went straight to the shower; as he walked, he slipped off his robe and let it drop to the floor, then stripped off the rest of his clothes piece by piece, leaving a trail on the floor behind him. He was naked when he stepped into the shower; he placed his hands against the shower wall, activated the shower, then leaned into the jets of warm water and just stood there.

That was where Laci found him.

She paused at the entry just long enough to look at the trail of clothes, then she followed it, picking up each item along the way. His robe felt damp; the darkening stains all over it testified to a terrible fight. The rest of his clothes were damp, but unstained; Laci choked down a sob of relief when she realized the dampness was from sweat and not soaking blood. She was close to the shower now, and dared to look in to check on him.

He was standing with his head and hands against the shower wall; his back was toward her, and he didn’t seem aware that she was there. She watched him for a moment, then turned and left a quietly as she had come, taking his clothes with her.

A few minutes later she returned with the blue towel robe she’d gotten for him. He was still in the shower, standing exactly as he had been before. She placed the robe on the bench, then left again. Sometime later, Luke stepped out from the shower and saw it there. Even though he wasn’t fully dry, Luke picked it up and put it on, then he went to find her. It wasn’t a search; he knew where she would be.

She was standing in the sleep chamber, waiting.

She was wearing a simple shift made from delicate fabric and her hair was still tied up with that red ribbon. She didn’t say anything; her greeting was a small, gentle smile that welcomed him silently. He returned her smile; he didn’t want to talk about it, not now, probably not ever, and she seemed to know that.

He walked to where she was, then stopped directly in front of her.

She reached out and touched his shoulder.

He reached, too; his hand glided over her cheek, then behind her ear and up to pull the red ribbon from her hair, freeing it. Blonde curls fell to her shoulders in a tangled mess. She let her hand slide over his collar bone, then under his chin, and then up, following his beard until her fingers arrived at his lips.

Her touch excited him. This time, he didn’t even try to resist it; his arms found her waist then wrapped around her, pulling her body to his. Her hand fell away, then her lips took its place; she kissed him with the reckless abandon of a woman in love.

He kissed her back.
When it ended, they looked into each other’s eyes to confirm that they both wanted the same thing here. His hands went to her shoulders; the shift slid off and down her arms easily, then fell to the floor. She responded in kind by untying his robe and peeling it off. Then came the rush; kisses and caresses, the fall onto the bed...

There was no hesitation, no fumbling clumsiness, no frenzy; it flowed beautifully from the first caress to the last rapturous wave of orgasm as if the two of them had been together since the beginning of time itself.

He would have stayed right here forever if he could; touching her, exploring her.

Loving her.

But he was so sleepy now...

He eased his body off hers, but not completely. Instead, he stretched his arm over her breasts and nestled against her side, and she turned so she could hold him there. They still hadn’t said a single word; none were needed; things were exactly as they should be. The warmth of her body sang a silent lullaby, and nothing else mattered right now because Luke Skywalker was feeling contentment for the first time in... forever.

He closed his eyes and fell asleep in the sanctuary of her arms.

……………………

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

I must have rewritten the scene where Luke and Laci come together ten times before choosing the one included here. There are many (fine) fics here that are loaded with (great) graphic sex scenes, but I felt that it just wasn't right for Luke and Laci to burn up the page. I wanted a scene that would make you feel how they feel. It worked for me, your mileage might differ.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

First virus of the fall, and it's been miserable. On the mend, posting this little chapter so you won't think I've abandoned you. Be kind, I've been sick.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Hub, Bar'haroon, The Outer Rim.

Mornings in the Hub were always busy times. Arrivals tended to happen then for many reasons, mostly because a morning schedule gave one an entire day to deal with any unexpected circumstances that might arise. In the Hub, time was literally money; every second had to be accounted for in somebody’s ledgers and paid for, preferably by somebody else. For example, a certain skiff vendor arrived at his business to hear from the night crew that one of his skiffs had not returned as scheduled and now he was short on the day’s contracts by one piece of hardware.

A very *expensive* piece of hardware.

They knew where it was; the tracking system was working, so they’d sent someone out to investigate and repossess it, but the vendor was so annoyed that he decided to take further action because time was money…

Not far away, in a nearby sector, the crew of the Millennium Falcon was still winding down from the night’s events. Fortified with food set out in the galley and now pressed much too tightly around the Dejarik table, Poe, Finn and Chewbacca were working hard to pry a detailed report on the raid out of Dar Na, who’s reluctance only served to fuel their interest in knowing more. They pressed him with questions, then sat there chewing food like wide-eyed farm animals while he answered.

A short walk and a wall away, things were quieter.

The Falcon’s ‘private’ quarters where, once upon a time, a princess slept, were an imperfect effort to make a space freighter feel like a home. The galley and kitchen were adequate, but the sleep chamber lacked sufficient insulation to be truly quiet. Every now and then the muffled sounds of conversation would find a way to trespass on the quiet of the space and rouse Laci just enough to recognize it. Sometimes Poe or Finn, but mostly Chewbacca, because his voice carried so well through the metal and composite that was the Falcon. The Wookie’s snorts and purrs had a soothing effect, and quickly put her right back to sleep once she’d checked on Luke, who seemed undisturbed by any of it.

She was in a pleasant dream when the comlink sounded. It barged in with a series of rude chimes followed by Poe’s voice.

“Laci?”

“I’m...” She knew the right answer, she just needed a second more to get it into her mouth.

“...awake.”
“Sorry,” Poe’s voice replied. “Philrian’s calling. She says it’s urgent.”

“Send it through.”

“You got it.”

“Laci?” There was a nervous twang in Philrian’s voice, “Are you there?”

“I’m here. You sound upset, what’s wrong?

“The transport service I set you up with last night just let me know that the skiff you were tracking didn’t return as scheduled, and didn’t respond to repeated calls, so they sent a technician out to see what the problem was. The tech found the skiff intact but deserted, so they called the constable to go to the freightliner that hired it to make them pay for it.”

Laci felt Luke move; he was awake and listening, too. She didn’t say anything to him so Philrian would continue without interruption.

“When they found the freightliner,” Phrilian went on, “nobody answered their calls, so they did a search in case someone was injured inside somewhere, and Laci,” Philrian’s voice dropped to a tense whisper, “what they *found*… !”

“I know what they found. Please, go on.”

“The news is spreading like wildfire, the sector is in uproar; they’re looking everywhere for the captain and crew.”

Laci sat up, then looked at Luke, who seemed to know her question before she asked and nodded in agreement. She and Luke knew exactly where to look for the absentee captain. She’d wondered why Luke showed Ruin mercy, but now everything fell into place; Luke hadn’t shown Ruin mercy at all; he’d let him live to answer for the horrific cargo hidden in his ship.

“They should try the red ribbon district.” Laci advised. “Luno’s something...”

“Palace” Luke said quietly.

“Palace! Luno’s Palace.”

“I’ll... pass that on,” Phrilian sounded curious about how Laci would know that, but wisely didn’t inquire further. “This is going to explode when it gets out of the Hub, Laci; they’ll be looking for anyone who might be connected to that freightliner or its crew and it would be better for us all if you left as soon as possible.”

Laci checked with Luke, who nodded.

“Consider us gone,” Laci said.

“You’ve still got ore in processing, what do you want to do about that?”

“Keep it,” Laci watched Luke’s face as she spoke every word, watching for – and receiving – his approval. “Please make sure the skiff vendor gets compensated for all his trouble; then use the rest as you see fit. And thank you, Phrilian, for everything.”

“That’s a *lot* of thank you.” Phrilian’s voice gushed in reply. “Come back and see me after this mess gets cleaned up and things have calmed down.”
“I will.”

The snap of disconnection ended the call, and Laci sighed softly.

“I’m going to miss her.”

The cool touch of Luke’s robotic hand against her skin served as a gentle reminder that here, in this new life where all things were temporary, she was not alone. She fell back, then rolled onto her side so they were face to face.

“So Ruin takes the fall after all.” She said.

She saw a wicked grin bloom on Luke's face.

“He’s earned it,” he said. “The *hard* way.”

"You knew what would happen?"

"I had a little... foresight."

“You could have told me.”

“What? And *ruin* the surprise?”

They shared a muffled laugh that drew them closer and closer until something had to happen. For a moment, Luke balanced on the knife edge between what he *wanted* and what he *had* to do, but the Jedi in him would not let go. He sighed and pulled back.

“I have to tell the others,” he said, “that we’re leaving.”

Laci watched him sit up, then turn and put his legs over the edge of the bed.

“Are we going home?” She asked.

“Home?” Luke paused at the word; it had come to have no meaning for him, but to Laci, it meant the nameless planet out on the Edge where his family was waiting. He’d let her take charge of getting supplies, and she done the job well; the Falcon was almost full, so there was every reason for her to think they would be going ‘home’ now. But they weren’t. “No, not yet.”

“Then where are we going?”

Luke leaned over and reached for his robe, stood to put it on, then looked down at her.

“Do you know anybody on Qir?”

…..

Meanwhile, in the communal space...

“… and so we waited.”

Dar Na’s audience was waiting, too; he’d finally come to the part of the story they’d been anticipating. The story so far had been unexceptional; they arrived in time to warn the villagers, who cooperated completely. As soon as the cover of twilight fell, the families crept from their homes into
the surrounding woods, then met at a rocky outcrop where Finn was waiting to escort them out of the area. While that was happening, Luke and Dar Na did a thorough reconnaissance of the village and decided where the best spot to intercept the raiders would be. At this point, Dar Na’s pause was almost too much to bear, and Chewbacca’s gurgled complaint spoke for them all.

“All right, then,” Dar Na resumed the story. “When the enemy arrived, they entered the village together from the same direction, two pair to a row; careless and indifferent, as if what they were about to do was of no importance to them at all.” The contempt in the young Sith’s voice was obvious. “Then as they walked along the main, each set of two pairs split off; one pair went to the left and one pair to the right, heading for the nearest home while the rest of the gang moved on. All we had to do was split up and follow the separated pairs.”

“The Jedi chose the left. I went to the right.”

“The two I followed crashed through the door, then rushed to find their victims without once looking behind. The first fell easily; I took him from behind; the blade under his chin, then up, then across. As I was finishing him, I heard the second call out, then heavy footsteps coming. I went to the doorway and saw that this was a Scr'tha.”

Mouths opened around the table, which meant that everyone knew about Scr'tha. They were ugly, mean and almost always really, really big. There were two species of them; one was much worse than the other.

“Which kind?” Poe asked excitedly, “Fluffy or Scaled?”

“Scaled,” Dar Na replied.

“Damn!” Poe breathed out what everyone was thinking. The Scalers were the worse ones.

“I took it on as it stepped into the room,” Dar Na said flatly, “my blade slid between the scales, but hit bone and stuck there, missing the airway entirely, so the Scaler was able to sound the alarm.”

“Damn!” Poe said. Scr'tha had large hollow nasal cavities that amplified sound.

“We went to the floor; I had to work the blade free of the bone, then redirect it to make the kill.”

“That could not have been easy.” Poe whispered.

“During the struggle,” Dar Na dismissed Poe’s words without reply, “I could hear the shouts of the others returning, and I knew that the Jedi was out there facing them alone.”

Silence.

Dar Na had said it calmly, but his eyes betrayed him; a fast flicker there confessed to the intensity of that moment. And his audience shared it right along with him; the fear for Luke, the frustration of not being there by his side out there in the dark.

“I went to aide the Jedi,” Dar Na began again, “but when I emerged from the house, I saw that I had not been needed.”

“What did you see, Na?” This time it was Finn asking; the question had been burning inside him. “What did Luke do?”

Dar Na stared at him, unsure if such things should be spoken of. But Finn had gone on the mission too, and for that risk, if no other reason, Finn deserved an answer. The Sith took a breath, then faced
Finn directly to tell him.

“I saw bodies suspended in the air; they were black masses blotting out the stars. I saw the Jedi standing below; he reached out…” Dar Na leaned forward, making it personal. “…and then I saw them pop open like ripe seed pods, shredded, spilling their insides out to the ground below, then fall.”

Silence.

His audience sat there paralyzed by the image his words painted in their minds. Dar Na had said *nothing* about blasters firing or lightsabers in motion…

“How many?” Poe asked weakly.

“Fourteen.” Dar Na replied.

Silence.

Nobody knew what to say next; not even Dar Na.

Especially Dar Na.

They were sitting there, fiddling with their food or sipping their drink, when Luke Skywalker suddenly emerged from the rear corridor. Dressed only in a blue bathrobe and bare feet, with his long gray hair straggled around his bearded face, for a moment, the Jedi looked like an angry god fallen out of an old temple mosaic and both the listeners and their storyteller were awestruck by the sight.

Already totally preoccupied with plans, Luke didn’t notice.

“We’re leaving. Now.” He told them, then centered his gaze on the Wookie. “Chewie, with me.”

Then he walked to the main entry and disappeared, heading for the cockpit.

Chewbacca mewed, then got up and followed Luke, leaving Poe, Finn and Dar Na behind to speculate about where they would be going next.

……

And on another part of Bar'harhoon, in a happy little village, the constables were getting nowhere with their investigation.

No, the villagers agreed, no strangers. No one at all.

No, nothing unusual had happened. Nothing at all.

They knew nothing about the abandoned skiff or those who rented it. Nothing at all.

The constables thanked them and apologized for interrupting their labor.

“And *we* apologize,” the village elder replied graciously, “for the *smell*. We ground fertilizer this morning,” he spread his arms toward the huge piles of stinking product as if to embrace them. “It’s a very special blend today, too. We could bag some up for you if you’d like...”

The constable declined politely. The village elder smiled.
Chapter End Notes

The good news is JJ Abrams is doing Episode 9 now. The bad news is JJ Abrams is doing Episode 9 now.

The good news is maybe he'll explain what the hell Episode 7 was about. The bad news is you know he won't.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Another short chapter to keep us going while I'm on the mend... :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s a big Universe; an old Universe.

Worlds have come and gone, so have civilizations great and small. But some things have more or less been true ever since any being anywhere realized that such a thing as truth existed. Universal Truths like Gravity, which started out as “what goes up must come down”, have been discovered, forgotten, then discovered again repeatedly for billions of years.

One Universal Truth has to do with the natural unpredictability of the Universe in general. Every civilization everywhere that evolved enough to engage in planning things sooner or later would realize that there was absolutely no way to be absolutely sure of anything.

In short, “shit happens.”

Given enough time, a civilization would arrive at more sophisticated ways of explaining it, usually giving it a name that overcomplicated the theory behind it into huge academic volumes, like “Uncertainty in Design” or best-sellers like “Imperfect Planning”, but when pressed for details, most authorities on the subject would simply condense the entire theory down to just seven words:

“If anything can go wrong, it will.”

One species that learned this truth early on were the Kourin; they were natural engineers, who worked ceaselessly for generations to create methods of planning and construction that virtually eliminated the element of chance. They became confident, and their confidence was their downfall; it never occurred to them that the admirably organized newcomers called the First Order might be calculating liars bent on conquest, not trade.

But when the unthinkable happened and they were facing extinction, the Kourin in their desperation came up with a plan for survival. They decided that they could only hope to hide the best and brightest Kourin if their conquerers believed them all to be dead. That required a great sacrifice, but when the call went out, thousands from the lower ranks came forward to assume the Kourin assets’ identities and then commit suicide in their place. The First Order swallowed the illusion whole; their attention went straight to rounding up the surviving Kourin and putting them to work.

And from that day on, the Kourin slaves worked ceaselessly to destroy the First Order from within.

Meticulous planning, patience and deception eventually paid off, but just as the Kourin were about to take their revenge on the First Order, they discovered that somebody else had hijacked their plan, and they had unintentionally put the galaxy’s very existence in jeopardy. That set off a chain of wildly unpredictable events that culminated in the galaxy being saved by the most unpredictable being in it.

Kylo Ren.
They’d watched him for years from a distance. He was exactly what they needed, but utterly uncontrollable and completely unobtainable, so they directed their energy to finding another; not as powerful, to be sure, but not as dangerous, either.

And they found another, or rather, another found them.

The Sith.

At first, they were reluctant to to accept Dar Noaa, but the prototype insisted. And so far, the prototype had been proven right; Dar Noaa had been very useful to them. That usefulness resulted in the prototype delivering not only the Sith, but the Kylo of Ren as well. Now the Kourin had both within their grasp, but they were unable to predict what would happen next with any certainty.

So they watched and waited.

Then an unexpected opportunity arose; the Sith made a tactical error in dividing his forces, and the Kourin took advantage immediately. Capturing and containing two of them was mostly a symbolic act meant to impress the other two. Generating the storm and flash flood to isolate the technician’s home was both easy and effective, and if all went as planned, only necessary for a short while.

But in their haste, they forgot one Universal truth:

If anything can go wrong, it will.

……

Lower falls, stone meadow highlands, The Edge.

Rey was tired of listening.

Dar Noaa and Irno had been going at for some time now, and while she understood what they were shouting, she’d quickly decided that placing blame right now was wasting time that might be a more precious commodity than they knew. She was Jakkun; she had no patience with this kind of nonsense at all.

If Ren were here, he’d have killed you both by now, just to shut you up.

Ren. Why don’t you answer me?

She wondered if the forcefield that was keeping the water and rock from crushing Irno’s home was capable of blocking her efforts. That was a subject actually worth talking about, but Dar Noaa and Irno were totally ignoring her attempts to enter the discussion.

“I’m *not* clairvoyant,” Dar Noaa was arguing his point, “I had no way of knowing that the Kourin already knew about the formula, and I certainly didn’t know that you had been busy building them enough resonators to super-energize a small fleet.”

“Neither did I.” Irno snapped back in his own defense.

“Which fleet?” Rey asked anxiously.

They both turned to stare at her for a second, then went straight back to arguing with each other
“How many vessels do they have?” Dar Noaa asked.

“I *don’t* know,” Irno’s voice lost some of its power as he conceded that fact. “I have no memory of ever seeing *anything* other than the prototype and the transport; I swear it. I made six replacement resonators that were never collected, and never thought about them again.”

Dar Noaa considered, but only for a second.

“You *do* know,” He accused coldly, taking advantage of the Kourin’s wavering confidence. “It’s all there, somewhere in your head. You remember everything.”

“I *don’t*!”

_Not again._ Rey thought. They were arguing in circles; this was the third time the subject of Irno’s convenient amnesia had come up.

_How can I make this end?_

Then she remembered something; maybe she could ‘suggest’ an end. Both Master Luke and Ren had used the technique on her, so she had to have the knowledge…

_“I’m thirsty.”_

She said it quietly, reaching out with a subtle gesture in the hope that the Sith was so invested in his argument with the Kourin that he was off guard and wouldn’t sense her intrusion. For Irno, she hoped that his obvious affection for her would be enough to influence him.

The two combatants turned to look at her and this time, they were paying attention.

“So am I.” Dar Noaa answered.


“Good,” Rey rewarded them with a smile, “Who’s coming with me?”

…..

Down in the meadow below, another argument, of sorts, was taking place.

_“Will you just,” Leia Organa asked wearily, “take some time to think this over?”_

There was something outside; something that defied the ship’s identification system; something that had just requested - or challenged – them to come out there, where it was. To her, that was unnervingly suspect, but to Ren, it seemed positively exhilarating.

_“Why?” he asked. “It’s right here; I want to see it. Don’t you?”_

Leia sighed loudly; if there was one consistent thing about her son, it was that he was fascinated by a mystery. When Ben was little, his insatiable curiosity was always getting him into trouble; sometimes he would get himself out; sometimes that task fell to to his parents. Leia always tried to be understanding, but Han’s patience with his son’s ‘foolish’ behavior was limited and one day, it ran out. After that, Ben started to be secretive about things and Han started to find more reasons to be
someplace else. She sensed she was losing them, but the more she tried to hold on, the more distant they became. Then finally, inevitably, they destroyed each other, and it was her fault because she was the one who asked Han to bring him home.

Now Han was dead, and Ben was gone, lost inside a new version of himself.

Ren.

If there was any good that came out of the tragedy that was Han and Ben Solo, it was Ren. When Leia looked at him, she saw the man Ben could have been had things not gone so terribly wrong. She wasn’t dismissing his past, she just saw how hard he was working to change his future, and that gave her hope.

There’s still light in him.

It was just her luck that Ben would surface now, when the one she needed was Ren.

“*No*.” She replied.

“All right, then,” he said, “you stay here and I’ll go… just for a look.”

Leia groaned silently; it was useless to go on; there’d be no stopping him. She never could say no to those eyes, anyway. There was only one thing she could do now.

“I’m coming with you.”

…….

At the lower falls, a temporary cease fire had been agreed to.

The captives took the lift up to Inro’s living quarters and found the level intact. The only signs that anything had even happened were sporadic groans coming from above and the sight of darkness where the forcefield ‘window’ that made up the far wall of Irno’s pool was located. Irno tapped on the pool lights, revealing a view of thick slurry of mud, rock and flood water moving past in strange, irregular pulses on the other side of the window.

Irno went to a workstation and checked.

“A little power drain somewhere,” he reported, “but the field’s good. We’re all right.”

The three of them went to Irno’s cooking area, picked up several containers of food cubes and water, then cleared enough space on a work table to set them down while they found something to sit on while they ate. There was merciful quiet for awhile; water and food cubes kept everyone’s mouth busy, but it didn’t last. Dar Noaa asked Irno a question about the resonators and Irno instantly replied that he was not going to submit to another interrogation.

And that started it.

Leaving the two of them to their resumed argument, Rey walked back to the railing and looked down the steps that led to the pool below. The memory of being down in the water with Ren bubbled up in her mind and she no longer heard the two voices back at the table.
Ren. Answer me.

No reply came.

By now, worry was becoming anger; he had to know what this was doing to her...

Ren!

No reply.

Getting angrier by the second, Rey looked up from the pool at the forcefield window, away from the memories. The window was dark now, but she remembered how lovely the softly diffused view of the falls was when she was soaking in the pool with Ren...

That’s when she saw it.

The overhead lights were casting a curious pattern on the forcefield window; the smooth surface now resembled an idle workstation display filled with static…

No, those aren’t reflections; they’re *shadows*…

The forcefield was no longer smooth; thousands of tiny bead-like bulges were responsible for the pattern. The ‘beads’ were scattered all over, and they resembled a phenomena that Rey had never seen until she’d left Jakku – condensation. She’d been to worlds now where the air wasn’t always dry like Jakku, and she’d seen mists and fogs and dew, but nothing like this. When she saw some of the ‘beads’ seem to grow bigger, her instincts told her that something was not right.

“Irno?” she called loudly.

“What?”

“Come here and look at this.”

The tone in her voice carried so much concern that the Kourin left the table and was beside her in seconds, with Dar Noaa not far behind.

“What?” Irno asked.

“Is *that*,” Rey pointed at the forcefield window, “supposed to happen?”

“What the…?”

They leaned forward together for a closer look.

Suddenly one of the bigger beads popped and became a stream of thick ooze that ran down the surface, encountering dozen of other beads, causing them to pop and add more streams of ooze. More pops followed, until the entire surface became a gigantic extruder as hundreds of stringy ooze streams seeped out, quickly coating the entire area. Dar Noaa made the first assessment.

“The forcefield is failing!”

“That’s not possible.” Irno replied, but his tone suggested otherwise. “The Kyber cluster is secure…”

He cut himself off, then ran back to the workstation console and began tapping furiously.

Dar Noaa followed Irno, and Rey lingered to keep watching only a few seconds longer before she
followed him. By the time she arrived there, the workstation display was already showing Irno and Dar Noaa just how bad the situation was.

“It’s not the Kyber cluster,” Irno’s tech hand fingers were flexing nervously, “and it’s not the forcefield, either...” He looked up at Dar Noaa. “… it’s the window frame! The forcefield is keeping everything outside out, but we’re *inside* the energy envelope and look...” His grip hand fingers were trembling as he touched the display. “… there’s a water leak at the pool. See?”

“Yes.” Dar Noaa replied.

“The shock from the rock fall must have cracked a pipe open; now the water pressure’s pushing it into the wiring conduits and it’s shorting everything in its path out.”

“So the forcefield is failing?”

“No,” Irno shook his head, “And it’s not going to fail; it’s going to bypass the window circuits! Any time now, we’re going to have a big, nasty, open *hole*,” he turned and pointed to make sure the Sith was understanding the problem, “right *there*.”

Dar Noaa, and Rey, too, stared at the forcefield window, which had become a wall of writhing ooze.

“Can you,” Rey asked hopefully, “use the Force to hold that back while Irno fixes it?”

“Not for long.”

“It’s not something I can fix quickly,” Irno informed them from behind. “Or even at all.”

“What do we do?” Rey asked.

Dar Noaa closed his eyes for a second, turned and looked at the open lift entry, then tapped Irno’s head to get his attention.

“Does that door seal completely?”

“Yes,” Irno answered. “They wanted to be sure if I accidentally blew myself up in the workshop, I’d *stay* in the workshop.”

“Then that’s where we’re going,” Dar Noaa told him. “It might buy us time.” He went back to the table and reached for the food cube container. “Grab what you can - water, food - anything else you think will be of use...”

They scrambled to gather as much as they could carry and then raced to the open lift.

……..

Far below, In the stone meadow, Leia had just stepped outside.

She was right behind Ren, who had stopped only a few meters ahead in order to take a long look at the object. Leia stepped next to him to get her first view of it.

It was... *big*.
It looked like a huge oval boulder, or a gigantic egg laid by what would have to have been something monstrous. Aside from a surface texture that slightly resembled the Visitor’s, it had no features at all.

“Look at it,” Ren said breathlessly, “It’s... *beautiful*.”

Leia looked up at her son; he seemed awestruck, and that frightened her.

“It is?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” Ren gushed, “I want a closer look...”

“Ren...”

It was useless; he was already on his way toward it, and she had to run to catch up with him. By the time she did, he was only about half a meter from the object.

“Ren...”

He dropped into a squat, then tilted his head to peer underneath it.

“No landing gear,” he reported as he searched, “but...”

“What?”

“It isn’t *on* the ground,” Ren’s voice conveyed delighted discovery, “it’s hovering just above it!”

He reached out and ran his fingers over the surface, which reacted to his touch with iridescent ripples that sped away from his hand, then vanished. “Do you see this?” He asked. “It’s like the coatings on your ship, and my transport, but much more sophisticated. No wonder we couldn’t get a scan...”

“Ren...”

“Yes?”

“I’d feel better if you weren’t quite so close to it.”

“Understood.”

Ren put both hands on the egg’s surface and pushed against it as he stood up. Rainbow color ripples spread out, then intersected, then vanished. He walked back to where the General was waiting nervously.

“What do you think it is?” Leia asked.

“It’s a peace offering.”

“Why do you...”

“Wait.”

Ren raised his hand and reached out toward the object.

“Open the door.”

The object reacted to his command instantly; its entire surface came alive with iridescent ripples criss-crossing like raindrops on a pond. A few seconds later, a rift appeared. The opening spread into a
narrow oval that looked just tall enough for Ren to walk through without lowering his head.

And he started walking toward it. Without a word. Without hesitation.

A sudden terror seized Leia, almost choking her, but she managed to call out.

“*Ren*!”

No reply came.

......

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Anybody else notice that with all "The Last Jedi" images, stories, toys, etc, coming out that we aren't seeing or hearing much about Kylo Ren? That's either very good or very bad...
Her name was Leia Organa, but that was not who she was.

She was a princess, a Rebel leader, a Senator, a wife, a mother, and a General. If you asked anyone who knew about her who she was, the answer would be some or all of those facts. But there was one fact that very few beings knew about; one fact that Leia herself had denied since the hour she found out about it.

She was *strong* with the Force.

Her brother tried to persuade her to learn how to use it, but she kept refusing and then, one day, he simply stopped asking. And back when Dar Noaa was still ‘the Sith”, he asked about it, too, and when she told him that she wasn’t like Luke, he laughed out loud, then said “Is that so?” But unlike Luke, Dar Noaa was relentless; he was always tempting her with ‘experiments’ and once, no, twice, managed to get her to go along. Afterwards, she would wonder why she said yes to Dar Noaa when she’d already said no to Luke, but that was a different kind of denial. And she never, ever, mentioned any of it to Han, who loved her enough to pretend he believed her denials until the very end.

There was only one being in the galaxy to whom Leia never denied it, because she could never deny it, not to him, because he’d known her from the very beginning…

Stone meadow highlands, The Edge.

“Ren!”

When that didn’t stop him, Leia’s maternal instincts took over.

“**Ben**!”

Her voice dropped between Ren and the opening like a stone wall. Then it spiraled around him; enveloping him from head to foot, binding him completely. And then he heard beneath her voice, another voice; deep and resonant, it stopped him cold, just as it had on Starkiller Base.

For an instant, he was back there, watching his father fall…

Leia saw and seized the instant; she went to his left side and grabbed his bandaged hand, connecting herself to him and the Force escaping from the energy sink module embedded in his palm. Still dazed from the tremendous power that had just hit him, Ren, turned his head and looked down at her.

“Mother…”

“No, Ben.” She told him. “We’re not going in there. Not yet.”

And Ren heard her.

“No…” he mumbled, to himself, not her. “… we’re not.”

“Walk with me.”
He didn’t protest or resist as she led him back, away from the opening, and when she felt she’d put
enough distance between them and the object, she stopped and looked up at him.

“I think,” she told him, “you can see things more clearly from here.”

Ren nodded slightly, then looked over his shoulder, back at the object, just in time to see the opening
shrink and disappear.

“Understood.” He said, then he turned his face back to her. “I don’t know why I did that; it was
reckless; a clear violation of the Code...”

Leia didn’t know the Code, but she knew how important it was to Ren. It was often the only thing
that kept him from losing his tenuous grasp on reality, and if he needed it now, she was going to
help.

“What does the Code require?” She asked.

“Protocol,” Ren answered automatically; Code recitation was a daily exercise for the Knights and
hearing himself say the words quickly restored his composure, “for an unknown is observation and
risk assessment prior to engagement...”

Something behind him popped, and they both looked back, toward the object, but before they could
could see anything, a burst of air swept over them from behind, forcing them both to squint and
cover their eyes from blowing meadow debris. When they opened their eyes again, they saw that
they were looking at an empty meadow.

The object was gone.

......

Far upstream from the meadow, at the lower falls, the captives’ retreat from the upper living quarters
now had them trapped in the workshop below. They put the items they’d brought down with them
onto the same worktable that was already crowded with the items they’d collected to take back with
them, filling it completely.

“So,” Irno tapped the tool kit he’d just put on the table nervously, “what do we do now?”

“I need time,” Dar Noaa replied, “to think.”

A series of menacing low-frequency groans came from above; they had a strange gurgling quality
that made it sound as if there was an enormous creature up there suffering from extreme flatulence.

“Gas pockets,” Dar Noaa said, “being compressed against the inside wall. The pressure’s building
fast.”

“Will the door hold?” Rey asked.

“Yes,” Irno replied. “And all that ooze will settle and harden behind it. They’ll have to dig us out.”

“Will they do that?”

“Probably not.”

“That *does* it,” Rey finally spoke her mind, saying what had been obvious to her all along, “who’s
for getting out of here right now?”
The question seemed to surprise Dar Noaa and Irno, probably because they’d been so busy arguing they’d forgotten they’d been deliberately trapped there. They glanced at each other somewhat sheepishly, then looked at her.

“We’re listening,” Dar Noaa said.

“The launch tunnel,” Rey directed herself to Irno, whose expression indicated that he already knew where she was going with this. “Does it use a frame like the upstairs window?”

“Yes. It. Does.”

“Can you open the entry?”

“I’ll find out.”

Irno was already moving as he said it; he led the others to the workstation and began to enter commands. The display revealed that the launch tunnel was intact, at least on the inside, but was unclear about whether it was obstructed on the outside or not.

“It’s a steep rise,” Rey described the tunnel for Dar Noaa, who had not seen it yet. “Big enough for us to take the speeders out single file. But it’s long and angled away from the falls, so there’s a real chance it’s poking out just enough to not be buried. I’ll climb up and check it out.”

“There’s a ladder, I suppose,” Dar Noaa growled, “there’s *always* a ladder.”

“While I’m doing that,” Rey continued, “You and Irno find rope or cable – anything you can tie – and start packing that table-load into something we can haul up with us.”

They stared at her.

“Well, get to it!” She commanded. “*Now*!”

Then she was off to climb the tunnel.

......

Far downstream, in the meadow, Leia and Ren were staring at the empty space.

“Where’d it go?” Leia asked.

“I have no idea.”

“Maybe it it wasn’t real; some kind of holographic projection?”

“No, it was *real*. I touched it. I put us in danger...”

“You didn’t, Ren – *Ben* did.”

“What?”

“Whatever that thing was, it was here for Ben, not you. It pushed you out of the way to get to him.”

Ren was listening; Leia watched his face as he thought it through and saw him frown when he reached the same conclusion.

“I was here,” he said, “but I was standing back, watching; seeing everything, but doing nothing.”
eyes narrowed as he remembered; first in confusion, then in anger at himself. “I failed to follow the Code...”

“Ren, don’t...”

“*Rey*!” He gasped. “I could hear her calling to me. I didn’t answer!”

“*Ben* didn’t answer.”

Ren stared blankly at Leia for a moment and she could almost hear the dialogue in his mind as he struggled with the idea that he might not be as in control as he believed. He’d been telling himself that Ben Solo no longer existed, but he’d just experienced incontestable evidence that Ben Solo was still very much alive and able to seize control...

“Ren?”

Hearing the General say his name pulled him back from the dark edge of his thoughts just as her hand holding his led him back from the object. She needed him to be in control, and he could be, he would be.

He was.

“Yes?”

“Call to Rey now,” Leia suggested, “We need to know what’s going on up there.”

“Understood.”

He held her hand so she could listen in, then reached out.

Rey.

.....

Far upstream, in the workshop, Dar Noaa and Irno had gathered all the rope, twine and cables they could find, but the only flexible material they could find was gossamer. They used that to wrap the energy sink modules and the resonators into one bundle, then the cohesion flux into a second, and were working on a third bundle to hold the energy probes. In order to keep them as steady as possible, each energy probe was wrapped individually first, then fitted into a makeshift lattice of thin cable before the bundle could be covered and tied.

Irno’s job was to pass them down to Dar Noaa, who was doing the fitting. Dar Noaa reached up for the last hand-off without looking, but Irno failed to put anything in his hand. When the Sith looked up, he saw the Kourin standing there holding the final probe in his hands, gazing at it thoughtfully.

“Is something wrong?” Dar Noaa asked.

“I was just thinking,” Irno replied without taking his eyes off the probe, then turned his head slowly until he had the Sith lined up in sight alongside it, “I’m *never* coming back here, you know.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“That’s what I want.” Irno’s attention shifted to Dar Noaa. “Maybe nobody should come back here. *Ever*. We could make sure of that.” He stretched his arms, pushing the probe in his hands forward and down toward Dar Noaa suggestively. “What do you think, Sith?”
Dar Noaa studied the Kourin for a second before answering. He knew what Irno was asking; a small adjustment and the probe would vaporize everything inside the forcefield on command – all of it, everything Irno had built for them, would be erased in a millisecond of yellow light. The idea was appealing, but there would be consequences.

“Are you sure about this?” he asked. “The humans have a saying, ‘don’t burn your bridges behind you’...”

“This isn’t a bridge,” Irno replied, “it’s a prison.”

…..

Not far away, in the launch tunnel, Rey had only a few more meters to reach the entry.

Rey.

The relief of hearing Ren’s voice was quickly followed with annoyance because once again, his timing was terrible.

It’s about time. Why didn’t you answer me?

- Long story. The General wants to know how you all are.

We’re all right, working on a way out. I’m climbing the launch tunnel right now to see if it’s blocked.

- Maybe I can help with that. Stop where you are.

Leia had been listening intently, but she couldn’t imagine what Ren meant. She saw him close his eyes, and to her surprise, she was suddenly in a vision, standing beside him, looking at...

Rocks.

They looked as if they’d just been thrown there, jagged edges and gaps, and there was something smooth and metallic peeking out from behind. Before she could ask Ren what they were seeing, she felt a tremendous surge in the Force. It flowed through him, then through her, too, and she knew what to do without being told.

She raised her hand and reached out.

Mother and child worked together. The rocks obeyed; they began to vibrate; some shattered into dust instantly; others shuddered, then rolled, until, one after another, they broke into pieces and fell away, exposing the object behind. Then Leia heard Ren calling to Rey.

The launch tunnel is clear now. Come back to me.

Down below, in the workshop, Dar Noaa and Irno were just finishing up with the energy probe when they felt the disturbance. Irno felt the vibration and heard the sound, but Dar Noaa felt something else. He’d never felt anything like it; the Force, pure and simple, power almost beyond his comprehension, a blinding light in his mind.

It was Ren, but he was not alone; Leia was with him.
“What is it?” Irno asked.

“Help.” Dar Noaa answered quietly.

…..

Downstream, in the meadow, the unexpected power she’d just unleashed left Leia breathless and light-headed. The instant it stopped, she gasped for air, then almost fainted, but Ren caught her before she could fall.

“General?”

“I’m all right, just a bit... dizzy.”

“It’s like that sometimes.” Ren explained, moving an arm around her waist to support her. “Let’s get you inside.”

She took a few steps, but stumbled, so Ren picked her up and carried her back to the Visitor, then to her quarters, where he deposited her on the sleep platform.

“Stay there.” He commanded gently.

She nodded, and he smiled at her, then turned and went to the sanitary station and filled a cup with water, then returned to her.

“Drink this.”

Leia took the cup and sipped some, then lowered the cup to speak.

“No,” Ren put his hand under the cup, stopping it. “All of it.”

Leia wasn’t sure who raised the cup to her lips again, her or Ren, but she made herself gulp it down.

“Good,” Ren said, “you’ll be feeling much better in a few minutes; a big drink of water always helps after.”

Leia put the empty cup down, then sat quietly while Ren loomed over her, watching her intently. He was staring into her eyes, looking for something there that she didn’t understand. And in a surprisingly short time, the dizziness cleared and she did feel much better. His face mirrored it; Leia saw a tiny smile on Ren’s face bloom into a happy grin that almost made her burst into tears because she saw her child in the man standing before her.

“Better now?” he asked.

“Yes, much.” she replied. “Thank you.”

“And I thank you,” he sounded openly affectionate, “what you did for me...”

“For us.” She corrected him softly as she pushed herself onto her feet to stand.

“You shouldn’t...” he protested, but he knew she wouldn’t listen. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“To the workstation,” Leia was on her feet now. “You were fine until we got that message.” She stepped around him. “I want a look at the log.”
Far upstream, they were already making their way up the launch tunnel. Rey went first to rig the cable line that they would use to hoist the bundles while Irno and Dar Noaa carried the bundle to the base of the tunnel and secured them together for the lift. As soon as it was ready, she began to pull from above.

Irno went next, climbing directly below the bundles, keeping them clear of the ladder, pushing them up with unusual urgency.

Dar Noaa vanished for a moment, then returned and climbed hard to catch up.

As she watched them ascend, Rey was pleased to see the disagreements were over for the time being, although it seemed odd that the two of them were suddenly in such a great hurry to leave.

Far downstream, Leia was sitting at the workstation with Ren watching over her shoulder. The log playback showed nothing unusual, though; it looked they way she remembered it.

“Nothing.” She mumbled disappointedly.

“Wait.” Ren said, possibly to himself. “There’s another way to look at it.”

He leaned over, brushed her hands from the touch-pad, then entered a command while she watched, bringing up a new display.

“What’s this?” Leia asked.

“Frequency analysis,” Ren replied. “You said I was fine until ‘come outside’, if that’s true, then perhaps ‘come outside’ wasn’t the whole message.” He made sure to mute the sound before continuing. “Let’s see what else might have been in there.”

A graph appeared. The voice appeared as a jagged line, but then a second line, one that was smoothly sinuous, appeared at a much higher frequency; so high neither of them would have heard it.

“And there it is,” Leia said, “but we couldn’t hear it...”

Something flashed in Ren’s memory.

“Maybe I could.”

Back when he’d first come to be with the Knights, while he was still in very bad shape, they kept him sedated most of the time. He’d drift in and out of consciousness, and he’d have bizarre dreams, at least, that’s what they told him they were. In some of the dreams, they would put something on his forehead that made him hear without listening. Then they’d test him on this or that, and if he got it ‘right’, they’d reward him with medication so intoxicating that he’d do anything to get more.

Not dreams, he thought, *conditioning*.

“Frequency conditioning,” he told the General while he was still coming to grips with the idea, “a way to control me. I had no idea...”

It was a shocking revelation to them both; it never occurred to either of them that the terrible things the Kylo of Ren had done may not have been of his own free will. For Leia, it came with a burst of new hope for her son. For Ren, it came with confusion and then resistance.
“You must have suspected they’d done something,” Leia said, “the First Order conditions *everyone*.”

“Not me,” Ren insisted. “They told me I was above all that. They told me...”

“They told you what Snoke wanted them to tell you.”

“No...”

“The old monster had it all planned,” Leia felt fury rising inside her, but Snoke was dead and beyond her reach now, “while he was ‘curing’ you of the sickness *he* put into you, he was also making sure that you would be his slave, doing his bidding, for as long as he had use for you...”

“No...”

“... and everything you believed,” Leia continued earnestly, trying to get through to him, “everything you felt, everything you *did*, was by design - *his* design, Ren, not yours.”

He didn’t reply, but she didn’t mind because he wasn’t falling apart, either.

It was a lot to take in all at once.

…..

Far upstream, the escapees were were in a hurry.

Rey told Ren they were out and on their way, and he replied ‘be careful, but hurry’. Something in the way he said it told her that he needed her, but he didn’t say anything else, so she let go and focused on the task at hand:

Getting home.

While they were trapped inside Irno’s workshop, most of the day passed by, and now they were racing against sunset to find a path down the slopes that would not end in darkness and disaster. Although her bundle was nothing heavier than she’d carried before, Rey found herself bringing up the rear because Irno and Dar Noaa seemed positively obsessed with getting as far as they could as fast as they could.

She was beginning to worry that neither of them could keep going at this pace for very long and they’d just end up sitting in the dark, exhausted and waiting for morning.

“You two,” she called down to them, “might want to slow down a bit.”

“You keep up,” Irno called back to her. “we’re almost to the woods.”

“It’ll be dark in there; we’ll get lost.”

“No we won’t.” Irno replied confidently. “They wanted to be sure I could work under any conditions, so they gave me *excellent* night vision.”

“But you said the dark scares you.”

“It does scare me; I *hate* being out in the dark.”

By now, they were moving under the Forest canopy and darkness fell quickly, as if a curtain had been closed behind them. Irno slowed down, but only so his companions could close the distance
between them.

“From now on,” he warned them, “stay close.”

“We must keep moving.” Dar Noaa insisted. “We haven’t gone far enough.”

“Yes we have.” Irno replied.

“Far enough for what?” Rey asked.

Two heads turned and looked at her, then two voices replied.

“*Nothing*.”

Confused and suspicious, Rey stopped to have a look around. She pivoted slowly, scanning the dark woods, then up the trail they’d just come down. A faint flash of lightning that was curiously yellow, not white, caught her eye, but no thunder followed it; the only sound she heard was the labored breathing of Irno and Dar Noaa as they left her behind, so she hurried to catch up.

She didn’t know that she’d just witnessed a truly remarkable event.

For the first time, anywhere, ever, a Kourin energy probe had been detonated *inside* a Kyber Crystal Cluster powered forcefield, and the result was awesomely unimpressive. The forcefield that was containing Irno’s home also contained the exploding energy probe, and then all subsequent explosions in the milliseconds that followed. It expanded like a bubble, then shrank again into the now-empty space within, absorbing everything, the pressure, the heat, even the shock wave, so the space silently went dark. The only trace that anything had even happened was a single jet of yellow energy that shot out of the launch tunnel’s open entry before it folded in on itself and disappeared. In less than a minute, Irno’s home was reduced to a perfect bowl of nothing carved into the rock.

Only the Kyber crystal cluster remained, alone and untouched beneath the crater floor.

…..

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Returning to the Outer Rim and Luke for the next chapter, and it’s going to be, uh, complicated, so it might be two weeks til it gets posted.

In other news, have you seen John Boyega in the trailer for "Pacific Rim: Uprising"? OMG, he is *smoking* hot in any uniform they put on him!!!

Just sayin'...
Change of plans; here's a short chapter done in a slightly different style to set up for the *next* next chapter, which is the one that might take two weeks for reasons I'll explain at the end of this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stone meadow highlands, the Edge.

Ren was standing nightwatch.

He was half-in, half-out, the Visitor’s open entry, leaning against the doorway arch, looking into the darkness, keeping watch over the ship and the sleeping General. But that wasn’t all he was doing; he was also keeping watch over Rey and the others as they worked their way down from the upstream falls.

Seeing without looking. He was getting better at it.

It wasn’t the same as reaching out with the Force to peek at the future. Ren could see them in his mind as if he was right there with them; he could see what was around them and what was ahead. More than that, if he saw an obstacle in their path, he could push it aside with a thought. Once they’d passed by safely, he would linger behind them to be sure they were not being followed. The energy sink embedded in his hand was doing the job of offloading the extra Force, so he wasn’t exhausting himself, but he was feeling tired.

It had been a long night.

Yesterday’s discovery of the signal hidden in the message knocked him off balance, and had it not been for the General’s being there, he might have broken down completely. It was her idea to check the log, and after they’d found the signal, it was her idea to have the ship run a full analysis of it, then search the entire download from his doomed transport for anything like it.

Or similar. Or even a possibility. The General insisted on that.

Considering the enormous size of the data in question, the process was going to take a long time, so as soon as they’d launched the program, Ren urged the General to lie down and rest. She resisted at first, so he persuaded her by saying he’d take first watch, then wake her when it was her turn. Her turn was not going to come, of course, but the promise made it easier for her to admit that she was completely exhausted.

He sat at the workstation until he was sure she was asleep, then went to the Visitor’s entry.

It was unusually dark and quiet, and Ren could see why; tonight, there was no storm lighting up the mountains in the distance. He’d expected that.

*That’s where they are. I’ll deal with them later.*
Then he turned his mind to seeing Rey, found her instantly, and had been keeping watch over them ever since.

They've cleared the woods, not long now...

The sky was brightening.

Ren’s concern became relief, then excitement, when he spotted movement in the shadows that had to be them, and he jumped out of the doorway, then ran to intercept them. Rey sensed him coming and raced ahead of Dar Noaa and Irno, straight into his open arms. They kissed each other so fiercely that the whole galaxy felt it.

He was still holding her when Dar Noaa and Irno arrived, and he shouted a greeting.

“I am so glad you're back!”

His voice almost cracked as he said it. It was a totally unguarded moment for Ren; a surge of joy that he didn’t understand possessed him, and it wasn’t just because he needed them - he truly cared about them. The Sith and the Kourin seemed surprised; they glanced at each other, then looked back at Ren with anticipation on their faces. For a second, Ren was at a loss; he didn’t know where to start, but then it came to him.

“I have so much to tell you...”

...........

In another part of the galaxy, a mission completed meant a new mission was about to begin.

The Millennium Falcon en route to Qir, the Outer Rim, Hyperspace.

As soon as he’d confirmed the Falcon had made a successful jump and was now moving through the safety of Hyperspace, Luke Skywalker assembled everyone, including the droids, in the communal space for a meeting.

He’d started it off by informing them that their next destination was the world Qir, and they were going there because Ruin’s records indicated the technology Guild had a primary redemption center located there. Ruin’s gang had been there twice before and had the guidance security code for the center’s locater beacon, which would guide them to it. So far, Luke’s plan was to orbit Qir and pin down exactly where the Tech Guild ship was docked, then find a safe place to land the Falcon.

Beyond that, he had nothing so far.

Everyone looked at Laci first.

“I don’t have much to offer,” she started, “When the Guilds showed up, Qir embraced them eagerly; everyone Lutor knew there either sold out to the Guilds and disappeared or just disappeared. The industrial regions are all subjects of the Guilds now, but some of the agricultural regions, especially the remote ones, haven’t done very well under Guild control and might be open for business if the money’s right.”

Chewbacca mewed out a very long comment.
“Chewy’s been there,” Luke translated to the others for him, “He and Han did a couple of private jobs for individuals wanting to avoid Guild service fees, but it’s been awhile, and he’s not sure if his contacts there are still around.” He looked at Chewbacca. “Look them all up, Chewy, and we’ll make some calls when we get there.”

Finn raised his hand tentatively to take a turn and Luke extended an open palm his way, granting him the time.

“We’ve hit the Tech Guild twice,” Finn raised two fingers as he spoke, “killed their agents, taken their treasuries, and left their ships for the locals. If they’re on Qir, they have to know by now that we’ll be coming for *them* sooner or later, so we have to expect they will ready and waiting for us.”

“You’re right,” Luke replied, “so we’re not running into this one.” He moved his gaze to make sure he looked at every one of them directly while he talked, reading their faces. “No safe harbor; we leave; no practical approach; we leave. I promise you, I will *not* lead us into a disaster.”

Everyone gave some indication of their understanding and agreement; Finn, Poe and Dar Na gave a single nod, Chewbacca purred, and Laci folded her hands in front of her. But the discussion wasn’t over yet; Luke had more to say.

“I believe,” he told them sternly, “that our encounter on Bar’harhoon wasn’t by chance. When the Technology Guild wants something, they are relentless *and* merciless. It’s very likely that our friend Ruin was hired to be a decoy; he and his ship were a small sacrifice intended to lure us to a location of their choosing.”

“So it’s a trap.” Poe concluded for him, then added, “but we’re going there anyway.”

“It’s a trap,” Luke replied, “But it’s also the Guild’s primary redemption center. If we take *that* treasury, we paralyze their entire operation; the slaughter will stop for as long as it takes for them to send more.”


“I know what I’m asking of you,” Luke said, “but I have no right to demand it. I’m going to leave you to talk it over and decide.”

Dar Na, who had been standing silent the entire time, stepped forward .

“We do not need to talk.” He said quietly. “We go where you go.”

Luke cringed a little; Dar Na’s unquestioning loyalty filled him with guilt. They all filled him with guilt. This was his war, not theirs, but they’d come along without hesitation and now he was responsible for everything they’d have to endure for his sake.

He surveyed the other faces looking at him, then replied to Dar Na.

“Do it anyway.”

With that, he left them, pausing only to glance at Laci as he passed her before he went in search of a quiet place to think.
In another part of Hyperspace, a mission that had already begun was on a collision course.

Resistance Transport, re-registered as TGT010104, now named The Outbound, en route to the world Qir, Outer Rim.

Kaydel Ko Connix tried to look casual as she hurried along the Transport corridors, but despite her best effort, she feared those she passed could hear her heart pounding.

She’d been summoned to the commander’s quarters for a ‘chat’.

Rolan Lexde had a reputation for being by-the-book, but fair, and Kaydel was counting on that to be true because she was in big trouble at the moment. She’d struck a fellow officer, but only because that officer had provoked her beyond any rational being’s patience limit. It wasn’t the first, nor the second time, that Lieutenant Zora Burke had provoked her, but this time Burke was really asking for it, in fact, she was *begging* for it.

And this time, she got it. Right in the mouth.

The corridor was crowded due to watch change, so Kaydel kept her eyes down to avoid the faces that passed her. She was already half hysterical and the knowing side glances and loaded greetings were not going to help her one bit. She was rehearsing her explanation over and over in her head and missed the turn that would take her to the command officer’s quarters, so she had to stop, then turn around to go back.

A few minutes later, she was standing inside Lexde’s quarters, being ignored as her commander sat at his desk reviewing the report one more time just to torture her.

“Well, Lieutenant,” Lexde finally looked up at her, “a one punch fight; I’m impressed.”

“Sir?”

“I understand this… ‘misunderstanding’... was about our missing pilot, Poe Dameron.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Apparently, Lieutenant Burke made several statements about you and Dameron that were not to your liking.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I know all about you, Lieutenant.” Lexde said. “You received the highest rating in flight training Commander Dameron ever gave out. He said you were a natural.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

“I take it Lieutenant Burke suggested there might be a reason for that.”

Kaydel was silent; she hadn’t rehearsed a response for this. Her personal relationship with Poe Dameron was none of his business, but she wasn’t going to say that now. Poe was her flight mentor, and more than that, he was a friend who often took on the role of the big brother she’d lost. Burke, like so many others, was attracted to Poe, but when he politely rebuffed her advances, her vanity wouldn’t let her just accept it and move on.

*Stupid girl, Kaydel thought, so full of herself that she couldn’t see the obvious.*
But she wasn’t going to say that, either.

Lexde fumbled with the reader for a few seconds, pretending to re-read the report, then looked up at her again.

“It says here,” he translated the report into simple terms, “that she inferred your relationship with Dameron is why you received such a high rating.”

“Yes, sir.”

“She also said you have strong feelings for him.”

“I *do* have strong feelings for him, Sir,” Kaydel replied boldly. “They’re called *admiration* and *respect*.”

Lexde laughed quietly. The Resistance had many young recruits, and with war now a reality, emotions were running high and hot among them. With no enemy in front of them yet, they’d been venting their stress on each other; quick to love, quick to fight, then quick to forgive and forget. The report said that Connix had endured previous verbal assaults from Burke with admirable maturity, but even the best among the young ones had their limits. And he knew Poe Dameron well enough to know that Connix was being totally truthful about the nature of their relationship.

“I thought it was something like that.” He motioned to the empty chair beside his desk. “Have a seat, Lieutenant.”

Kaydel walked to the seat and sat down stiffly, ready to take what was coming next.

“Relax, Lieutenant Connix,” Lexde tossed the report aside, “from what I’ve read here, your action was both provoked and justified; that’s not why I called you here.”

“Sir?”

“I’ve got a special assignment for you if you’re ready to get out there. I warn you, it will be dangerous.

“I’m ready, sir; what is it?”

“I’m sending a small advance team to Qir. You will pilot the shuttle.”

Kaydel’s expression brightened.

“Yes, Sir.” She replied.

“And once there, you will become a member of the team.”

“Yes, Sir.” Her eyes widened. “What’s the mission?”

“Poe Dameron.”

“Sir?”

“We have a report that Dameron has been seen on the Outer Rim and may be headed to Qir. Your assignment is to confirm that it’s him and make contact if possible.”

“You have a ‘report’?” Kaydel scoffed openly. “Come on, Sir, if Commander Dameron had escaped the Sith, he would be back *here*, with *us*, working on a plan to rescue the General.”
“I know the official report says ‘kidnapped’”, Lexde unconsciously rubbed his thumb alongside his
nose as he considered his words, “but that’s not an accurate statement. Dameron - and the General –
went with the Sith willingly.”

“I can’t believe that, Sir. I *won’t*.”

“Can you believe that the General and Dameron, and even the Sith, are engaged in a mission of
extreme importance to the survival of the Republic?”

“They are?”

“I ask the questions, here, Lieutenant. Answer the question.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You were present when the Sith’s starship first arrived, weren’t you?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“And you got a good look at the Sith? Both of them?”

The question made the memory flash in Kaydel’s mind. Their faces. Those eyes.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good.” Lexde said. “If spotted, they can lead us to Dameron.”

“Yes, I suppose they could,” Kaydel replied, "but Sir, what are the odds that we’ll find *any* of
them? The Outer Rim...”

“They’re out there *somewhere*, Lieutenant, and we must find them as quickly as possible.”

“And ‘somewhere’ is Qir?” Kaydel asked skeptically. “We know that because...?”

“Yes, *Qir*.” Lexde stressed the word. “The information comes from a very reliable source, and
they have eyes there. If any of them set foot on Qir, we’ll know when. And where.”

Kaydel’s expression changed, going from excitement to suspicion. Everyone knew why the ship had
suddenly shot to the front of the line for repairs. Everyone knew who came aboard and installed all
the new equipment. And everyone knew who had eyes everywhere these days.

*The Technology Guild.*

“Permission to speak freely, Sir?”

“Granted.”

“There’s been a lot of speculation since we left Coruscant about why we got special treatment, and
I’m unclear about who this ship is in service to now. Do we serve the Republic or the Technology
Guild?”

“*Both*.” Lexde answered, but the rest of his words were slow in coming. “We have been assigned
to a mission for the Technology Guild that, if successful, will be of *paramount* importance to the
Republic fleet when it engages the First Order.” He leaned toward her and looked straight into her
eyes. “I can’t give you any more than that.”
Kaydel understood. The less she knew, the less she could reveal if captured; she’d die, but not right away and not easily. She felt like she’d just been dipped in freezing water; the chill, the shiver in her flesh, made her cross her arms tightly, but she kept her head up, her eyes on him.

“Yes, Sir.” She replied. “When do we leave?”

………..

Qir.

The name was ancient. It meant ‘here’.

Qir was average planet, orbiting an average star, but just a little bit on the big side; new arrivals learned that fact the instant they tried to stand or walk. Officially, its gravity was designated a ‘slight inconvenience’, but the reality was that the inconvenience depended entirely on where one came from. Travelers from average sized worlds acclimated in a few hours; travelers from smaller worlds needed more time, and travelers from larger worlds might need weeks to get over feeling dizzy and light-headed.

Another fact about Qir was that it had no axial tilt, so it never had seasons. Qir’s native species evolved in a world where little changed over time, and they stayed in the temperate zones, avoiding the extreme cold of the poles and blazing heat along the equator. They also stayed out of the mountains, both those formed by crustal uplift and those formed by the planet’s impressive volcanic ranges. Nobody knew why; avoiding the mountains was such an ancient tradition that its purpose was lost long before the civilization there learned how to keep records and no trace of oral history, no folktales, no myths, no songs, remained in collective memory.

Instead, civilization confined itself to the the vast valley floors, where great cities and farmlands flourished in the shadows of those mountains, and their fates were tied to which kind of mountains surrounded them. Heavy industrial cities favored the crustal uplift mountain valleys, and the pastoral industries preferred the rich soil below the volcanic slopes. After countless generations, the two kinds of societies had become extremely different in how they perceived almost everything, until there was only one thing that was still universally believed among them now:

Those who ventured up Mount Qir’ Qorit would find only Death there.

………..

To be continued…

Chapter End Notes

Few things make a movie great like an awesome location for a major scene. The instant I saw the video at the link below, I KNEW that it was where I wanted to see the next chapter unfold. But it's so awesome, I am not sure I can do it justice in words! So take a look and consider this a teaser...
Click here
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Qir’Qorit.

The name meant “Here it ends”, but the meaning was so ancient that no one knew where it came from. Some said it was the spoken tongue of terrible dark beings who once ruled here; others said not so. Some said it should be translated as “it ends here”, but others insisted that the traditional translation was correct. There was one thing about Qir’Qorit that was not subject to dispute, though; the meaning behind the name was as obvious as the mountain’s stark and lifeless peak.

Qir’Qorit was where it ends. It was Death.

The volcano rose sharply, cutting into the sky like a monster breaching from a sea of soil, with its jaws open wide to devour anything unlucky enough to get in its way. It dwarfed everything below. Its naked gray peak, treacherously steep and scarred by catastrophe, stood defiant against time; wind and water sliced into it relentlessly, but always the mountain fought back. It would rouse from its slumber without warning; the whole world would tremble as it restored itself violently, meter by meter, with fiery ash and rock.

The sky would go gray, then charcoal, and ash would color the world.

The when of the name was lost long ago, along with the civilizations that once thrived in the region. Notbeing knew just how many civilizations were lost; there was no record of how many times the region had been scoured clear with fire and stone, then ‘discovered’ and ‘settled’ again because almost no scientific study had been conducted there; it was deemed not worth the investment. But they understood what it was; they had satellites monitoring it from the safety of space and sensors buried in the ground, listening constantly while they stayed far away.

Except for the farmers.

After eons of eruption, erosion, repeat, the lower slopes of Qir’Qorit and the vast plains beyond were fertile, and the mountain caught every passing cloud, so its streams provided a limitless supply of water. It was good land, as long as one didn’t mind the thought of being boiled instantaneously, then charred, then buried forever by a surprise pyroclastic density current.

The locals didn’t use that term, though; they didn’t even know it. They rarely mentioned the danger, but when they did, they would simply say “Qir’Qorit”.

“Here it ends.”

…..

Qir system, the Outer Rim.

The Millennium Falcon was enroute to Run’numble, the great valley, subtropical region, but nobody knew that yet, except for Luke...

Chewbacca the Wookie knew about the Force.

Although he was no Force-sensitive, he’d been around those who were for a very long time, so he
understood how the Force worked. He made a list of everyone he and Han had ever done business with on Qir, then took it to Luke Skywalker.

Then he waited.

Luke scanned the list for a long time; Chewbacca could see his eyes moving up and down, then up again, then down again. It was no surprise that Luke was taking his time, because this was not only their first decision since arriving in the system, it was their most risky decision. They were deep within Guild ‘territory’ now, and who they chose to contact here would set the course for the mission. The Guilds controlled everything and everyone, so a poor choice of who to trust could result in betrayal, capture and probably death.

Luke closed his eyes.

Chewbacca couldn’t feel it, but he knew that Luke was reaching out with the Force, looking ahead, seeing the possibilities. That’s what they were, too, possibilities, because the future was always in motion.

Luke opened his eyes.

“Tell me,” he pointed out a name midway down the list, “about this one.”

“Pok’Tha,” Chewbacca mewed the name approvingly. It was the one he would have chosen.

“Native Qiri; farmer; he and his mate raise hepi. Their herd needs lots of space, so they’re in rough country, the Run’numble Valley.”

“That’s near Qir’Qorit.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve been there? You’ve seen the mountain?”

“Yes.”

“Does Pok’Tha serve one of the Guilds?”

“No. Hepi wool has no offworld markets.”

“Then the Guilds ignore him?”

“They did, for the most part.”


Chewbacca gave him a quick nod, then left to make the call.

……

In another part of the Qir system, a Republic shuttle had just dropped out of hyperspace.

The primary planet in the system, Qir was the biggest of the three worlds that circled the system sun, and stood out against the dark of space. It was also the only one with an atmosphere suitable for humanoid life, so it sparkled with light reflecting off clouds and polar ice caps, which was always a welcome sight to those seeking a place to land.

“So, what now?”
Kaydel Connix shrugged. Like her copilot Vix Fieder, she had had absolutely no idea.

“We follow orders,” she replied, “Continue to Qir, and hope that somebody calls to tell us where to park when we get there.” She checked the controls; they were right where they should be, and Qir was only hours away now. “Start a full channel scan, then go back and see if the Major knows anything.”

“You got it.”

“Oh...” Kaydel tried to make it sound like an afterthought, “while you’re back there, take a look at their hardware for me.”

“You want a weapons check? Now?”

“No, just a look.” Kaydel corrected him. “I just want to be sure everything’s secure.”

“First mission jitters?”

“Something like that.”

“You got it.”

Kaydel sent him away with a calculated smile. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Fieder; hell, she picked him to come along, but nothing about this mission felt right. Nothing at all. It was entirely possible that Fieder was right about it being first mission jitters, though, so she was keeping her doubts to herself. She knew almost nothing about the team leader, Major Day; he and his three subordinates arrived on the transport not long after they returned to Coruscant space, and aside from attending long, private meetings with Commander Lexde, they had remained in their quarters ever since. That fact, along with a dozen more little things of no consequence, really, made Kaydel uneasy, but that didn’t justify making Fieder uneasy, too, by mentioning it.

No point in making both of us paranoid...

Her self-admonishment was interrupted when the incoming message alert sounded. It was showing the correct codes, but Kaydel opted to tap the monitor rather than the speaker, so she could listen without being detected.

“Outbound shuttle,” the voice was bored, but military, in tone, “Acknowledge.”

It struck Kaydel how convenient the ship’s new name was; anyone eavesdropping on this communication would mistake it for commercial traffic chatter. That meant the shuttle’s arrival would probably go unnoticed by anyone not already expecting them.

“Outbound shuttle, acknowledge.”

Kaydel complied; a nervous tap opened a channel to reply.

“Outbound shuttle here,” she said as pleasantly as she could manage, “Who am I speaking to?”

“Scan for navigation beacon,” the voice was unimpressed. “Access code 44428771.”

Kaydel paused the scanner and entered the code; the navigation beacon appeared on the flight display and the program automatically set course for it.

“Beacon acquired,” she reported, “now what?”
“It will bring you directly to us,” the voice replied. “Be precise on your final approach; it’s a tight fit.”

“I will.”

“One more thing,” the voice softened, becoming almost friendly, “Don’t let what you see throw you; it’s not as bad as it looks.”

“I won’t,” Kaydel replied, then switched off, hardly listening.

The shuttle was already accelerating toward the bright spot in the display that was Qir, and she was curious about where exactly they were being guided to. It only took a few seconds to zero in on the beacon’s location, and then Kaydel consulted the shuttle’s database for information on the site and read a disturbing piece of information.

She was flying straight into a volcano.

……

The Run’numble valley, sub-equatorial Qir, the Outer Rim.

If there was region of Qir that one could call remote, it was the Run’numble valley. It’s isolation wasn’t do to rough terrain or sea; the valley was wide and so gently sloped, it offered no challenge, and the closest sea was more than five hundred kilometers away. Although it had numerous deep-cut streams thick with trees, the valley was mostly grassland because the soil closest to the mountains was less than ideal for large-scale cultivation. It was layer upon layer of volcanic fallout where ash-buried rocks would ambush unsuspecting cultivator blades, as many early farmers discovered when they tried to plow it. The problem was so severe that eventually, the entire region was left to those willing to raise livestock that could get by only on what the grasses provided and not what could be forced from the soil.

Pok’Tha was one of them.

His land was his by habit, not law, but there was no threat of his ownership ever being challenged because his land was closest to the mountain. His hepa, big hairy, goat-like creatures that evolved with the mountain, had free run for countless kilometers in all directions. That included the mountain, where they foraged up through the jungle, then climbed high, onto the starkly ribbed, bald elevations above, to munch on mosses and lick minerals. Notoriously lazy, hepi went to water only to drink, so their tan wool was always stained green from micro-mosses growing in it when sheering time came. Run’numble was in a warm zone, so the hepi only had to be collected and sheered twice annually, leaving the rest of the time for Pok’Tha to pursue activities that were more interesting and profitable.

Like racing. And an ‘unofficial’ import business.

That’s how he’d met Chewbacca and his partner Han Solo.

Police and politics, the arrival of the Guilds in particular, forced Pok’Tha to give all that up, though. Worse than that, the Guilds forced changes that choked ‘private’ contracting out of existence, so it had been years since he’d heard from any of his ‘unofficial’ friends. He was stuck on his land with nothing exciting to do beyond fathering offspring with his mate – and she was only fertile four times a year.

So when, out of nowhere, Pok’Tha got a call from Chewbacca, he wasn’t concerned at all by the warning the Wookie gave him about how ‘they’ might be bringing trouble.
He was ready for anything; Chewbacca and his friends were welcome.

In another part of the galaxy, the happy reunion was over; it was time to talk about narrow escapes and their implications. It was also time to share revelations that could be much more important than any of them realized.

Stone meadow highlands, the Edge.

They were crowded into the cockpit; Leia was standing with her back to the Waveform beside Ren, who was using it as a butt-rest. Dar Noaa and Rey were in the seats, resting their feet after the long walk home. Irno was in the aisle between them making small, nervous movements with his hands and feet.

The first narrative was almost finished; Dar Noaa related the story of how they’d been trapped with little interruption. Rey said almost nothing, and Irno, surprisingly, only commented on technical things like how the broken water pipe inside the forcefield caused the window frame to fail, how the door to the lift held up long enough, and that it was Rey’s idea to climb up the launch tunnel. The Kourin remained quiet even when Dar Noaa explained how they’d found the cache of resonators, and then how they decided to eliminate that problem by detonating an energy probe inside the forcefield.

“Everything inside,” Dar Noaa concluded his report, “was vaporized.” He could see that Ren wasn’t satisfied with what he was hearing, so he quickly added more. “There was no time to investigate what else might be in there, or how it could be used against us, so we made it all go away.” Ren seemed unmoved by that, too, so Dar Noaa pressed on. “The forcefield was a perfect container; absolutely nothing remains. And there was no way they could know that we did it; from their perspective, it was a terrible accident that could have terrible consequences.”

“Maybe,” Leia looked at Ren, “that’s why they left so suddenly.”

Ren didn’t reply.

Dar Noaa saw the fleeting expression of concern on Leia’s face, and immediately wanted to investigate.

“They came here for a reason,” he said. “Did they speak with you?”

“Yes.” Leia replied. “Over the comlink.”

“What did they say?”

“They said,” Leia was still looking at Ren as she answered, “come outside.”

“And you went outside?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

Leia searched Ren’s face, but saw no sign that he wanted to participate in telling the story. Maybe it was too much to expect so soon afterwards; maybe he was still reeling from it all. She certainly was.
But somebody had to tell them, and not just about the object, but about how it led them to discover the signal hidden in the message and how it had been used to control Ren. She took a deep breath and began.

“Something was out there, waiting for us...”

......

In another part of the galaxy, the Republic shuttle was on final approach to its destination.

Run’numble Mountains, Qir, the Outer Rim.

“No. Way.”

Vix Fieder’s reaction to his first view of Qir’Qorit managed to express what Kaydel Connix was thinking perfectly. They’d broken through the blindingly bright, high ice crystal-laden clouds and were still getting adjusted to clear air when they saw the mountain chain below. From their vantage point above the planet’s surface, it resembled an open zipper; two rows of jagged peaks rose into the air like monstrous teeth.

And there, at the end of the chain, looming over everything, was Qir’Qorit.

“Beacon’s strong,” Kaydel replied calmly, although she was anything but. The Resistance’s training simulations hadn’t included volcano landing. “Our approach is prefect; dead center.”

“Don’t say ‘dead’.”

“Sorry.”

The entry behind them opened and Major Day appeared. The tall, gray-haired officer looked out the cockpit viewport, then stepped up between his pilots’ seats and steadied himself by placing a hand on each of the seat’s backrests.

“So, that’s it.” He said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Have they made contact?”

“No, sir; nothing. We’re still on the beacon.”

“I don’t like this.” Day replied. “Three minutes, Lieutenant; if we don’t hear from them, I want you to break off.”

“Yes, sir,” Kaydel answered, then took a chance, “sir; do you know who...”

“No.” He cut her off brusquely, as if he’d been expecting the question and resented it “All I know is we report in, get our orders, and go.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kaydel glanced at the controls; the timer she’d just set seemed to be counting down unusually slow. Then she looked up from it, back at the viewport, toward the mountain. She saw the peak clearly now; the tip of the volcanic cone was gone, completely blown away, and in its place there was a
deep caldera. The caldera’s vent well was not in the center, but off to one side, so Kaydel could see down into it.

No activity. No lava. No steam. Just a pool of water at the bottom.

It was asleep.

The slumbering core was encircled by fragments of previous eruptions that over-hung it like the balconies on luxury high-rises back home. She counted three good-sized sections; the two lower ones were badly fractured, but the highest balcony, the largest, appeared to be substantial and uncracked.

Then she spotted it.

Sitting right there on the highest balcony, inside the caldera, was a *starship*.

There was no mistaking the silver gleam of its hull; it was a Techno Union ship, one of the new ones. Built for small-scale ‘strike and go’ missions, the new ships were fast, maneuverable and rumored to be armed with the most sophisticated weapons available, some of which not even the military had access to yet. It made sense that the Technology Guild would be using one of their own out here, but Kaydel was puzzled why would they choose to dock it in a place like this…

“Republic shuttle,” the voice on the comlink startled her, “We’re locked onto you; release the controls so we can guide you in.”

Kaydel looked at the timer. There were only two seconds left.

“Sir?” She asked.

“Do it.” Day replied.

Kaydel keyed the command, surrendering the shuttle, then slumped back against her seat. Major Day left without comment.

As soon as she heard the entry door seal shut, Kaydel leaned forward and rested her hands on the console exactly as Poe Dameron taught her to do. If anything went wrong, she would retake control instantly. She caught a glimpse of Fieder staring at her, so she looked over at him, tilted her head and smiled confidently and said exactly what Poe Dameron had taught her to say.

“Just in case.”

……

Far below, on the Run’numble, The Millennium Falcon had just landed.

Following Pok’Tha’s instructions, the ship arrived skimming the ground so Chewbacca could maneuver it through the wide open doors of the Qiri’s enormous barn door and land inside. The barn was large enough to enclose Pok’Tha’s entire herd at sheering time, so there was plenty of room to shelter a freighter the size of the Falcon, but Chewbacca still chose to set his ship down toward one end so it was not in line of sight from those doors and was facing a wall it could blast through if necessary.

By the time the ship was secure and the ramp was lowered, Pok’Tha was already hurrying into his barn to greet his guests. Chewbacca led the way down the ramp, roaring out a greeting that echoed throughout the space – and Pok’Tha howled back an equally deafening reply.
Luke and the rest of the crew stayed back while the Wookie went to his friend and embraced him. This was the humans' first view of a Qiri; Pok'Tha was almost as tall as Chewbacca and remarkably similar to the Wookie in build. He was furry, but unlike Chewbacca, his fur was pale in color and short, giving him a smooth, sheared appearance. And he wore clothes; baggy brown pants held up by a thick leathery toolbelt covered his lower body.

They were expecting Chewbacca to gesture them forward to meet his friend, but instead, the Wookie started a conversation with the Qiri, who not only understood Wookie, but appeared to be fluent in the language. But those watching needed no translation because they could see the body language; they saw Pok'Tha ask about Han Solo, Chewbacca’s answer, and the Qiri’s sadness at the news.

Silence, then the moment passed and Chewbacca waved them forward.

........

High above the Run’numble, the Republic shuttle was on final approach.

The ship lined up on, then passed through, a small notch in the outer wall of the mountain to enter the caldera.

As she sat there watching, Kaydel was astonished by the true scale of it; from above and away, it looked smaller and much less terrifying.

But they were in it now.

As the shuttle passed over the vent, on its way to the high balcony on the far side, Kaydel looked down to take a closer look and was stunned by what she couldn’t see. Now in shadow, the core well was a gigantic black hole; a gateway to nowhere, so dark and foreboding that Kaydel breathed out in relief when the ashen gray floor of the balcony came into view. The shuttle slowed, but continued to move in a straight line toward the far wall, getting much too close before it suddenly dropped the final few meters to land with a jarringly muffled thump.

Kaydel was about to curse out her opinion of the landing when the shuttle began to move again, and she realized they’d been set down on a mechanical turntable that was automatically moving them into place for departure. They’d leave the way they’d just come in, through the notch on the far side.

Another jolt, and the shuttle came to rest.

“That’s it.” Kaydel told Fieder as she rose from her seat. “Shut us down.”

“You got it.”

She went to the cockpit entry and opened the door just in time to see Major Day and his team huddled together, but one of them spotted her and said something that broke the meeting up instantly. The three subordinates separated and returned to their seats, and Major Day walked to where Kaydel was standing.

“Lieutenant Connix,” he said, “you’re with me. Everyone else,” he raised his voice so Fieder could hear him, “stays inside unless I send the code.”

“Yes, sir.” Kaydel acknowledged the order. She didn’t know ‘the code’, but she was sure the three sitting this one out did. “Weapons, sir?”

“Not necessary.”
Day went to the shuttle’s passenger entry, and tapped the control panel to open the external door and lower the ramp. A light breeze blew in from outside as the air pressure equalized and assaulted their senses; it stung their eyes and noses with particles of decaying ash and sulfurous gases. Day seemed unaffected by it, but Kaydel had to squint her eyes tightly as she followed him down the ramp and outside.

Two humans in plain black uniforms were waiting for them. They wore no insignia to identify who they were or who they served, and offered no salute. And they made no introductions, requested no identification.

“Follow us,” one of them said, “and stay on the walkway.”

Kaydel glanced down; they were standing on a woven metal walk that was suspended just above the surface of the volcanic mix under their feet and supported by an intricate series of spikes and metal webbing that not only spread their weight but dampened the impact of their steps, too. Its presence was a warning that this balcony might not be as substantial as Kaydel had thought, which only added to the mystery of why a state-of-the-art Techno Union ship would risk docking here.

The two in black seemed to be in a great hurry; they turned and started walking quickly toward an open entry at the tail of Techno Union vessel, where two more black uniformed men were waiting. Kaydel fell back a few paces so she could get a look around, but there was not much to see. The metal walkway branched off; one track went toward the outer rim and the other went toward the inside of the balcony and stopped at the edge overlooking the vent core.

*No end rail, no barrier,* she thought, *anyone walking at night would step into open air and be gone.*

Then there was the odor.

No one ever told her that volcanoes could stink so bad. Burnt rock and sulfur, but something else, too; Kaydel couldn’t identify the smell, but it made her stomach turn. She started to ask Major Day if he smelled it, too, then realized that he was too far ahead, almost at the open entry, so she rushed to catch up. They were already being escorted inside when she arrived, so she fell in behind him, leaving the question for later.

The corridor was the same polished metal as the ship’s hull, and Kaydel peeked repeatedly at her own reflection as they advanced. She heard a muffled comment from behind, then a laugh. The pretense worked; they thought she was a vain and foolish girl, so now she would be able to examine the ship in detail without anyone caring.

*Open door; three sitting at ease… closed door; coded… closed door; coded… closed door; coded… closed door; coded… closed door; coded… closed door; coded… closed door; coded… closed door; coded… closed door; coded… closed door; coded…*  

She looked ahead and saw the corridor ended at a closed door. Coded. Anticipating that this was the door that would open to admit them to the command center, Kaydel leaned a little to get a better view and walked right into Day’s back. Their escorts had stopped at the very last set of closed doors that lined the corridor, and now one of them was tapping a control panel beside the one to the left. The door slid open silently, and the escorts gestured for Major Day, and her, to enter.

Three steps later, Kaydel found herself standing beside the Major inside the most luxurious office she’d ever seen. There was *actual* furniture in it; cushioned chairs sat before a large polished desk where three small objects placed with great care sat in the glow of spotlights from above. There was not one piece of technology to be seen on the desk, not even a keypad to activate a holodisplay. The wall behind the desk held no technology, either; no shelves, no viewscreen, no control panels, only a
large slice of polished stone mounted under lights that highlighted the swirling pattern of whatever those minerals caught in rock were.

Then Kaydel noticed that Major Day didn’t seem to share her curiosity. He was staring into the air, immersed in thought, his expression tight with growing impatience.

“Sir?” She asked.

He looked at her, but before he could respond, they heard the sound of the entry door closing. Both of them automatically turned that direction and they saw someone standing there. He was average height, slim, and it was difficult to tell how old he was from a distance. And he was not in a uniform; his civilian clothes looked expensive; the perfect fit moved elegantly around his body as he walked toward them.

Major Day didn’t seem impressed by any of that, either.

He was standing at attention; his hands were at his sides, fingers curled just short of making fists; his back was stiff and his expression was forced indifference. Kaydel read the message his body was sending; Day knew this person and distrusted him. The elegance around her lost its beauty instantly as Kaydel directed all her attention to the stranger approaching them. Following the Major’s lead, she assumed a formal stance and waited.

“Prompt, as always.” The stranger addressed Day pleasantly. “It’s good to see you, Danil.”

“I can’t say the same.” Day replied coldly. “We’re here for orders.”

“One thing at a time,” the stranger raised a hand to put Day off, “you haven’t introduced me to your companion.”

Day didn’t respond. The icy silence alarmed Kaydel, and she immediately took action.

“Lieutenant Kaydel Connix,” She stepped forward and saluted, “Pilot, Republic Fleet.”

“Ah, yes,” the stranger replied, “formerly of the Resistance, I believe.”

Day made a sound that wasn’t a growl, but was definitely hostile. He glared at the stranger as he did what was necessary.

“Lieutenant Connix,” He said it without looking at her. “Meet Ronjir Likit, Director of the Technology Guild.”

“Thank you, Danil,” Likit said. He began to slide his hands together, relishing the officer's submission. “Don’t worry, this won’t take long...”

.........

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes
Please bear with me, the roller coaster is on its way up, and this time, we're dragging a goddam *mountain* along with us. Did my best to make you see it in words, and if you looked at the video I end-noted last chapter, I'd be really grateful if you left a comment on whether I did okay and/or what I could change, add, subtract, etc to make it more 'real' in your minds.
A short chapter, that should have been part of the last chapter, but made it much too long, so I held it back a week to stay on pace. And I just needed to go "there" for awhile. Not fully pleased with it, especially the intro; will almost certainly change it later, but what the hell, right? It's just a fanfic...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Perception is everything.

It took a long time for the galaxy's sentient beings to accept that reality, mostly because the idea that no two beings had the exact same reality anywhere, anyhow, was just too terrifying to face. Civilizations everywhere determined early on that the only way to remain civilized was to maintain a shared illusion of reality by defining it with agreed-upon aspects of perception that became known as “facts”.

Simple facts like ‘up and down’ or ‘left and right’, even ‘male or female’ (where applicable) were easily decided, and almost everyone accepted them happily without question. More complex facts, especially those that had no physical properties, proved so complicated that they were never truly defined at all and wound up as subcategories of vague general categories that almost everyone accepted, just not happily. For instance, the general category “love” could include anything from adoration to hate, in any combination, in any manifestation, and could change at any moment without warning. Every being everywhere knew that all too well, but they accepted the ‘facts’ of love because even a vague reality was better than no reality at all.

And so, “love” became a throw-away term for way too many things that most definitely weren’t, but that didn’t matter because, deep down, most beings knew the truth about love:

It isn’t a ‘fact’; it’s a process…

Stone mountain meadow, The Edge

Leia Organa was growing tired; tried of talking; tired of choosing her words carefully. She was just plain tired, and it was starting to show, on her face, in her voice.

“It didn’t look like *anything*," she was finally getting to the guts of what happened, “just a big gray… egg?”

She looked at Ren, hoping he’d add something; he nodded, but that was all. His complete silence while Leia told the story did not go unnoticed; the three listeners would look at him every time Leia paused, but Ren didn’t respond to her cues. He would nod slightly, indicating that he agreed with his mother’s account, but neither pauses nor encouraging glances his way produced any comments.

At first, the silence didn’t bother Rey because she knew that when Ren was feeling stressed, he’d
resort to the Code, which required ‘respectful’ attention. That meant Ren would only comment when absolutely necessary to clarify confusion, and never to add ‘unnecessary’ details. What did bother Rey was the fact that Ren hadn’t looked her way since the General began talking. He hadn’t looked at the General, either; he just stared vacantly down, as if his mind was someplace else.

If Dar Noaa noticed, which he almost certainly had, he chose to let it go. He was following Leia’s narrative very closely, and quickly ended the silence with a question.

“Did it do anything?”

“Not at first, but then Ren touched it and it reacted.”

“What did it do?”

“I don’t know how to describe it…” Leia’s tone suggested that she was asking for help, and she looked at Ren again, “it changed color…”

Ren finally had something to say; a clarification request could was not to be ignored, especially when it came from the General.

“A new kind of coating,” he said, “similar to the one on this ship and my transport, but much more sophisticated.”

“Kourin design?”

“Yes.”

Dar Noaa waited a few seconds to see if Ren was going to add anything more, then when nothing else came, turned his attention back to Leia.

“What did you see?” he asked her.

“When Ren touched it,” Leia replied, “it seemed to come alive; a wave of, I don’t know – energy - spread out from his hands in all directions, and as it did, the whole surface became iridescent. It was… beautiful.”

Hearing that, Dar Noaa quickly turned his attention from Leia to her son.

“Was it?” He asked, making sure Ren knew the question was directed to him.

“I activated something,” Ren answered, choosing to avoid the subjective nature of the question put to him. “It must have been a translation initiator, but not the same as a comlink translator; it was much faster.”

“A translation initiator?” Dar Noaa asked, “How did you know?”

“I could feel it,” Ren put his fingertips together, then stared down at the mirror image his hands made as if it meant something. “It read me, it…” he paused to search for a word, and found one, “… reflected… me,” he pressed his hands together, “… then it became…” he looked directly at Dar Noaa, “… me.”

“In what way?”

“I can’t explain, I just felt it. All I had to do was tell it what I wanted…”

“That’s how,” Leia said, “you knew you could open the door.”
“There was a door?” Dar Noaa asked.

“No,” Leia answered, “No door; the surface was featureless. Then Ren said “open the door”, and it literally split open for him.”

An expression of confusion, then realization, flooded Dar Noaa’s face. He turned and looked down at Irno, who had been quiet so far. The Kourin was already staring up at him; his grip hand was tapping on one of the seats in measured beats, like a countdown to detonation.

“Tell me, Irno,” Dar Noaa asked, “what do you think; does that sound a lot like an *interface* to you?”

Irno’s grip hand went still.

“Yes.”

“Interface?” Ren asked.

Dar Noaa offered an open hand to Irno, inviting him to explain.

“*You* tell him,” Irno snarled accusingly, “and while you’re at it, tell him what it’s *for*. And then tell him why you didn’t tell him - or any of them - about folding space.”

“What?” Ren asked.

“Right before he took me home,” Irno charged ahead, replying before Dar Noaa could, “he solved the equation for folding space. That’s the *real* reason he wanted to go there, to get the components I would need to make an interface for the prototype so *he* could do it.”

“I did not,” Dar Noaa protested, “we went there to get the resonator. That was *your* idea, not mine.”

“I don’t understand,” Leia said, “Folding space isn’t possible...”

“It is *now*,” Irno informed her, “or, it will be, just as soon as we put in a new resonator and get that Ren linked to the prototype.”

“Why me?” Ren asked.

“Because,” Irno replied, “it requires a Force-sensitive for the process to work. The Kyber cluster provides limitless energy; you and the ship’s systems provide everything else. Understand?”

“I don’t” Leia said.

“He’s saying,” Dar Noaa explained, “that the vessel needs Ren to fold space; it and all of its parts exist only in real space; the Force does not. Its technology can detect and draw from the Force, but it’s a conduit; it can’t manipulate the Force the way Ren can because he exists in *both* states simultaneously.” He paused to take a breath and saw the expression on her face. “Are you following this?”

“Not really.”

“Let me do it,” Irno stepped between them, then turned his back on Dar Noaa and faced Leia. “It’s simple: the Kyber cluster provides the power, the Force-sensitive directs the manipulation, the ship does the navigational computations, then *poof* – you go, wherever you want, instantly,” he pointed over his shoulder at Dar Noaa, “because that Sith’s equation *works*.”
“Impressive.” Ren said. “Still, why me? Why not the Sith? Or the Jedi?”

“*Limitless* power.” Dar Noaa answered. “The Kyber crystal cluster and you; to the Kourin, you are the ideal match. Luke or I might be able to fold space between worlds, maybe even star systems, but you…” he paused because the concept forming in his head was truly astonishing, “… you might fold space between… *galaxies*.”

The Kourin nodded in agreement.

Silence filled the cockpit as everyone tried to grasp what had just been said.

Ren raised his left hand and looked at it; underneath the layers of gauze, he could feel the energy sink pulse that was keeping the ‘limitless power’ that Dar Noaa had just talked about from killing him. To him, ‘limitless power’ was the monster hidden *within* the monster he already was. That thought terrified him beyond reason, and he couldn’t think beyond it. Completely at a loss, he looked at Rey for help, only to realize that everyone was already looking at him.

“I…” he stammered, “… can’t…”

“Then don’t.” Leia said, coming to his rescue. Then she turned to Dar Noaa. “This is getting complicated, Noah, and we’re all tired…”

“Yes, of course,” Dar Noaa replied. He even sounded relieved. “We should stop now; take some time to get cleaned up and eat, then resume once we’ve refreshed ourselves.”

“Make it *quick*.” Irno complained bitterly. “There’s no time to waste; we need to get the resonator in the cluster and *us* out of here.”

“I understand that,” Dar Noaa replied, “One hour.”

Everyone but Irno agreed, and a few seconds later, the Kourin found himself alone in the cockpit.

As soon as she and Dar Noaa were alone in their quarters, Leia confronted him about what Irno had said.

“Why didn’t you tell us about folding space?”

Dar Noaa walked to one of the sleep platforms and sat down heavily, then sighed.

“There was nothing to say.” He began his defense with a simple, uncomplicated truth, then realized that was not going to satisfy Leia at all. “I didn’t expect Irno to go rummaging through my rubbish and find something of value there, but he did. I intended to tell you as soon as I’d had a chance to verify it, but we’ve had higher priorities to attend to, so I didn’t get to it. The implications are enormous, and until I’ve had time to fully consider those implications, I saw no need to say anything to anyone.”

“You mean to Ren.”

“*Yes*.” Dar Noaa said firmly. “And to keep it from him, I kept it from you and Rey, too.”

“I can understand why you don’t trust Ren,” she said, “but you don’t trust me, either, it seems.”

“It’s not about trust, it’s about *survival*.” He replied, visibly wounded by her words. “That’s what consumes me day and night; everything I do is has only *one* purpose – to keep us alive.” He
stretched out an arm. “It’s a list *this* long,” he stretched it further, “and there is no place on it for ‘folding space’ - not then, not now, perhaps not ever.” He dropped his arm wearily, too tired to go on. “And, at the moment, I don’t gave a damn about it.”

“By keeping it to yourself, you put Ren – and me - in danger.”

“Not *intentionally*!” Dar Noaa’s eyes flashed. “I believed I was *protecting* you; *both* of you. You’re so glad to have Ben back that you’ve blinded yourself to the reality that *Ren* is barely holding on; anything more could push him so far over the edge that you – that we - would lose him forever.” He raised his hands again, this time to look into the emptiness there. “Do you still not know how much I love you? Losing him now would *kill* you, and that would kill *me*!”

Leia’s anger vanished; she walked to where he was, then leaned over, put her hands on his shoulders and her forehead against his. After a moment, he reached out and put his hands on her hips; holding her, supporting her, needing her so badly. She seemed to slip through his fingers, though, and suddenly she was kneeling in front of him with her hands on his knees.

“Forgive me,” She looked up at him, and he saw tears escaping her eyes. “I keep asking too much of you, and you give it, Noah. You always give it.”

“And I always will.”

He leaned over and used his hand to wipe the tears from her face, then he closed his eyes, put his fingers to his lips and kissed the salty wetness there. Like a magical fairytale potion, it healed his wounded feelings instantly, and when he opened his eyes again, Leia saw they’d returned to the rich honey color she loved so much.

“Did I tell you,” he asked, “there was a ladder?”

…”

Not far away, in Rey and Ren’s quarters, an uneasy silence ruled.

Rey went directly to the sanitary station to clean herself up, and Ren went to the sleep platform and sat there to wait while she did. Having her back, safe and within reach, he was painfully aware of just how much he’d come to depend on her to help him hold himself together, and that she’d want to talk about his failure while she was gone. Worse than that, he’d have to tell her that he failed because Ben Solo was weak and foolish. The General wanted to blame it on Snoke because of the only-just-discovered conditioning he’d been subjected to, but Ren knew better.

It was Ben Solo’s fault. Again and always, Ben Solo’s fault.

Rey turned on the water and worked her hands under the meager spray, then bent over and splashed her face and hair at least five times before she straightened up again. She almost wiped her hands on her tunic, but stopped short when she caught sight of it.

“I’m filthy.” She groaned loudly, grabbed the tunic gingerly and hoisted it up over her head, then dropped it to the floor beside her. “Uh, I forgot, there’s nothing else...”

She twisted her body just enough to bend over to pick it up again, giving him a glimpse of her breasts dripping with water. For an instant, he was back at the waterfall, making love with her, and the memory set off a confusing storm of emotion inside him. Intense animal desire, then embarrassment, then shame...

“Wait.” Ren was already pulling his tunic up when he began to speak, “Take mine,” he told her
through the fabric as he finished pulling it off, then he laid it across his legs to appraise it. “It’s not totally disgusting yet.”

She turned around to look at him; her face was still wet enough to have tiny rivulets of water following the curve of her neck downward, then flowing over the delicate ridge of her collar bones to meet and become a dainty stream between her breasts. Ren felt his face flush; her body was so beautiful, so perfect, and he was so utterly unworthy of her...

He made himself look down. Rey saw him do it.

She walked to the sleep platform and stopped in front of him.

“What’s wrong?” She asked.

He didn’t look up.

“Nothing.”

“If nothing’s wrong,” she replied, “then look at me.”

She watched him struggle to make himself do it; he raised his head with a quick, nervous jerk so he was looking directly at her face. He was sitting perfectly still, stiff; his eyes fixed on hers as if looking anywhere else might make him explode. She’d seen this expression many times now, and she knew what it meant. Ren never seemed to be aware of it himself, though; he believed he had Ben locked away so deep inside his head that no trace of him would, or could, ever be seen again.

“What’s wrong?” She asked again, this time with concern.

“While you were... gone,” Ren answered guiltily, “I was… different.”

“I know, I was listening,” she answered, “you lost control...”

“Not that.”

“What, then?”

“Ben Solo was here.”

“What did he want?”

“He wanted to *go*,” Ren said. “He didn’t care where; he wasn’t thinking about anyone... but himself.” Ren’s confession poured out of him in choppy bursts of pained words. “I… he... acted like a... fool...” He had to stop for a second to control the anger inside. “...and I didn’t do *anything* to stop him; if the General hadn’t pulled me back, I’d be gone now. I wasn’t strong enough…”

“Ben’s still here, isn’t he?”

“I’m in control.”

“I know that. Look at me, Ren - *all* of me.”

He forced himself to lower his head so he could see her body; the sight of her beauty made him tremble.

He closed his eyes.
Rey moved closer, reached down, took hold of his right hand and started to pull it toward her.

“Touch me.”

He opened his eyes and looked up at hers, silently pleading, but she didn’t stop.

“Don’t be afraid,” she whispered lovingly, “when you touch me, I feel Ben, too.”

Her words poured into his mind, crashing hard against the wall of guilt and shame, cracking it open, rushing through, reaching the soul imprisoned there.

And she knew it.

Like it or not, Kylo of Ren, you *are* Ben Solo.” Rey felt his hand trembling, and closed hers around it to hold on. “You can’t keep him locked inside you forever. And you don’t have to! On Dagobah, You - and Ben - made me a path; you - and Ben - kept me from killing you by blowing us up; and then, even though you - and Ben - loved me, you sent me away to save me. When I look at you, I see him; in your eyes, on your face, in everything you do.”

His eyes burned; holding the tears back, as he had held so many things back, was blurring his vision. He felt her press his hand against her breast, guiding his fingers to a nipple already firm and eager to have them. He caressed it delicately; she made a little sound that electrified his body and the growing hardness between his legs was agonizing because now he knew that *she* knew that Ben Solo was feeling it, too.

She knows. She’s known all along, he tortured himself, and, still she...

He looked deep into her eyes, silently pleading, terrified to believe. Desperate to believe.

“I *love* you,” she answered them, “All of you.”

He slipped his hand out from under hers, but not to pull away. Instead, he reached around to draw her down onto him, bringing her face, her lips to his. Kissing wasn’t enough; he tugged at her pants.

“I warn you,” she said breathlessly as she used her feet to push her boots off and out of the way, "I’m filthy.”

“Oh,” he murmured back, “I hope so...”

They made love fiercely, thoughtlessly, with first-time intensity because, in a way, it was the first time; he didn’t have to hold part of himself back any more.

And she surrendered happily because, for the first time, she had all of him.

…..

Not far away, their breakthrough was being felt.

It flooded Leia and Dar Noaa’s quarters as they were just sitting down with warm, nondescript bowls of something to eat.

“Oh, no,” Dar Noaa groaned, “they’re at it again.”

“I know.” Leia said softly. “Are you all right? How do you feel?”

“I feel… tried and cranky.”
“I know.”

“Wait a minute...” Dar Noaa looked at her curiously. “I’m tired and cranky, not...”

“I know.”

“It’s Force discretion, but not theirs...” he reached out, seeking, “… it’s coming from... *you*!”

“Yes.”

“But... how?”

“You never asked me if I knew about Force discretion; you just knocked me out with a drink and drugs. “ Leia explained. “I learned about it right after Ben was born; I had to. And I used it - a *lot*.”

“A most pleasant surprise,” he stared at her with pure affection, “and greatly appreciated.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied.

.....

Not far away, and completely obvious to everything, Irno was sulking in the cockpit.

Lost in thoughts so troubling and dark that he’d terrified himself thoroughly, he was slumped down in one of the seats, tired but too full of anxiety to fall asleep because he knew his own kind better than they did. They wanted something; they *always* wanted something - and when they wanted something, it didn’t matter how difficult it would be or how long it would take – they would find a way to get it...

............

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

TUESDAY is election day, which means (1) you should vote and (2) I'm working all day at the polls. Add to that five more days working, even the weekend, and you can bet the next chapter will be late. Hoping it won't take two weeks, but it could. Just sayin'.
Chapter 33

Qir.

It was a world populated by beings who truly believed they'd found a way to have the best of all worlds. The dominant native species, the Qiri, enjoyed a great deal of freedom; they could choose where to live, what to do to make a living, even who to have as a mate. Their trade was generally based on fair value exchange, and their law on maintaining peace among them.

When Qir was eventually 'discovered' by aliens, the newcomers were welcomed, as long as they did nothing to upset what was a perfectly satisfactory civilization. The arrival of galactic trade guilds on Qir was disruptive at first, but the guilds were expert in assimilating new societies; they seduced Qir by bringing it what the population desired at a price they were able to pay, and then they proceeded to eliminate the competition through merger, buy outs and other ways that nobody on Qir wanted to think about. Once that was over, Qir settled down to trade according to the Galactic Federation of Trade Guilds guidelines, and business thrived. That would have been all there was to say about Qir, were it not for the unexplained and horrific events that occurred just recently.

Without warning, an entire community had been exterminated. Everyone there, adult and child alike, was killed; their bodies were mutilated, then left to rot. Qir had its share of crime and violence, but never anything like this; everyone was shocked and perplexed.

Then it happened again.

Another community was attacked in the exact same manner.

Everyone was shocked and perplexed, but now they were also deeply concerned.

And then, it happened a third time – then a fourth time - and they were openly alarmed.

Speculation and suspicion became epidemic; communities that had been interacting for generations started to pull back from each other. Trade slowed down as orders and deliveries dropped, contracts failed and profits plummeted. That was totally unacceptable, so when the government’s investigations failed to produce results, the local Guild affiliates appealed to the Galactic Federation of Trade Guilds for help. The GFTG agreed to look into the matter and take whatever measures were necessary to restore business to usual, and the attacks stopped.

Qir breathed a collective sigh of relief, then got back to work, uninterested in the disturbing rumors being whispered in spaceport barrooms and brothels all along the Outer Rim about attacks that were happening everywhere else…

……

The Qir’Qorit grasslands, Qir, the Outer Rim

Although Pok’Tha’s land stretched for kilometers in all directions, most of it was still wild.

He and his mate Thia had a modest, airy household close to the huge barn they used for sheering their hepi and not much more. Their tools and transport vehicles all fit into one corner of the empty barn, so the house was strictly for family. This pleased Thia greatly, as did the three little ones that she and Pok’Tha had produced; two energetic four-year olds that kept them busy and recently, a new
She greeted Pok’Tha’s guests with her infant in her arms; the two older ones scampered about excitedly at first, then stopped to study the newcomers.

“Forgive my young ones,” Pok’Tha hurried to gather them up into his arms, then carried them closer, we don’t see many offworlders here.”

Chewbacca mewed a pleasant greeting that Pok’Tha’s children repeated, mimicking him precisely.

“And this is my Thia,” Pok’Tha turned to look at his mate, gently dropping his two little captives so they could run to their mother, “and our newest one.”

“Welcome,” Thia said warmly, “My Pok’Tha says you’ve traveled far to visit us; there is food on the table and our bath house fires have been burning all day. Come, refresh yourselves.”

Chewbacca needed no encouragement; he headed for the table piled high with Qiri cuisine. There were fruits and vegetables, grains, breads and bowls of spices; all things the Wookie enjoyed tremendously. Poe, Finn, Dar Na and Rey followed him, watching his selections closely and choosing what he did.

Pok’Tha lingered behind, waiting for Luke, who was waiting for Laci, who had gone to speak with Thia and see her infant. Thia put the infant into Laci’s arms, then showed her how to hold him, and once Laci had the young one snuggled up close, she turned so Luke could see him, too.

As Luke watched Laci smile and coo at the adorably fuzzy little Qiri, a wave of guilt washed over him.

She’s still young enough to have children, he thought, she could have a family, a life of her own...

He’d left all that behind a long time ago, when he become a Jedi.

Compassion for all. Attachment to none.

Since the moment he rescued her, those Jedi vows dimmed, then faded away, lost in the brightness of her eyes when she looked at him. She expressed her gratitude through affection, but instead of showing her compassion by keeping his distance, Luke not only welcomed her attention, he kept going back for more. His Jedi compassion became friendship, but then it caught fire and instead of stepping back from the flames, as a Jedi should, Luke had thrown himself in because he wanted her. Even now he felt himself burning inside with a need for her that he had no right to feel.

He watched her begin to sway, rocking the infant in her arms.

A life of my own, he told himself, that never was. But could be...

Laci noticed.

She saw something in Luke’s expression that told her to go to him, so she turned to Thia and surrendered the infant with a gentle pat on the head. She walked quickly to join Luke, but when she got there, he turned his face away, then headed for the table and the others, leaving her to follow.

And even though she was sitting by Luke’s side during the meal and conversations, all of his attention went elsewhere, first for listening to Pok’Tha’s humorous stories about doing business with Chewbacca and his partner Han Solo, and then listening closely while Pok’Tha talked about his land.
At first, it was mostly counts and descriptions, how many hepi on how much land and how much wool and what it brought on the market last season, but as his little lecture progressed, Pok’Tha’s words became less practical and more spiritual in tone.

“We live well here because we do not fight the land,” he explained, “we cooperate with it. I am not master of my land; I’m its caretaker, that is, until the mountain takes it from me.”

“Does the mountain belong to you?” Luke asked.

“No, if anything, it’s the other way around. My hepi belong to the mountain; I belong to my hepi, so I belong to the mountain, too. We all know our place here.”

“Have you ever climbed to the summit?”

“Never. No one climbs Qir’Qorit; the mountain sees to that. The lower slopes are treacherously steep and slick with rain forest.”

“How do you manage your herd, then?”

“My hepi manage themselves; they’re slow but sure-footed on the slopes. They climb high for the mineral licks; it gets cold up there, so their wool grows long and thick. When it’s time for shearing, all I do is burn my grasslands. The grass sprouts quickly after a fire; my hepi know this, so they come down from the mountain to gorge themselves on it. The grasslands are warm and their wool becomes hot and heavy, so they come to the barn on their own; the old lead the young. We shear them, then release them back to the mountain and the process begins again, so there is no need to climb.”

“And no way to see what’s up there.” Luke sighed.

“But, there *is*,” Pok’Tha rose, went to a cabinet on the wall and opened it. “I keep track of my hepi using this.” He selected a red ball from the exposed shelves, then returned to Luke. “It’s a shepherd drone.” He pressed a tiny button and the ball on his hand extended two fabric wings. “With these for eyes, I check my hepi even when they’re very high, near the summit.”

“How often do you use your shepherds?”

“Every day.” Pok’Tha replied. “And right now, my hepi are very high up the mountain.” He could tell from Luke’s expression that the Jedi was keenly interested now, so he put out the question. “Would you like to see them?”


“Then come with me.”

Close by, but high above, the Outbound transport had just cleared the notch and was rising, moving away from Qir’Qorit.

“Take us to one thousand meters,” Kaydel told her copilot, “then level off and throttle back.”

“We’re not going home?” Vix asked.

“No,” Kaydel activated the navigation display and entered the coordinates written on a small card that had been handed to Major Day, who’d handed it to her. A display of the region below appeared with a route brightly superimposed over it. “we’re going to this agricultural trade terminal,” she
pointed to the only ‘city’ identified by the display, “called ‘Line’s End’, and once we’re there… I don’t know.”

“Who does?”

“The Major, I suppose. I was only there long enough to get this,” she held up the card, “then I got booted to the corridor so they could talk in private.”

“What was it like?”

“The ship? Didn’t get to see much of it, but everything inside is TechnoUnion; and new, cutting-edge new, all of it.”

“Could you tell who they are?”

“Technology Guild. Inside and out.”

“Why would the Tech Guild bring something so new we can’t ID it all the way out here and park it inside a volcano?”

“Maybe they’re testing it.”

“Testing it? What could they be testing in *there*?”

“I don’t know.” Kaydel lied. She wasn’t allowed to tell him that she knew exactly what they were doing there. There was only one thing that could bring the Technology Guild Director himself to this place, and Kaydel was excited and deeply troubled at the same time.

They’d found what they were looking for. Poe Dameron.

…..

Far below, no one paid any attention to the distant sound of something passing overhead.

Once Pok’tha had led Luke away, the conversation quickly changed topic. Chewbacca had been a guest here before, and remembered how delightfully thorough Qiri hospitality was, so he mewed a question about the bathhouse to prompt Thia to tell her new guests about the local tradition.

“Wash off the journey with a nice soapy shower,” she beckoned them to follow her, “then a long, hot soak…”

Everyone got to their feet without hesitation. They’d been using the Falcon’s shower for days; the recirculated water and timer did a modest job at best, so it sounded like an invitation to paradise and they fell in behind her, moving through the kitchen and out the back back door, then down a short path to the bathhouse.

…..

As he stepped off the lowest stair onto the floor of Pok’Tha’s basement, Luke heard their footsteps pass over head. The basement reminded Luke of his early life on Tatooine; it was a tight maze of shelves, all neatly arranged, and like at Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen’s place, it was where the family’s most important possessions were stored. The maze ended at a door that opened to reveal a compact, but sophisticated, electronics room.

“I watch my hepi from here,” Pok’Tha led Luke to a workstation with an unusually large display screen, then gestured to Luke to sit on the long bench that served as a seat there. The bench was
smooth and easy to slide along, but because Pok’Tha was tall, it was a high seat and Luke’s toes barely touched the floor. The Qiri sat next, positioned himself at the workstation and activated the program without even looking at it. The display screen instantly produced a view of thick jungle and waterfalls. “I keep four shepherds on the mountain; two watch the lower slopes.”

He tapped to activate a split screen image of both shepherd views.

Luke studied the image grimly; the terrain was steep, slippery and treacherous. Climbing would be slow and dangerous.

“This one,” Pok’Tha switched to another view, “watches the highland slopes.”

Luke studied the image; the jungle had been left below; the scrub-covered terrain was less slippery, but steeper and riddle with sharp-looking rocks and boulders. Climbing here would be slow, dangerous and exposed.

“And *this* one,” Pok’Tha switched to the final view, “watches the summit mineral licks.”

Luke studied the image; the terrain was extremely steep, composed of broken rock, layered ash and stone strewn from the volcano. Vertical ravines cut deep by rain ran down the slope like giant stripes, crisscrossed with narrow pathways made by hepi seeking minerals. The hepi were there, lounging on rocky outcrops, warming themselves in sunlight, indifferent to the deadly drop-offs surrounding them. Aside from a few small plants straggling between the stones, there was nothing more to see – and absolutely no cover at all. Climbing here would be *suicidal*.

“Can your shepherd fly over the vent?”

“You wish to see the face of Death?”

“Yes.”

“All right, then, prepare yourself...”

The Qiri launched the shepherd; as it gained altitude, the fresh sides of the summit’s most recent activity began to appear. The cone’s outer walls looked almost smooth, and terribly unstable; evidence of slides was everywhere and there was no sign of life there at all. Pok’Tha guided the shepherd toward the jagged edge that marked the vent, and suddenly they were looking down into the open jaws of the volcano.

The vent’s violent history was easy to read; Luke saw the shadowed pit, then the broken balconies, but it was the highest balcony that seized his attention. He saw the TechnoUnion ship, the landing carousel, the grid of walkways, one of which led to the inner edge. And beyond that edge...

“What the...” Pok’Tha pointed at the ship in the image, “... is that a *starship* sitting there?”

“Yes.”

Pok’Tha’s paws hammered his console and the image blurred as the shepherd turned and sped away from the vent, then down the slope, past the hepi and into the scrub-covered slope below. Luke waited in silence while the Qiri worked to regain his composure, and he was prepared when Pok’Tha finally turned to demand an explanation.

“You’ve heard about several recent attacks here on Qir,” Luke asked. “where entire villages were slaughtered?”
“Four.” Pok’Than confirmed and corrected Luke’s estimate. “There were four attacks. Everyone was terrified; business, pleasure - everything - stopped.”

“The ones responsible for that terror,” Luke looked up at the screen, which was now showing a view of the lower slopes again, “are in that ship; there, inside the volcano.”

“That cannot be so,” Pok’Tha argued, “we were assured the threat was *gone*.”

“Assured? By who?”

“The Federation of Guilds; doing business here got so bad that they stepped in to address the problem - and the attacks stopped.”

“On your world, yes,” Luke replied, “but only the killers moved on to other worlds; the ones they work for stayed here.”

“Work for? You make it sound like a business!” Pok’Tha’s fur was standing on end, giving him a fluffy appearance that completely belied the agitation that caused it. “What kind of business deals in such savagery?”

Luke took a breath, then told him everything.

……

Up and outside, then down the path, inside the bathhouse, it was finally Laci’s turn.

She’d suggested that Chewbacca go first, mostly because he was the family’s friend, but also because his shaggy hair would take longer to dry in the heat room, so if he went first, the rest could join him there and all be finished drying at the same time. Then she insisted the young males go ahead of her because Thia offered to show her the garden, and the idea of a quiet walk with another female was more appealing than sharing the bath was. Then she followed Thia out the door, leaving Poe, Finn and Dar Na to work out whatever bathing arrangement worked for them.

Thia’s garden was a little masterpiece; flowers and vegetables arranged in patchwork so no space was left idle or barren. Thia took great pride in sharing every detail of her work; from names to uses, every plant served a purpose. Some for eating, some for medicine and some for qualities that ‘nourish the spirit’.

“Like *this*,” she snapped off a sprig of tiny pink flowers and handed it to Laci, “Rub it on your skin after ‘bath’ and it will make you feel so good.”

Laci sniffed the gift, but it had no scent. Her face must have shown her puzzlement.

“Kkkkk...kkkk...” she said; the curious sound was a Qiri giggle. She broke off a sprig from another plant, then slid it into Laci’s hand to join the first one. “And this one, too. Together, they do *wonderful* things. You will see.”

One hot shower and a long, luxurious, private soak later, Laci was sitting on a long bench beside the bath with a small towel in one hand and the sprigs in the other.

“Use the towel...” she recited Thia’s instructed to herself, wiping herself off from face to feet. “Then crush the flowers together...” She made a fist, then used her fingers to mash the sprigs, “… then brush them everywhere...”

The milky substance went on smoothly, then vanished, leaving no trace behind. For an instant her
skin felt cool, then warm and a little bit tingly, but nothing more. And no perfume filled the air at all.

“Hmmmm,” she said to herself as she set the mangled sprigs aside, “maybe I did it wrong.”

Once she was dressed, she decided to go back to the Falcon and change into something from her little pile of new clothing, so she bypassed the house and walked straight to the barn. When she arrived there, she saw Pok’Tha standing at the base of the Falcon’s ramp with Chewbacca.

“I must go to town on business,” Pok’Tha’ got directly to the the mater at hand, “and I am told,” he glanced at Chewbacca, “that you need supplies. It’s trade market week, so you should be able to find anything you need there. Your ‘three’, Poe, Finn, Dar Na, are coming along, too; Chewbacca says they could use some time away from the ship.”

Laci looked at Chewbacca, who shook his shiny, combed, clean head in agreement.

“Oh, yes,” she said, “but we'll need Luke's permission.”

“He's already given it,” Pok’Tha replied. “It was his idea that you come along.”

“It was? All right, then,” Laci stepped between them, onto the ramp, “but I’ll need some time to paint Dar Na; can you wait?”

Pok’Tha’s answer was a nod and outstretched, open arms, which Chewbacca translated into barter sign for her:

“Yes, with pleasure.”

Chewbacca and Pok’Tha watched her hurry up the ramp and out of sight.

“Are you sure,” Chewbacca was so concerned that he practically meowed the question. “that you want to do this, my friend?”

“Yes.” Pok’Tha replied solemnly.

Then the Qiri went to charge up the turbo-wagon, leaving Chewbacca alone at the ramp.

The Wookie stood there for awhile, listening to the quiet symphony of sound that filled the barn. Breeze through the open doors stirred hanging tools while the doors and walls clacked or hummed with harmonic vibrations.

Several small rodents, hidden, out of sight, were arguing over a morsel of grain.

High above, a few sleepy night-wings were just waking up.

And then, quietly above the whispering, Chewbacca heard Han Solo sigh.

*I’ve got a bad feeling about this.*

……

The Terminal at Line’s End was quiet and empty most of the time, but not today.
Today it was a party town, filled with farmers who had just sold their products and dealers who’d bought their produce in what everyone agreed were good deals. That meant that the town would stay awake long into the night so the fresh influx of money could find its way into the hands of transient vendors who always seemed to arrive right after the dealers. A temporary town of tent stalls and wagons had popped up right there at the terminal, where anything and everything, most of which was perfectly legal, was put out for sale. Those out for a good time and those looking for a bargain jostled for position at every stall, sometimes four or more deep if the vendor was willing to take offers. Greetings, haggling and disputes competed against raunchy music with deafening results, so continuous shouting this way and that made normal conversation impossible, and many had to make do by resorting to trade sign.

Everyone was busy, absorbed in their own plans for the night, so no one noticed the three newcomers who were standing at the edge of the action.

Poe, Finn and Dar Na were deciding where to start.

When Laci told them she’d decided to stay behind and handed Poe a list of items to look for, it didn’t sound like a huge request, but now, seeing the size of the market and the crowd, the the paper in Poe’s hand had suddenly gained weight.

Twenty five items on the list, none of them peculiar or uncommon, all of them small; at least a hundred vendor stalls, all of which had real and potential customers jammed tightly around them.

It took a few minutes for them to realize that they’d probably do a better job of filling Laci’s list from the chaos if they separated, so Poe carefully tore the paper into thirds and let the other two choose which section they wanted to work with. Then Poe set a meet-back time at the place where Pok’Tha had dropped them off and sent them off with advice they’d heard many times before.

“Remain unnoticed,” he told them, “and you remain alive.”

Hoods up and pulled forward to shield their faces, they moved away, merged into the crowd and vanished from each other’s sight.

…..

Kaydel was lost.

She hated to admit it, but she’d been wandering the terminal market for so long that she had no longer had any idea which way was which. She’d lost track of Vix hours ago and finding him had become her primary mission because as his superior officer, *she* was responsible for him.

He’s sitting in a tapping stall somewhere, getting stoned on the the local brew...

She hoped he was, because that would mean he wasn’t part of the crowd pressing past her. They all knew exactly where they were and where they were going. She did not. As she wandered, horrible scenarios played out in her mind; all of them ended in total disgrace.

Disaster. Or death. Disaster *and* death...

She stopped, then stepped between two stalls to get out of the flow until she could get a hold on herself.

I am an officer of the Resistance; I’m better than this...

She stared absentmindedly at the stream of beings passing by.
This is hopeless. There is no way I’m going to find Poe Dameron here; I can’t even find Vix...

It was exactly at that moment when someone walking past turned their head, looked her direction for an instant, then continued on. For a moment, she thought maybe she’d been thinking out loud and unconsciously drawn attention to herself, but even if she had, no one passing by would have heard her over the noise ringing through that crowd.

A split second glimpse of a face deep inside the shadow of a hood, but it felt... familiar.

*I wonder*...

She stepped back into the crowd and moved with the flow, then pressed through it to catch up with the hooded figure for a closer look. The figure’s stature and movements suggested a male, but every time he stopped long enough for her to really see, he would turn and be off again. She had to work to keep up with him, but the more she watched, the more she suspected it was *him*.

*The Sith. The one that decked Finn in the hanger bay*...

She remembered him well, too; nobody could forget that face. All she had to do was get one good look. That should have been easy, but he held his head high, well inside the hood of his robe, and it wasn’t until he stopped at a brightly lit stall to look at hanging pots of something that the light was at just the right angle to give her a glimpse at his face.

At first, she thought it was a trick of the light; the profile matched her memory, but there were no colored patterns on the cheeks as she remembered seeing when she saw him before. If it even was him.

Keeping her eyes averted, just out of the line of his sight, she moved toward him to confirm or reject, but before she could, he turned away from the vendor and walked on.

She followed, watching his every move, and the more she watched, the more she felt that, plain face or not, it had to be him. He had the same stride, the same rhythm, in his walk; every movement whispered of cautious confidence. When he stopped to look at something, his body was relaxed, but alert, forcing her to keep moving toward him to avoid being noticed, with her head down, feigning interest in something.

Then he would move on, and she followed.

Afternoon became evening and shadows deepened; she caught glimpses of his face under the colored lights of vendor stalls and doorways that stung her memory enough to keep her going. Several times when he stopped, she managed to get close enough to hear his voice, but that was of no use because she’d been too far away to hear what he said to Finn in the Resistance hanger bay. His voice was quiet, but deep, so the sound carried and there was something about it that made her want to hear more. And he had a scent; she couldn’t place it, but it made her think of the spicy-sweet treats her mother used to bake. Like those treats, the scent was attractive; it made her crave more of it. While she was lost in the memory, he took a small sack from the vendor and walked on, so when she looked, he was nowhere to be seen.

*Dammit!*

Going on instinct, or perhaps a trace of scent, Kaydel hurried on in the direction he’d been heading until now, still hoping he was what she thought he was. Growing more and more distressed that she’d lost him entirely, she passed darkened vendor stalls and closing doors, moving faster and faster, only vaguely aware that she was leaving the crowds behind and racing into the unknown.
She didn’t even see side alley until she was passing it.

She didn’t see *him* at all.

He came at her so fast, she didn’t realize what was happening until she felt herself being shoved up against a wall in the dark. Something metal flashed in the faint light, and she froze when she felt the cold, sharp edge of a blade against her throat.

“Do not move.”

It was *his* voice, quiet and threatening.

One of his hands was pinning her right hand behind her back; his other hand held the blade touching her skin. Her right shoulder ached savagely, but she was too terrified to move.

“Why do you follow me?”

She literally swallowed her terror; the blade moved with her throat, remaining in contact, but not cutting.

“I’m...” she spoke slowly, carefully, “… looking for someone. I thought you would lead me to him.”

“You know me?” The voice sounded puzzled, but the blade didn’t move. “I do not know you; I’d remember *you*.”

Kaydel pushed her fear out of the way; this was what she came for. She could do it.

“I’ve seen you before.” She babbled, getting it out as fast as she could. “Resistance Transport; you took my friend inside your ship.”

Silence. The blade didn’t move.

“His name,” she said; a last, desperate act, “is Poe Dameron.”

The blade vanished, then was swiftly replaced with a hand. Like the blade, it barely touched her skin, but kept her frozen in place. The shadow in front of her shook his his head, freeing it from the hood, and in the faint light, Kaydel got her first close look at a *Sith*.

She’d expected the face of a demon, but he looked almost... *human*. Smooth dark hair, held back by narrow braids; an earring dangling from one ear; thin, dark brows over his eyes; a strong jaw. His lips were closed tightly, hiding his teeth but making oddly-placed dimples high on his cheeks prominent. In another reality, she could have called him ‘attractive’, except for one disturbing thing.

*Those eyes…*

“What is your name?” He asked. This time it was a question, not a demand.

She could see the disturbing honey color she’d heard about because those eyes were glowing in the dark. He was staring at her, no, he was staring *into* her! She could feel him in her head, examining, investigating, seeking something. She was powerless against the invasion and frightened, but the same time, she felt her terror slipping away because something about it felt... right.

“Kaydel.” She answered.

“Kay-Del.”
“No, Kaydel... and you are?”

“I am Dar Na.” He replied, “friend to Poe Dam...” He stopped suddenly, turned his head away from her and looked back into the dark depths of the alley.

“Actually, you’re both my friends.”

Recognizing the voice, Kaydel strained against the hand at her throat, trying to see where it had come from. She saw two figures moving in the shadow, coming toward her and her captor, but she didn’t wait to confirm who they were before calling out.

“Captain Dameron?! I could use a little *help* here, sir.”

“Let her go, Na.”

The hand dropped away from her throat, then the other hand released her arm. As she grabbed her shoulder to soothe the ache there, the last of Kaydel’s fear dissolved into anger and she lashed out with her good arm, missing Dar Na’s face, but tagging his shoulder with a fist.

“That *hurt*!” She hissed.

She knew she’d just made a mistake and cringed in anticipation, but all Dar Na did was laugh.

“You are *fierce* for one so small.” He told her. “I like it.”

It sounded so much like a compliment that Kaydel didn’t know how to respond, but fortunately for her, Poe Dameron and his companion, whom she now could see was the newcomer Finn, had arrived. Kaydel straightened herself the way she’d been taught, displaying confidence she did not possess.

“Hey, Poe.” She said.

“Hey, Kay.” Poe replied. “I’m sorry that Dar Na scared you.”

“He didn’t.” She lied. Dar Na snorted in amusement, but said nothing.

“Good.” Poe said, then studied her curiously. "You're not the last person I expected to run into here, but you come close. How did you get *here*? *Why* did you get here?”

“Looking for you. Commander Lexde sent me.”

“He did? Why?”

“He needs to contact the General; he says she has something the Republic needs badly. Can you take me to her?”

“That depends...”

“*Wait*.” Finn interrupted Poe, then turned on Kaydel. “First things, first. How did you know we’d be here? *We* didn’t even know we’d be here until a few days ago.”

“We were told.” Kaydel answered. "Commander Lexde’s not the only one looking for you; the Technology Guild has agents all over the Rim; they're looking for you, too. We know that you’re here because the Tech Guild knows you’re here.”

“The Tech Guild is *here*?” Poe asked. “*Where* here?”
“Up there,” Kaydel pointed up and away, into the night, “that mountain in the distance… what’s it called?”

“Qir’Qorit.” Poe said. It wasn't an answer; it was a realization. He turned to Finn, “We have to go back.”

“Yes,” Finn agreed grimly, “and right now. Something’s wrong; I can feel it.”

“The Resistance wants you back, Poe,” Kaydel raised her hands, palm ups and open. “We *need* you.”

“That’s… great, Kay,” Poe answered, “but I really have to go. Right now.”

“But…”

“Listen, Kay…”

“Quiet!” Dar Na whispered loudly. “Someone is coming.”

“Everyone, back to the wagon.” Poe ordered, already turning in the direction he’d just come from. “*Now*.”

Kaydel saw Finn follow Poe and started after them; she’d only taken several steps forward when she felt arms around her waist, then her feet leaving the ground, then a flip and she was hanging over Dar Na’s shoulder like a sack of hornwols. The Sith moved quickly, as if her added weight was nothing, catching up to Poe and Finn, then passing them.

“Why’d you bring her?” Finn demanded.

“Poe said ‘everyone’.” Dar Na called back, without slowing, “and she has value.”

By now, Dar Na was well ahead of Poe and Finn, and gaining distance fast, but then he stopped.

Poe and Finn didn’t think anything of it, though; they were almost to the place where Pok’Tha would be waiting with the turbo-wagon recharged and ready to go. But when they reached Dar Na, they realized why the Sith had stopped: Pok’Tha was standing beside his wagon, but he was not alone - someone was standing there with him.

Still hanging over Dar Na’s shoulder, Kaydel grabbed his arm, pulled herself toward his side, then twisted her head as far as it would go to see what was happening, but saw only only shadows moving towards them. She felt the Sith shift his balance, sliding her forward, then down, onto her feet, in front of him. As she touched down, she looked up automatically and was caught by those eyes again, but the sound of footsteps approaching quickly broke the spell and she turned around to see what was coming.

It was Major Day. And his team.

With their weapons charged.

…..

Two hours away by turbo-wagon, things were quiet but not peaceful.

As soon as the terminal market expedition disappeared from view, Laci began to search for Luke.
She’d expected to see him in the Falcon, but he wasn’t there. And he didn’t show up, not even to say anything before the others left, which was unlike him. It made her so uneasy that she found an excuse not to go along.

When she returned to the Falcon and Luke still wasn’t there, she asked Chewbacca where he was. The Wookie signed that he’d ‘gone for a walk’ and should be back ‘soon’, then excused himself to go work on something, leaving her on her own.

She chose to return to the house in the hope that Luke might be there, but he wasn’t. Thia, who had made mention that she seldom had the ‘luxury’ of female companionship, greeted her warmly and the two of them chatted over shared kitchen chores, then read the children a story to get them settled down for the night, and then chatted some more over tiny cups of a lovely and potent drink that Pok’Tha had brewed.

They talked about Pok’Tha. They talked about Lutor Kin.

Then they talked about Luke Skywaler.

It was already dark out when Laci said good night and walked back to the barn and the Falcon, but Chewbacca had the night-lights on to guide her way. She called out when she entered the ship, and the Wookie called back from the cockpit, so she went there first to see if Luke was with him.

He wasn’t, and when she put the question to him, Chewy signed 'In the back... somewhere'.

Laci patted his silky head, then went to find Luke.

She found him in the sleep chamber, in the chair. He wasn’t asleep; he wasn’t meditating; it looked like he was... waiting. An empty empty bowl and a few crumbs sat on the table beside him.

“You didn’t go with the others.” Luke looked up at her. “Why not?”

“I wanted to visit with Thia,” Laci replied, “she doesn’t get much company out here. And I was hoping that you and I would have some time to... ourselves… but you went for a ‘walk’.”

Luke reached for her hand; hers met his halfway.

“It’s an old habit,” his hand slipped over hers, his fingers glided gently over her skin, “it helps me to think, to see things clearly…” He gripped her hand, pulled it to his face as if to kiss it, but instead he closed his eyes, then inhaled deeply. “… you smell… wonderful.”

“Do I?” Laci asked. “Thia gave me something from her garden, for after the bath. She said it would do 'wonderful' things, but...”

“Yes... wonderful...”

Luke released her hand, pushed himself up from the chair, then leaned in to sniff again; following the scent up her neck, then under her chin, then up again, until his breath found her ear. The unspoken question in that breath shot through Laci’s body, releasing a tidal wave of desire.

“Luke...”

His name was her consent; taking her face in his hands, he silenced her with a kiss. She fell against him, matching his kiss with her own. This time was different than before; this time he took her with animal urgency, sweeping her up in his arms, then carrying her her to bed. They wasted no time; anything between them was simply tugged out of the way, and they made love with their eyes open,
sharing each other’s ecstasy. He was still inside her when she raised her hand to his face and traced the smile on his lips.

“Look at you...” she purred contentedly.

It was a perfect moment, everything he needed it to be.

Afterwards, he held her close, listening to every sound her body made, committing it to memory.

“I love you, Luke...” she murmured drowsily, “I love you...”

When her breathing told him that she’d fallen asleep, Luke eased himself out of her arms and off the bed, then pulled his clothing back to where it should be. When finished, he sat on the edge of the bed, leaned over and touched Laci’s hand.

“I have to leave you for awhile,” he whispered tenderly, “I’m going to end this nightmare, so I can take you home.”

He pulled the blanket up over her, brushed her hair out of her face, then sat and watched her sleep until he was ready to go.

When he stepped out onto the Falcon’s ramp, Luke saw Chewbacca waiting below.

“I need you,” he walked down to join the Wookie, “to do one more thing for me, Chewy.”

“Yes,” Chewbacca grunted, “Anything.”

“Give *this*,” Luke dug into his robe pocket, pulled out the data cartridge Leia had given him and handed it to the Wookie, “to Poe Dameron. Tell him it’s from the General; he’ll know what to do with it.”

Chewbacca mewed; a sad, mournful sound that had no translation.

“I know,” Luke replied, “but I promised not to lead them into disaster, so I'm going alone. Keep them safe until I return.”

Then he left, and all Chewbacca could do was watch him go.

………..

To be continued...
Night fell slowly on Qir’Qorit.

First, it swept across the valley below, plunging it into shadow as Qir’s sun dropped behind the mountain, then it silently crept up the lower and highland slopes. It was inescapable, like an incoming tide, moving higher and higher until even the summit sank into its depths for the night.

The summit was cold, dark and deadly.

The hepi were sleeping soundly; each had found a place to lie down before sunset, and since no other creatures would dare to venture so high in the dark, they had nothing to fear. They tended to grunt, chew, belch and pass gas while resting, and the random noises blended with the relentless whistle of the wind. It was an absurd symphony, but it served a purpose, because the sounds were like a map of the terrain; every hepi could tell where every other hepi was. Perhaps in ancient times, they would have been listening for a predator, but those times were long gone.

So they barely noticed when a new hepi suddenly appeared among them…

The summit of Qir’Qorit, Qir, the Outer Rim.

As soon as he was sure he wasn’t falling to his death, Luke Skywalker let out a huge sigh of relief.

He’d done it!

He’d folded space before many times, but never this far – and never this accurately. He’d arrived exactly where he hoped he would, on one of the narrow hepi trails, amid the herd itself. Aside from a few dull grunts, the hepi didn’t react to his presence at all.

Although he was wearing the hooded longcoat made of hepi wool that Pok’Tha had given him, Luke felt the stinging cold on his face immediately, and that motivated him to start moving. He couldn’t see the hepi, but he could hear them, and he could tell by the sound of every step if he was staying on the path or straying off it. It was impossibly slow going until Luke paused to get his bearings and saw a faint red flash coming from above.

Perimeter sensors.

It was a stroke of good luck, but not entirely; the sensor flashes marked where the summit topped off, pointing Luke towards his destination, but made getting there more difficult. The paranoia that compelled whoever was inside the ship up there to put sentry sensors in a place no one could reach would also compel them to set traps for anyone who did.

A loud snort told Luke he’d just passed too close to a slumbering hepi, but it only was warning, not a challenge. The animal sniffed, picked up the scent of Luke’s hepi wool longcoat, and went back to sleep.

So, it fools hepi, but will it fool the sensors?

Pok’Tha had bragged about the quality of his hepi wool; he even claimed the wool was a near perfect insulator, which meant the coat would make Luke virtually invisible to sensor sweeps looking
for heat traces. When the sensors picked him up, they would probably see him as nothing more than a wayward hepi, but ‘probably’ was not ‘certainly’. Since his plan depended on not being noticed before he wished to be, Luke reconsidered the situation before going any further. His logic was sound; even if they were paranoid enough to use perimeter sensors, they would be thinking group assault, not infiltration by one man acting alone. That was his advantage, but also his risk, because if he underestimated them, when he moved down onto the rock balcony where their ship was docked, they’d be ready and waiting.

I need a distraction…

He was thinking of possibilities when when he heard quiet clatter behind him, followed by a soft chorus of snorts. He turned and saw the hepi coming his way. They moved slowly, sleepily, but steadily forward and up until they surrounded him, then they stopped.

Luke didn’t know if they’d been aroused by his movement or the scent of the longcoat - or something else – but he welcomed their presence. He took a few steps forward, and the hepi moved with him. He took a few more steps, this time up, and the hepi came along. He repeated the pattern, steps sideways, then steps up, steering the little herd toward the rim and the perimeter sensors, but stopping a few meters away.

Then he waited.

One by one, the hepi folded their legs beneath them and sat down to chew and doze. As they did, Luke slowly moved closer to the rim and those sensors, imitating their swaying gait as best he could. Finally, he was close enough to see over the rim and down into the caldera below.

He was expecting to see the high balcony flooded with security lights, but it wasn’t; aside from running lights on the walkways he’d seen earlier, and night-lights illuminating the ship fore and aft, it was dark. The lights were not bright enough to cause contrast blindness, which meant that Luke could be spotted moving even while in shadow. The only place where he could count on contrast effect for cover was close to the ship’s entry, where light reflected up from the walkway below fell on the ship’s shiny hull, increasing the glare significantly.

Luke closed his eyes to focus; this would be a short, but difficult fold.

Between the walkway and the ship’s hull, touching neither, no alarms... right… There.

The hepi paid no attention.

Not far away, below, inside the TechnoUnion ship, two technicians were watching a monitor with minimal interest, when one of them noticed something unusual.

“Look,” he snickered, “Stupid animals; one just fell right off the mountain.”

“Where?” The other technician asked.

“Who knows?” The first replied. “There were eight; now there’s seven. No alerts, so it didn’t fall our way.”

“No barbecue again.” The other sighed jokingly. “Nothing to clean up, either.”

They shared the laugh; humor of any kind was a precious commodity on this assignment, even more precious than real meat. For a few minutes, they were able to forget where they were, and that was
just long enough for neither of them to notice a fleeting alert from one of entry sensors.
Luke was inside.

……..

In another part of the galaxy, break-time was over...

Stone meadow highlands, the Edge.

Left alone in the cockpit, Irno made good use of the privacy. Something he couldn't quite recall about the energy sinks kept nagging him, so he touched the waveform and started to search the design database for anything related to energy sinks. He looked at four files before he remembered. There was a tiny flaw in the design that could, in situations of extreme high energy transfer, cause the energy sink to fail. The flaw was determined to be 'insignificant' in ordinary use, so the problem was added to the bottom of a long list and forgotten. Now that one of the energy sinks was embedded in Ren's hand, the flaw had become *highly* significant and needed to be corrected as soon as possible, so Irno put the program to work on how to fix it.

While that was running, he amused himself by reading one of the database's updates and annotations, which had the intriguing title "Anomalies in Gossamer-Energy Sink Bonds", which turned out to also be *highly* significant when it came to Ren. 'For reasons not yet understood', the update stated, 'the energy sink generated tendrils that spread into the surrounding gossamer, then fused with it, fixing the energy sink permanently in place.' Irno was thinking of ways to tell Ren about that when he realized the agreed time to regroup had passed.

So he went to get them.

He didn’t care what they were doing, either; he simply went to the closed doors and pounded hard with his grip hand until someone on the other side of that door responded. He heard Dar Noaa grumble something from behind the first door, and he shouted at it. The message was short and to the point:

“Back to work!”

The response from behind the second door was slow in coming. When it finally did, Irno heard Rey’s voice faintly, but she wasn’t talking to him. After a few seconds of muffled conversation that Irno couldn’t hear clearly, he heard Rey again.

“On our way!”

With that mission accomplished, Irno went back to the cockpit and flopped into the same seat he’d been waiting in to wait some more. It wasn’t a long wait; it just felt that way because every second wasted mattered. Irno couldn’t comprehend why they didn’t understand that.

Dar Noaa and Leia arrived first. Irno saw the Sith look past him toward the waveform display, which was building a holographic image of recommended modifications to the energy sink module that was currently embedded in Ren’s left palm. Dar Noaa went straight to the waveform to examine it.

“What’s this?” He asked, but Irno was sure he already knew. His next words proved that. “I thought you were going to replace it outright?”
“I was thinking,” Irno stood up, next to him. “if I modify it in place, I can stabilize it and extend his… it’s… life long enough to perfect the next one.”

Dar Noaa glanced down at him.

“Really?” He asked.

Irno knew that tone well by now; it wasn’t a question at all. The Sith was getting much too good at reading between the lines.

“The thing is,” he said reluctantly, “I might not be able to get it out…”

He’d stopped because he saw Rey at the entry, with Ren right behind her. Without another word, he tapped the waveform and killed the display. Dar Noaa made no attempt to stop him, and said nothing, but Ren had to have seen it, and Irno had no wish to waste any time on Item Two when Item One was unresolved. He moved past Dar Noaa to intercept Ren before he arrived, placing himself between Ren and the waveform.

Ren looked own at him suspiciously.

“What was that about?” he asked.

“*This*,” Irno lied, extending a fisted tech hand, then opening the palm to show everyone the resonator he’d put in his pocket back at the now-vaporized workshop, “needs to be out *there*…” he closed his fist again, then extended one finger to point toward the corridor. “… installed. Now.”

“I know that.”

“Then get on with it; we can talk about everything else later. Someplace else. *Anyplace* else.”

Ren glanced at Dar Noaa, who said nothing, then at Leia.

“He’s afraid the Kourin are coming.” She said.

“I don’t believe,” Ren replied, “they’re very eager to do that right now.”

“And *I* don’t believe,” Irno countered; there was fear in his voice, “that you understand what’s at stake here - they *want* you! The instant they realize we’re trying to leave, they’ll come – for *you*!” He put out his grip hand, reaching for Ren’s, but stopped himself half-way. “And I don’t know what they’ll come *with*.”

“You worry too much.” Ren said.

“You worry too *little*.” Irno replied.

The urgency in Irno’s tone was also written on his face, and Ren felt sorry for him. The Kourin had no idea who he was talking to, but that wasn’t his fault; his understanding of the Force was limited to tangible things like resonators and energy sinks.

“You,” he said calmly, “underestimate the power of the Force.”

“No, I *don’t*.” Irno replied with a sharpness that surprised everyone. “And neither do *they* - so get out there and lift the cluster so we can get out of here.”

Ren looked up and behind him at Dar Noaa, seeking guidance. The Sith’s silent gesture of approval was enough to make him turn around hand head back to the corridor. As he passed by his mother, he
gave her a little grin.

That’s when Leia saw it. Something had changed.

She could see it in his face; she could *feel* it. It was more than the patience he had with Irno, more than the respect he’d just shown Dar Noaa, more than the way he looked at Rey - and the way he’d just looked at her.

*I’ve missed that face so much!*

Memories long-suppressed in a futile attempt to accept the loss of her son burst from their prison, flooding her mind.

*Ben…*

A sudden tussle behind her broke the spell; Irno pushed Rey aside to follow Ren, but she let him go ahead of her without protest. And before she left, Rey gave Leia a look that proclaimed she had something to tell her.

Something good.

It would have to wait, though. As soon as she was sure Rey was out of earshot, Leia went to the waveform and Dar Noaa, who looked as if he already knew what he was about to hear.

“Tell me,” she said, “what did Irno mean by ‘extend *his* life’?”

……..

In another part of the galaxy, it was cold, quiet and dark…

The summit of Qir’Qorit, Qir, The Outer Rim.

Like an empty theater, the high balcony inside the caldera was deathly still. The lights of the TechnoUnion ship on the walkways played with the darkness, casting long shadows against the rock, creating eerie illusions. Confusing distortions in depth and dimension on all sides made it as treacherous as it was terrifying. Nothing was as it seemed…

Luke was inside the ship.

It was one of the shortest folds he’d ever attempted, just enough to get himself to the other side of the ship’s entry door, but since had no idea how thick that door was, his safe arrival was the result of a good estimate and luck. He landed so close to the inside of the door that when he took a step forward, he felt a tug from behind. A quick look revealed that the last few centimeters of the longcoat had not cleared the door, and were now solidly embedded in it. No alarm had sounded, though, and Luke wanted it to stay that way, so he eased himself out of it carefully and left it behind.

He moved along the corridor, passing closed doors on both sides. Behind those doors, Luke sensed quiet activity; they were all asleep. If they were lucky, they would remain that way long enough for him to do what he’d come for and leave. If they were unlucky, they would wake and interfere, then die. The forward door was another matter; Luke knew the watch would be on the other side of that door, fully awake and certain to interfere. Their deaths were unavoidable. He would start there, then
work his way back, door by door, until he found the Technology Guild agent in charge.

He was reaching out to open that door when another door slid open. The room beyond the open door was softly illuminated, and Luke could see someone standing there.

“This way, Master Jedi,” the voice he could never forget beckoned, “I’m right here; waiting for you.”

It was *Likit*.

Luke reacted without thinking; he never imagined that the black heart behind this nightmare would dare to get *personally* involved in the butchery, and show up out here on the Rim, sparing Luke the trip to Coruscant to find him! The shadowy figure stood motionless, cold, aloof and unafraid, silently taunting Luke by its posture alone. Here was the cause of the horrors he’d seen and the horrors he’d *done* because of it…

Luke walked straight to the open door, then through it, with only that thought in mind; it wasn’t until he heard the sound of the door sliding shut behind him that he recognized the obvious.

This was a trap.

……

Far below, inside the Millennium Falcon, a different discovery was being made.

The Falcon’s vintage proximity alert system was not the best, but it had one redeeming quality; instead of being confined to the cockpit, the alarm was wired throughout the entire ship. Han Solo made the modifications long ago, right after he and Chewbacca were almost killed by raiders when they failed to hear an alert because they were both working at the far end of the ship.

Chewbacca wasn’t in the cockpit when the alert sounded; he’d taken refuge from his distress over Luke’s departure at the Dejarik table, but single player mode failed to comfort him because, after so many years, the Wookie knew every move the game would make in advance. And every time one game-piece defeated another, he thought about Luke. Dejarik didn’t celebrate life; it celebrated the grim reality that, sooner or later, life *ends*.

*First Han, then Maz, and now…*

Suddenly the proximity alert howled, startling Chewbacca, rescuing him from finishing that thought. Forgetting the game, he slid out of the seat and hurried to the cockpit. The display there had already identified the intruder, and was tracking its course.

*Shuttle… Republic registry… coming directly at us…*

Chewbacca didn’t know what it meant; friends out here would be welcome, but why weren’t they sending a recognition message? He asked himself what would Han say if he was here.

*A little paranoia goes a long way’…*

And he’d be right.

There was no time to waste; the approaching ship would be arriving in minutes, so until Chewbacca knew they were friends, he’d prepare for enemies. He brought the keel cannon on line, instructed it to load the explosive ammo, then prime the charges. Then he sounded the Falcon’s outside alarm to alert Pok’Tha’s family, who knew it, that there was trouble. And then he tapped the interior alarm to
wake Laci and summon the droids.

And then he headed for the communal space, grabbing up his bowcaster on the way.

R2D2 and BB8 were first to appear, but they required no explanation. Although they were generations apart, both droids had the same program priorities, and both had already detected the problem. Threepio shuffled in next, alert but completely ignorant of the situation beyond knowing he’d been summoned.

Laci arrived last, looking disheveled, but wide awake. When the alarm jolted her out of a pleasant dream, the first thing she thought was to wake Luke, but he wasn’t there.

He wasn’t in the communal room, either.


“Gone.” Chewbacca signed.

“Gone?” Laci asked. “Gone where?”

When the Wookie didn’t answer, she walked to him, then stood there looking up at him, waiting for an answer. He lowered his eyes, avoiding hers.

“Chewie, where did Luke *go*?”

Before he could answer, Chewbacca heard Thia on the ramp; the claws on the Qiri’s bare feet clacked loudly on the metal as she raced up it. A few seconds later, Thia came rushing into view, fur bristling and out of breath.

“I’m here,” she panted, “what’s wrong?”

“Someone’s coming,” Chewbacca told her, “could be trouble; take your young and find a place to hide until we know it’s safe.”

“But...”

“Go now, my friend. Please.”

Thia whistled softly, then departed as quickly as she’d come, leaving Chewbacca to face Laci and answer her question.

……

Far above, inside the TechnoUnion ship, a confrontation had begun.

As he strode toward Likit, Luke sensed two things: Likit was alone in the room and there was a disturbance in the Force here. Likit was standing behind a polished desk in a dark tailored robe, partially blocking the view of a large polished slice of stone mounted on the wall behind him. The swirling pattern in the stone asked for Luke’s attention, then demanded it.

He slowed, then stopped.

*Kyber? Yes... *metamorphic* Kyber... massive... impure... useless, but beautiful...*
“Luke Skywalker,” Likit addressed him, “come to me at last. I’ve gone to great lengths to get your attention; further than I intended to go, but now that you’re here, perhaps we can come to an understanding.”

Luke didn’t answer him; if Likit expected to make a deal now, he’d have to be an idiot, which he wasn’t. If this was a trap, which Luke was sure it was, silence might bait him into revealing it.

“But first, I must apologize,” Likit said, “for underestimating your counter to my first offer. You’ve earned my respect, and I don’t bestow that lightly.”

Luke remained silent; his eyes were locked on Likit’s, but his face showed no trace of the suppressed rage inside. Likit was confident, not the least bit afraid, when he should be both; more evidence of the trap not yet sprung.

“I can see,” Likit said, “that you are not yet ready to be reasonable, so I’ll get straight to the point: the prototype. I *must* have it.” He ventured forward a step, coming closer to Luke. “My Guild has grown impatient; this project is draining our treasury faster than we can refill it. My position, my property and wealth – even my life – depend on producing *results*.,” He stepped backwards, returning to the spot he’d been before. “So, you see, I have no choice about this...”

Luke heard a low hum; it grew louder, flooding into his ears, then into his head. He winced in pain and reached out to defend himself, but nothing happened.

“Nothing at all.

“What you’re experiencing,” Likit told him, “is a Force cage. It’s just an electromagnetic field being channeled through that beautiful slab of Kyber behind me. Married to the right technology, it’s as potent as pure crystal, and when energized, it automatically seeks out a compatible target. In this case, that’s you.”

Luke could himself being engulfed by invisible energy.

“Oh, a word of advice,” Likit added, “there’s a slight feedback issue with it; the more you resist, the denser the field becomes. Eventually, it solidifies and then, well... I imagine you can see how it ends. You should be feeling it by now; soon you won’t be able to move, and then, you won’t be able to breathe.”

Luke could feel the pressure rising all around him.

“One last chance,” Likit said, “all you have to do is tell me where your sister and the Sith are; we’ll take care of the rest. I promise I’ll do everything possible to spare her, and I can guarantee both of you a comfortable life under our protection. But you must do it *now*, Luke - while you can still talk.”

Luke answered with a look of pure contempt.

“Unfortunate,” Likit said, “but not unexpected. I know you don’t care what I do to you as long as your *sister* is safe; that’s why, right now, my agents are collecting up the rest of your companions. I’m sure with the proper ‘encouragement’, one of them will make the right choice.”

Luke felt his arms going stiff.

This was the end, playing out like a hideous practical joke, just when he’d found a reason to live. There was nothing to do, except warn Leia if he could. He didn’t know if his message would even make it through, but he had to try.
Leia, hear me…

........

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

I can hardly believe it - I'm running out of time!!
Chapter Notes

Correction: in my haste to beat TLJ, I had a brain fart, and screwed up a small but important fact. Last chapter: Pok’Tha was at Line’s End with Poe, Finn and Dar Na, so he couldn’t be at the farm. It was supposed to be *Thia* who heard the alarm and hid with her children! It’s fixed now, but some of you read it before I discovered the error. Sorry about that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Run’numble valley, near Qir’Qorit, Qir, the Outer Rim.

Chewbacca was ready.

He’d done everything he could, except fire up the Falcon and try to flee. That was his first choice, but he couldn’t pilot and fight at the same time and neither the droids or Laci could be much help. He still had no idea of the approaching shuttle’s intentions, but he knew it was able to blast him them out of the sky if they ran. But the keel cannon was hot and aimed at the barn wall for a last-minute departure; the plan was to let the shuttle land and deploy first because that could buy precious seconds for their escape.

Now Chewbacca was at the barn entry, bowcaster charged, watching the shuttle’s slow descent. The ship’s underbelly floodlights came on, proving their intention to land, and he could hear the hiss of its air thrusters working hard.

He’d left R2D2 in the Falcon cockpit, connected to the ship’s system, because the little droid understood the situation and would fire the keel cannon on the Wookie’s signal. He assigned Threepio to man the entry and ramp, so it would already be retracting for launch when, if, they came running back.

BB8 and Laci were with him at the barn door.

Their instructions were simple. As soon as the shuttle touched ground, BB8 would roll out on reconnaissance, getting close enough to send a live image back to the viewer in Chewbacca’s hand. He was not to engage, only observe. He’d given Laci a blaster, told her she was ‘backup’ and not to fire until he told her to and then aim at the shuttle. Odds were, she wouldn’t hit anything, but wild blaster flashes might make their unknown guests think there were more than two defenders in action.

The shuttle landed; settling into the tiny dust-storm made by its thrusters, it vanished in the dark for a few seconds, then confirmed its arrival with a loud thump. While the dust was still settling, BB8 sped toward it, making use of the cover to roll in close, then stop to let the dust disguise it. Covered with dust, it’s composite shell would scan as just another rock in the stoney field.

The hiss from the shuttle fell silent.

A few seconds passed before a side entry opened and BB8 saw beings step out, one at a time. The
glare coming from lights inside the shuttle reduced them to shadows, but BB8 counted six and transmitted the image back to Chewbacca. The Wookie wasn’t sure what he was seeing, but he did see that some of them were carrying heavy loads that he was certain were assault weapons.

He signaled BB8 to withdrawal and come back as fast as it could. The little droid shot from his hiding place in the brush instantly drawing attention; weapons swung into position and lights followed as it raced away from them toward the barn.

Chewbacca raised his bowcaster and took aim, but hesitated because none of the invaders had fired a weapon; they were simply walking quickly, following its path. If he waited a few more seconds, they would all be in range…

Laci was behind him, holding the blaster correctly, but her eyes closed tight. She only opened them when she heard the whoosh of BB8 rolling past her into the barn, looking first at BB8, then out into the night. They were getting close now, and she was able to see their silhouettes against the light from the shuttle.

“Chewie!” She whispered, “*Wait!*”

The Wookie growled back at her.

“I think that’s Dar Na… and Finn… and Poe! *Look*!”

Chewbacca didn’t have to look; his nose was already telling him that Laci was right. It was them, but there were three others – three others with weapons - right behind them. Three was easier than six, but he wasn’t sure if he could take them down without hitting Poe, Finn or Dar Na in the process.

BB8, who had taken position behind Laci, heard what was said and quickly scanned the approaching group, seeking confirmation. A millisecond later, the droid shot past Laci, then Chewbacca, heading back to intercept them, beeping and chirping loudly as it went.

“BB8!” It was Poe’s voice. “Tell Chewy not to shoot – it’s *us*!”

Laci gasped with relief, but Chewbacca didn’t lower his weapon, not even when he saw their faces at the barn door.

……..

In another part of the galaxy, at the Edge, in the stone meadow, Item One was being addressed.

The floor plates were out, the Kyber crystal cluster was unlocked and Ren was just starting to lift it when he felt a great disturbance in the Force.

“Leia, hear me...”

_Uncle Luke… *Mother*!”

His concentration was instantly broken, and the Kyber crystal cluster slid back into the container cavity, barely missing Irno’s face as it fell.

“Hey!” Irno shouted, “Watch what you’re doing – you almost *killed* me!”

Ignoring him, Ren turned and raced to the cockpit, where he’d left the General with Dar Noaa. When he arrived, he saw the Sith holding her in his arms, supporting her. Her eyes were closed and
she was trembling badly.

“Mother!”

He raced forward, reaching out as he came.

When he got to her, he pulled her from Dar Noaa’s arms and gently set her down into one of the seats.

“Mother?” Ren squatted in front of of her, then took hold of her hands. “Can you hear me?”

Still trembling, Leia opened her eyes to look into his.

“Ben…”

“Uncle Luke - what did he say?”

“He said,” Leia’s tone was detached, as if she was completely dazed, “He’s trapped... a high place... on Qir... we should move on...” she shook her head a little to clear it “… and never look back.”

Ren turned his head, then looked up at Dar Noaa.

“I heard him, too, at first,” he told the Sith, “then he faded.”

“Something interfered,” Dar Noaa replied, “but your mother held on.”

“Move on’; ‘never look back’.” Ren said. “That was intended for you, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

Irno and Rey arrived in time to see and hear everything.

Rey went directly to where Ren and the General were; Ren was completely focused on his mother, so she said nothing. The expression on his face when he looked up at her confirmed the anguish she was sensing.

“He said *he* was trapped,” he told her, “not ‘we’; he must have been separated from the others.”

“What about Finn?” Rey asked. “He’s all right, I can feel it. *Find* him!”

Ren closed his eyes, seeking; seeing without looking.

Uncle Luke... the high place... below... not far away... Finn.

Finn!

The effort fell flat. Finn’s hatred was an impenetrable wall; an unexpected side effect of giving Finn so much of himself. The power he installed in Finn to protect those he loved was locking him out!

He groaned aloud in frustration.

“What’s wrong?” Rey asked.

“He won’t talk to me.”

She dropped down beside him, sliding her hand down his arm as she went, until it reached his.
“But,” she gripped his hand earnestly, “he’ll talk to *me*.”

……..

In another part of the galaxy, there was good news and bad news...

Run’numble Valley, near Qir’Qorit, Qir, the Outer Rim.

Poe, Finn and Dar Na arrived at the barn door together.

“Pok’Tha told us,” Poe slowed to look at Chewbacca, but didn’t stop walking, “what Luke was planning to do; where is he?”

“He’s *gone*.” Laci answered from her spot behind the Wookie.

That stopped all three of them.

“He didn’t tell you, either,” Poe couldn’t see Laci’s face well in the darkened barn, but the sound of her voice told him how distressed she was, “did he?”

“No.”

“How long ago?”

“Chewy says he left not long after you did.”

“Dammit!”

Finn’s hands became fists, and Dar Na muttered something in Sith. Poe turned around to face the three strangers that had arrived right behind him.

“We’re too late.”

“I am truly sorry,” one of them replied, “to hear that.”

Aiming his bowcaster directly at the speaker, Chewbacca growled out a loud and threatening stream of sounds that nobody understood except the one it had been directed at. He came forward to stand beside Poe.

“Major Day,” he lowered his weapon to his side as he introduced himself, “Special Operations, Coruscant Tactical.”

The Wookie replied with a vicious roar. He was no stranger to CT; he and Han Solo had tangled with them more times than he cared to remember.

“*Relax!*” Finn stepped between them, raising his hands. “They’re on *our* side!”

Chewbacca let out a skeptical snort.

“It’s *true*!” Poe assured him. “Commander Lexde sent them to find us; but that’s not all...”

“The Galactic Federation of Guilds,” Day took over the conversation, “knows what’s happening here; and they know about the Tech Guild’s involvement in it. Chaos on the Rim is *bad* for business; they want it stopped...”
Finn was trying to pay attention; a lifetime of training as a Stormtrooper had not prepared him for this. When Pok’Tha told them that Luke sent them away so he could go up the mountain *alone*, Finn was so shocked that he exploded into violence, and it took both Poe and Dar Na to hold him back long enough to regain control of himself. Then Major Day offered the shuttle to get back fast enough to intercept Luke, and he grabbed the possibility, then held on tight. Now that hope lay crushed at his feet, and he lowered his head, sinking into a whirlpool of useless grief and rage.

So what happened next caught him completely off-guard.

**Finn!**

It was Rey’s voice, loud and clear, as if she was standing right *next* to him! And there was someone with her, quietly pushing something into his head. It was less than a whisper, but suddenly Finn knew exactly what to do...

**Rey.**

- **Luke needs you!**

- **Where?**

- **A high place… do you know what that means?**

  **Yes!**

- **Hurry!**

A surge of power rocketed into Finn’s brain, pouring into every cell, drowning his grief and turning his anger into determination. He had what he needed, and the words came without thought.

“Luke needs us.”

The sound of his voice seemed to stop everything; he raised his head to look.

“What did you say?” Poe asked weakly.


Chewbacca howled, then turned and quickly headed for the Falcon’s ramp. The others followed.

“Wait!” Day shouted. “You can’t go up there in *that*! They’ll blast you the instant they see you coming!”

Chewbacca paused, but only long enough to look back.

“*Listen* to me!” Day persisted. “Right now, up there, inside that volcano,” he looked up at the barn roof as if it was transparent and he could see the mountain beyond, “a maniac named Ronjir Likit is waiting for *us* to deliver your young friends any time now - *Let. Us. Do. It*!”

Finn, Poe and Dar Na stopped instantly. Laci looked back, saw them, then stopped, too.

When he realized they were no longer following him, Chewbacca stopped.

He turned around to see Finn, Poe and Dar Na going back to Day - with Laci tagging behind.
In another part of the galaxy, it only took four words for Leia Organa to regain her composure.

Stone meadow highlands, the Edge.

“Finn’s on his way.”

Hearing her son say that electrified her, sparking her mind out of the shadows. She realized that it wasn’t Luke’s words that overwhelmed her, it was the wave of emotion that brought them.

*Love... sorrow... regret... and... *surrender*???

The word 'surrender' was *not* in her vocabulary, and she rejected it instantly. Her brother was a *Skywalker* - and Skywalkers were fighters!

*No. You. Don’t!*

Ren sensed the surge of energy rising in his mother, and suddenly he was a child again, watching her in wide-eyed wonder. He reached out, offering his power.

Leia took it.

Closing her eyes, she answered her brother’s call; the message would be swift and hard, like a smack on his head:

**Rule Number one: Don’t Die!**

In another part of the galaxy, time was passing painfully slow.

The summit of Qir’Qorit, Qir, the Outer Rim.

Ronjir Likit was an impatient man. He’d remained standing as a sign of respect to the dying Jedi, but it was taking much too long and he was growing bored. He checked the monitor on the control in his hand one more time and was dismayed to see that it was still picking up signs of life inside the Force cage. That was extremely annoying, because the designers assured him the Jedi’s death would be both painless *and* quick. Likit had confidence in his technicians, though, and the Force cage was not perfect; perhaps the monitor was picking up residuals or random particle collisions or something like that.

He moved as close as he dared to the containment field to have a look.

The Jedi was stiff, motionless; if there was any life left in the old man, it wouldn’t last much longer. For a moment, Likit regretted the loss; Luke Skywalker was the last of his kind; he would have been a *huge* asset…

The sound of an unseen comlink chiming rescued him from sentimentality and he went his desk to respond.

“Yes,” he tossed the Force cage control onto the smooth desktop and watched it slide away, “what is
“Director? Sir...” a nervous voice replied, “... you wanted to be notified when the Outbound shuttle returned; they’re on final approach - with the items you requested.”

“*Excellent*. I’ll be meeting them. Have an escort team at the pad; at least six.”

“Yes, Director.”

As he tapped the comlink to end the conversation, Likit found himself looking at the Force cage and the Jedi again.

“Did you hear?” He mocked it. “I *have* them; soon I will have your sister, too. And there is nothing you can do about it.” He paused to relish his success before continuing. “You’ll have to excuse me now; I’m going to meet them *personally*.”

And with that, he left the room.

His departure was barely noticed; Luke was deep in meditation, floating in silence.

*It’s curiously peaceful here…*

**- Rule Number One: Don’t Die!**

*Leia*…!

Luke didn’t know if it was real or just the fantasy of a dying man, but her presence was *blazing* inside his head, filling him with light. Her words were a storm surge, riding high on the crest of incredible power, penetrating the Force cage effortlessly. She’d never been this powerful before.

He thought if he’d been able to reach her, and she was able to answer, he’d hear something like “I love you” or “Goodbye”; not *this*.

He’d told her that he’d been trapped on Qir, that she and Dar Noaa should abandon the meadow, ‘move on - and never look back’. Even if Leia refused to understand what that meant, Dar Noaa would, and Luke could rely on the Sith to take her to safety. The irony in that was not lost on Luke; the last ‘Lord’ of the Sith, a species that Luke had helped drive to extinction, was now the one being he was depending on to save what remained of his family. Leia’s words were familiar; Dar Noaa said the exact same thing to him that night at Maz Katana’s place, when the two of them first became allies in the war to save the galaxy:

*“Rule Number One: Don’t Die.”*

Now Luke had *two* voices in his head; both urging him to live.

The Force cage pressing down on him, growing stronger every time he tried to resist it, had quickly exhausted him, so he’d retreated, going deep into himself, choosing the serenity of meditation over the horror of a futile struggle. As he did, the energy field reacted; its brutal grip paused, then relaxed ever so slightly.

The relief was infinitesimal, but *real*, which was probably why Luke was still alive.

**- Ben is here with me. Where are you?**
That explained it; Ren was with Leia, using his power to amplify hers. Now, at the end, it was comforting to hear her, comforting to know that 'Ben' was at her side. And he could talk to them for as long as he lasted...

The top of a mountain.

- Qir’Qorit?

How did you know?

- Finn told us. *Hold on*! He’s coming for you.

Leia’s words were a shock; when Likit said he ‘had them’, he sounded completely confident. He said he was going to meet them ‘personally’. There was a piece of the puzzle missing, but Luke knew if Leia said Finn was coming *for* him, then Finn was no captive!

*But Likit doesn’t know *that*…*

The thought plunged into the lifeless pool of Luke’s meditative state. Ripples spread through his consciousness; possibilities began to swirl in his mind, drawing him up and away from the depths of despair. Then something surfaced and demanded his immediate attention.

*Something’s… *twitching*.*

He roused himself slowly, carefully, measuring his growing awareness against the Force cage’s reaction. The energy pulsed slightly, then ebbed back to its previous level, costing Luke a few seconds of pain but gaining him consciousness.

*Twitching… right arm… my *hand*!!!*

He couldn't move his head to look, but he definitely felt the fingers of the mechanical hand they’d given him on the Resistance transport slapping against his thigh. The medical team there had improvised the prosthetic using obsolete components of dense, forged metal that made it so heavy Luke was still exercising it to build strength.

It was an *antique*, made to match its owner.

*Maybe…*

If Likit’s technology was designed specifically for Luke Skywalker, flesh and blood - and nothing else - it *was* possible; the energy field was indifferent to the lightsaber hanging from his belt a few millimeters above his hand; if it was indifferent to his hand as well...

*Try*!

It required concentration and absolute calm; Luke focused, then attempted to raise his right shoulder a tiny bit, just enough to see if he could do it.

His shoulder moved.

A jolt of pain as the energy reacted; Luke remained calm. The energy field ebbed.

A few seconds passed, then Luke tried again, and succeeded again, pulling his shoulder and the arm attached to it higher. Another jolt of pain, then the energy field ebbed. Again and again, Luke made his move, until he felt the wrist of his metal hand tap the hilt of his lightsaber.
Hand to the hilt...

One more pull, one more jolt of pain, but his hand was where he wanted it. The twitching fingers seemed to glide around the hilt on their own to find the switch. Luke had no idea what igniting a lightsaber inside a Force cage would do, but he was about to find out.

Now, *press*...

.....

To be continued..

Chapter End Notes

I told my self the thing to do was bare-bones the rest of this story, just to get done before TLJ opens; but for reasons I will explain sometime later, I've changed my mind. For what it's worth right now, these stories *matter* to me; it's been a real lesson in the joys and pains of putting myself out here, promising you a story that I believe was worth your time, then sticking with it even though it never got 'popular'. I still think I can get to a good stopping point *before* TLJ, but *only* if I can do it without breaking my promise to you - and myself. Episode 8 is almost here, and I always knew I had to hand Star Wars back to Disney when the time came. I understand if TLJ gives us what we've hoped for, your interest might naturally move on, and I thank you all for sailing with me.

And yet, there are so many "Loose Ends"... ;-)
It was dark, cold and quiet. No clouds blocked the sky; not even the night wind dared to tease the mountain. The air was still and the night sky was ablaze with stars and nebulae.

The mountain had waited a long time for this...

The summit of Qir’Qorit, Qir, the Outer Rim.

“Republic shuttle,” the voice coming from the comlink was difficult to make out because of static interference, “Welcome back. Release the controls so we can guide you in.”

“Releasing...” Kaydel replied, “… now.”

She watched the display switch over to remote, then slumped back against her seat heavily.

“So far,” she said, “so good.”

“Is it just me,” Vix asked “or is it cold in here?”

“Don’t ask me,” Kaydel answered, “right now, I’m too numb to feel anything.”

“Yeah… I know.”

They sighed simultaneously; everything happened so fast that neither of them had time to do anything besides follow the stream of orders coming from the back. The team’s attempt to intercept Luke Skywalker had failed, and even as they were returning to the shuttle, Major Day was shouting the order for immediate launch over the comlink. By the time Kaydel primed the engines, initiated the launch sequence and activated the navigational system, the landing party was inside and ready to go. The Major gave the command, and Kaydel had been busy since. Now that the TechnoUnion ship had control, all she could do was monitor their progress and watch for trouble.

This was the first time she ever resented being a pilot; everything that *mattered* was in the back.

Back there, Poe Dameron, Finn and the Sith were getting the details of why CT Special Ops had come after them. The Major’s explanation during the ride back to the ship from the trade market had been nothing more than repeated assurances that ‘nobody is a prisoner’ and more would come once they were airborne. And once they were airborne, the Major said “Take us back to the mountain”, which meant Kaydel would be confined to the cockpit for the duration.

Kaydel knew what would happen when they got there, but that didn’t frighten her as much as she’d always imagined it would. She was ready to fight, and ready to fall, if it came to that. It was what could happen afterwards when – and if – they made it back to the Outbound that was eating away at her. Poe was in no danger; he was officially listed as an ‘abduction’, but Finn was listed as ‘wanted for questioning’, and word around the ship was that he was a First Order infiltrator and everyone knew what happened to spies.

Then there was the Sith; his connection to General Leia’s abduction was obvious, so he would most
likely be handed over to CT for interrogation. He didn’t look like he’d be easy to break, if he could be broken at all, and either way, the outcome would be the same; he’d vanish without a trace…

“Lieutenant?” Vix’s voice cut into her thoughts. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she replied, “why are you asking?”

“You just looked a little... sad.”

“I’m fine,” Kaydel replied, then added, “keep your mind on the mission.”

Vix frowned and turned his attention back to the controls. Kaydel stared at him for a few seconds, then did the same thing, silently repeating that advice to herself until something in the navigation display caught her attention.

The image was flickering.

At first, Kaydel thought she was seeing things; stress and fatigue could cause perceptual problems, and she had no shortage of either right now, so she leaned forward to get a closer look. The little red square in the center of the image that marked their destination was causing the effect. Kaydel had never seen a display malfunction like this before; it came and went at regular intervals, turning the red square in a tiny beating heart. The comlink was silent and no systems alerts to be seen anywhere, so there was no reason for the hair on her arms to be standing on end.

But it was.

Back in the cargo compartment, Poe, Finn and Dar Na were watching the CT team prepare with agitated interest. So far, they’d been an audience only, and as every minute ticked by, they were becoming more assertive, paying attention, moving closer to look at every piece of equipment pulled out of those unmarked black bags.

“Look,” Poe whispered, “MT4400’s *and* FO90’s; we asked for the 90’s, but they told us they weren’t ready yet.”

“FO90’s are *never* ready,” Finn grumbled, “One in twenty will overheat before you’ve spent ten thousand rounds; and one in fifty of them will *explode*.”

Although he’d kept his voice low, Finn’s comment was overheard by Major Day, who went to one of the black bags, reached in, then pulled out one of the FO90’s. He walked to Finn, stood in front of him and held the weapon out. Finn’s reaction was automatic; placing his hands on the weapon just outside of Day’s, he pulled the weapon from the Major’s hands, held it up and proceeded to inspect it.

“FO90,” he recited, “explosive caps; four internal cartridges, two thousand rounds each.” He opened the stock to confirm that it was loaded, then closed it again. Then he raised the weapon and looked through the range-finder at the Major. “Range: 2400 meters; accuracy… well, just keep firing ‘til you hit something.”

Day laughed.

“You’re too smart to be a stormtrooper,” he said, “if you make it off the mountain, I might have a place for you.”
“My place,” Finn replied, “is with the Resistance.”

“We’ll see about that.” Day said, then turned his attention to Poe. “I’ve been told you can be trusted, is that true?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Go take what you want.”

Poe nodded, then went to see what was left in the packs. Crossing his arms, Day took a long look at Dar Na.

“*You*, on the other hand,” he told the Sith, “are another story. What are you good for?”

The young Sith considered the question before he answered it.

“I am the darkness.” He said calmly. “Return my blades and you will see.”

Now it was Day’s turn to consider; he glanced at Finn with with a puzzled expression on his face.

“He’s best on his own, sir,” Finn translated Dar Na's words into something more practical. “He knows what to do.”

Day stared at Dar Na for a few seconds and must have seen what he wanted to see, because he turned and motioned to one of his agents, who retrieved Dar Na’s blades from one of the packs and brought them back to Day.

“Here.” Day handed them out to Dar Na. “*Don’t* disappoint me.”

The threat in Day’s words was something that Dar Na both understood and respected, so he didn’t reply. Instead, he turned, went to a seat, then sat down to check and prepare his property. Day turned back to Finn again.

“If he disappoints me,” the Major told him, “I shoot *you* first.”

“Understood.” Finn replied.

With that, Day turned to go back to oversee his agents’ preparations. Finn watched him go, knowing that he meant every word.

……

In the valley below, the waiting had begun.

Laci trudged back to the Chewbacca like a child who’d been kicked out of a party; she’d followed the others without hesitation, only to be turned away at the shuttle’s entry. Their rejection was logical; with no combat skills whatsoever, all she would do at *this* party was get in the way. Poe had softened the blow by reminding her how much ‘they’ would need her when ‘they’ came back to the Falcon, so she didn’t protest.

Chewbacca was just inside the barn door, waiting for her; Laci patted one of his arms as she passed, but didn’t stop.
As he watched her cross the shadows, into the light of the Falcon’s ramp, the Wookie’s heart ached for her.

*Now comes the waiting, if Luke doesn’t… the data cartridge!*

In all the confusion, he’d totally forgotten about it! So now, instead of being in Poe’s possession as Luke requested, it was still in his bandoleer pouch. Chewbacca zipped the pouch open, took the cartridge out and looked down at it regretfully.

*Give this back to Luke; he can give it to Poe himself. He thought. And if they don’t return…*

Chewbacca looked up at the mountain; whatever was happening up there was out of his sight now.

And out of his hands, too.

He tucked the data cartridge back into the pouch and went to see if Laci needed any help.

…..

High above, inside the caldera, aboard the TechnoUnion ship, the night watch was busy.

There was nothing unusual about sending an escort squad to meet an inbound vessel; the contractors on this assignment were the kind that required constant reminders of where they were and who they were dealing with. Once notified, the escort would assemble itself, and since this was one of those rare times when the Director would be out there, they would automatically use special precautions. That was a good thing, because at the moment, the watch had its hands full - something was causing havoc with the ship’s master system.

Transient events that didn’t trigger alerts were affecting everything from the generators to the waste converters to stall, then restart, over and over; even the navigation display was acting up.

And no one could figure out why.

…. Not far away, the reason why had come to the moment of truth.

*Now, *press*…*

The brilliant green plasma blade of Luke’s lightsaber hissed as it glided up from the hilt; forming perfectly from base to tip, it passed through the energy field of the Force cage like it wasn’t even there. That was a relief, because Luke had been anticipating something explosive and painful. He was still tightly encased in the field, so his first efforts to use it were small moves that got him nowhere at all. Then he tried making little circles, each larger than the one before, as if he was cutting a hole in the energy field.

And *that* worked.

Two things happened right away; first, Luke felt the field weaken, then withdrawal, giving him a little space to move and second, he saw that the field was changing. Luke watched intently, then realized what he was seeing: the Force cage was blind to his lightsaber, but *not* to the hole he was making with it; the technology behind it was trying to close what it interpreted as a fault in the energy field - and it was failing.
Luke worked faster, making larger circles; the energy field weakened even more as the Force cage diverted more and more energy to closing the hole. He was gaining space with every stroke. If he was lucky, the hole would soon be large enough to attempt a dive through.

If he was *very* lucky, he might actually make it…

…..

Not far away, Likit was busy giving the escort squad directions.

“There are three high-priority prisoners arriving here in the next few moments.” He informed them. “One is Sith; we know nothing about him, so watch him closely. The other two won’t give you any trouble.” He paused, then checked to be sure they were paying attention. “They are *extremely* valuable; handle them with care. Is that understood?”

Six voices replied in unism.

“Yes, Director.”

“Bruises, broken bones, and the like,” Likit continued, “if necessary, are acceptable, but they are no good to me *dead*. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Director.”

Satisfied that he’d said enough and already imagining the most expedient ways to ‘persuade’ these new assets to cooperate, Likit fell silent. The escort squad resisted the urge to look when they heard his hands sliding against one another and stood like statues, waiting for the order.

Then it came.

“We will proceed now.”

…..

Outside and above, the Outbound shuttle was about to land.

Kaydel’s jaw ached; so did her fingers. A blind approach like this one would’ve been stressful even under ideal conditions, but doing it with both guidance *and* the comlink misbehaving, it was unnerving. Despite the problems, the TechnoUnion ship site refused her request for an actual beacon, a light she could see, saying that they had everything under control and no lights were required. That resulted in the white-knuckled attention and clenched teeth that she was paying for now.

As soon as she felt the thump of the shuttle touching down, Kaydel left her seat, went directly to the cockpit entry and opened it. She caught her breath when she saw that Poe, Finn and Dar Na were positioned in the middle of the *heavily* armed team – with their hands behind their backs!

“Major?” She kept walking toward them as she spoke, trying hard not to give herself away, “What…”

“It’s not what it looks like, Lieutenant.”

Slowing a little bit, Kaydel looked again. Her comrades and the Sith didn’t didn’t look upset or angry, instead their faces showed the same tense, excited anticipation she’d seen so many times since she’d joined the resistance. They weren’t going out there as prisoners – they were going out there to
“Yes, sir.” She said. “What about us?”

The question was merely for confirmation; Kaydel already knew what was expected of her. Success or failure, this mission would require a 'crash' launch; off and up, suicidal speed and angle, hence the name. She’d run many simulations, but this would be her first, and possibly last, *real* crash launch.

“In here,” Day instructed, “and stay hot.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Major dismissed her, not with words, but by looking away, but Kaydel remained where she was. She wanted to send them off with a show of respect, to see their faces so she would remember them. Day’s team was utterly uninterested in the tribute; Poe gave her an affectionate wink; Finn offered a single, appreciative nod.

Dar Na looked at her with those eyes...

Day’s hand went to the entry control panel and tapped. The door slid open, and then they were gone.

……

Inside the technoUnion ship, in Likit’s quarters, Luke had made progress.

The hole in the energy field was large enough to make the attempt, but it was going to be an incredibly dangerous move. Even if he managed to get through without making contact with the energy field, it would recognize his presence outside and instantly move to recapture him. There was a way to prevent that, but it was something Luke hadn’t done in a very, very, *very* long time – he’d have to leap through the hole as it closed with the lightsaber ignited. Swinging it back as he went through would keep the hole from sealing, and if he could manage to *keep* it there the whole time, the Force cage would remain distracted. That would buy him time outside to figure out what his next move should be.

It would have been difficult when he was young; it might be *impossible* now that he wasn’t.

He hesitated, listening to whispers of doubt and fear, but the view through the hole fought for him. Outside, there was a chance to live, to take her home.

Outside, she was waiting for him.

*Laci.*

The hole was big enough, and his shoulder was aching from circling the lightsaber to hold it open.

It was now or never.

……

*to be continued...*
"Stay *alive* - no matter what occurs!!"
-Hawkeye, The Last of the Mohigans

I am *determined* to finish this story the way I envisioned it, it's just gonna take awhile longer than I originally planned. Damn, those two years went by fast! I hope you'll stay on board for the rest of the voyage. :-)

Thanks to everyone who posted comments; I need your support *now* more than ever!
It's said that when you die, your whole life flashes before your eyes.

Of course, the saying only exists because somebody who didn’t actually die said it; those who did die never said anything about it one way or the other. And that’s just one of the problems with the saying; another problem is that having your whole life flash before your eyes as you die would require more time than you’d have to spare. And who wants that, anyway; wouldn’t it be better just to get the highlights and leave that time you got so drunk that you ended up puking your guts out all night forgotten?

And then there’s the biggest problem of all – what does it mean if *nothing* shows up? Does that mean that your life was nothing, or does it means that you’re not actually dying?

I guess it depends on your point of view...

The summit of Qir’Qorit, Qir, the Outer Rim.

Major Danil Day had served the Republic for a very long time.

He was still young when he helped bring the Empire down on Jakku, but he remembered that fight well, along with every fight that came afterwards. When the fighting finally ended, he was relentlessly recruited by Coruscant Tactical until he finally agreed to sign on – but only as an adviser, not an active agent. It was a high-pay, comfortable office situation that bored him completely until the day he first heard the name Ronjir Likit. That name kept coming up, time and again, in mission reports that were filled with cost overruns, unexpected crises and unnecessary casualties.

It was also the reason Day started going on missions again.

At first, it was research; Day figured if he could identify the reason that missions undertaken at the Technology Guild’s request went off-rail, they could fix the problem. What he learned was that things went off-rail because that was how the First Seat of the Technology Guild, their Director, *wanted* them to go. There was nothing official to be done about that, so Day took the only course open to him; he requested reassignment as an active agent – and CT agreed.

Once there, Day specialized in missions for the Technology Guild, making sure the objective was achieved without Likit’s infamous ‘three C’s’; which was why he’d accepted this mission. He’d hoped to keep this one simple and clean, but that was no longer possible because somewhere inside the TechnoUnion ship he was walking toward, a man named Luke Skywalker was in trouble and needed help.

And *that* changed everything.

The landing party from the shuttle was walking toward the TechnoUnion ship when they saw the entry there open and the Escort squad emerge, followed by a lone figure in civilian clothing. Day slowed, then stopped.

“Quick and clean,” he said without looking back at his team, “if possible.”
Then he resumed walking.

They met in the middle, where the walkway branched off.


“Delivering Dameron, as requested,” Day ignored the false pleasantries, “and two companions.”

Likit gave the prisoners a cursory inspection, but didn’t bother to ask who was who; he already knew everything about the two he was interested in, and a quick inspection of the third told him everything he needed to know there, too. Interrogating the young Sith would be a complete waste of time.

“That one,” he indicated Dar Na, “has no value; take him.”

One of the escorts grabbed Dar Na by the forearm, pulling him away from the others, onto the side walkway. A second escort joined them as the first shoved Dar Na ahead of them with the single word “walk.” As they watched Dar Na being marched away, Finn and Poe exchanged a look; the lighted walkway he was being forced along came to an abrupt end, beyond which there was only black.

This wasn’t part of the plan.

Inside the shuttle, Kaydel, who had been watching the action nervously from her seat in the cockpit, saw the Sith being separated, then marched down the side walkway toward the inner edge of the balcony, she quickly realized what was about to happen when they got there. The others were still back on the main walkway, standing there, as if they were waiting for it.

No.

It wasn’t a word in her head; it was hardly even a thought. It simply, irrevocably, *was*.

No.

Fingers poised above her controls, she watched them proceed, measuring every step. They reached the end of the walkway and stopped, then the escorts stepped back, preparing to shoot the Sith, who was standing right on the edge, staring at them defiantly.

No!

Kaydel slapped the controls, kicking on the shuttle’s floodlights, blinding everyone outside.

And then she turned them off, plunging them into the dark again.

The few confused seconds that followed were more than enough for Dar Na. He grabbed each escort by an arm, yanking them forward as he dove between them, releasing them as he passed through.

Still gripping their weapons, the two went flying into the darkness.

Dar Na landed face down on the walkway, rolled off and away, then disappeared into the shadows.

Back on the main walkway, Finn and Poe grabbed their weapons from Day’s team, which was already engaging the remaining escorts. Two escorts were knocked to the ground right away, then shot before they could move. The other two, who were guarding Likit, shoved him back, then opened fire. The team dove off the walkway, scattering into the shadows, and the remaining escorts followed, firing wildly into the dark.
Likit ran back to the TechnoUnion ship, shouting for help as he went.

The sound of the general alarm shrieking was immediately followed by a rush of armed black uniforms out the open door. They surged onto the walkway with their weapons, racing forward, straining to see what they were running into. All of their attention was on the fight ahead of them, so no one noticed as one after another of those in the rear suddenly slid off the walkway into the shadows and didn’t return.

While the others kept the escorts engaged, Finn raced forward through the dark toward the TechnoUnion entry. He saw the sudden disappearances on the walkway; Dar Na was clearing the way for him and he quickly took advantage. In a few seconds, he was on the walkway and then at the entry, and then inside.

The corridor was empty. The side doors were open and those rooms were empty, too.

Only two doors remained sealed.

Through the forward door, Finn could hear frantic exchanges being shouted; they were calling for support. But he couldn’t sense Luke’s presence there - that was coming from the other door...

_He’s alive!_

....

Inside Likit’s quarters, Luke was half-way to freedom.

At the last minute, he decided that diving through it would be a fatal mistake; he’d only gotten this far by being slow and careful, so he tossed speed aside for caution. He changed direction with the lightsaber, going from circle to oval, and the energy field followed. He stayed with the pattern, carefully lengthening the height until the top of the hole was right in front of his eyes, and the side bulged wide enough to to step through the hole if he turned sideways as he did it.

A few millimeters of energy field rising from the floor like a trampoline and lingering numbness in his legs made the first step terrifying because Luke knew if his foot even touched the energy field, it would attach itself instantly and he’d back where he started. Watching his foot carefully required lowering his head, and both left foot and his head cleared the hole cleanly, but now he and his lightsaber were half-out and half-in.

He was still deciding what to do next when the entry door slid open and he saw Finn there.

“Stay back!” He shouted. “if it detects you, it will attack!”

“What is it?” Finn shouted back.


Finn didn’t understand what ‘Force cage’ meant, but he understood ‘trap’ perfectly. Luke was clearly caught in whatever it was, but Finn had no idea what to do about it.

“What do I do?” He shouted.

“The stone!” Luke shouted, trying to point with his free hand. “There, on the wall! Shoot it!”

Finn fired; the round hit the stone and bounced off. Two more rounds proved equally useless; he needed something more powerful.
He dropped the weapon, then reached out…

A single blast of red Force lightning crossed the room; it sped over Luke, over Likit’s desk, then into the metamorphic Kyber on the wall. It surged throughout the veins and swirls in the slice of stone, turning them into fiery channels of molten rock, dissolving the bonds that held the rock together.

Its task complete, the Force lightning vanished. So did the Force cage.

A thousand pieces of fragmented rock fell to the floor and shattered there.

The sudden relief made Luke dizzy; deactivating his lightsaber, he staggered a few steps, then almost fell. Finn got there just in time to catch him. He embraced the Jedi master until he felt Luke recover and straighten up, then stepped back.

“Are you all right?” He asked.

Luke’s response was to lean forward toward Finn’s face and study it intently. Feeling the intrusion, Finn had a moment of pure panic - Luke had just seen him send a bolt of red lightning across the room and he had no explanation for how he’d done that. There was no hiding what Ren had done to him any longer, and he could feel the Jedi Master moving through his mind, seeking answers. And finding them.


“It wasn’t my choice…”


Then he turned and headed for the open door.

……

In another part of the galaxy, a spontaneous celebration was taking place.

Stone meadow highlands, the Edge.

News of Luke’s rescue reached the little group in the Visitor’s cockpit instantaneously; both Ren and Rey suddenly caught their breath in pain and looked at their hands, then looked at each other with exhilaration.

“What?” Leia asked eagerly.

“It’s Finn,” Ren replied, “He’s found Luke… he’s *got* him.”

Leia reached out; seeking her brother, finding him, feeling his relief. She let out a breathless squeal of joy that started tears, but then she felt something else that stopped them.

“He’s so…” she whispered fearfully, “… *angry*.”
In another part of the galaxy, things were taking an unexpected turn for the worse.

Summit of Qir’Qorit, Qir, the Outer Rim.

Kaydel and Vix were watching the firefight outside from the cockpit. The fight had spread; it moved off the walkway into the shadows, they could only follow the action in bursts of weapons fire that provided little insight to what was transpiring outside. The only thing Kaydel was sure of was that the frequency of bursts was slowing, meaning the fight was almost over.

She was feeling optimistic when the shuttle’s proximity alert sounded, shattering her hopes.

Something was coming.

Moving quickly, it was heading directly for the notch in the crater wall. While the sensors sought the identify of the intruder, Kaydel and Viz strained to get a look at it.

“Where are the lights?” Vix asked. “They can’t come in *dark*… can they?”

“No,” Kaydel answered, “not unless… damn!”

The sensor display was showing an identification: ID: TechnoUnion Incursion

“It’s an Incursion!” Kaydel groaned loudly.

“Duplo Ringus!” Vix swore. His native tongue had a musical quality that defied the horror he was feeling. “We’re *dead*!”

Kaydel sucked in air, fighting to stay calm. The newest version of the old Strafe series attack ships, the TechnoUnion Incursion was a flying nightmare; it came fast and low, continuous fire, penetrators, explosive rounds…

The proximity alert howled louder.

Kaydel looked toward the notch just as the Incursion ship’s floodlights flashed on, illuminating the entire crater, the balcony, all of it – including them. She saw bodies lying still and bodies in motion fleeing the sudden exposure as the Incursion banked and began its run.

She saw the flashes; she held her breath.

The first hit struck slightly off-center; it tore into the shuttle’s nose on Vix’s side and peeled it off, taking everything on that side, including Vix, with it, but Kaydel didn’t see it, because the impact slammed her head back against her seat. Stunned, but still conscious, she was only vaguely aware; she smelled smoke and felt heat, but it felt unreal, like a dream.

She saw Hosnian Prime, her parents, her brother laughing, her mother crying, her Resistance comrades comforting her, Poe Dameron teaching her how to fly…

Then she saw the Sith.

That face. Those eyes... only they looked different now.

They were glowing.
She felt herself being pulled up the seat; arms closing around her tightly, lifting her up, then moving, carrying her into the fire. As consciousness faded, she turned her face toward his body, settled against it; her nose found that exotic, attractive scent again, and she heard a heart beat. It was curiously comforting, so she closed her eyes, shutting out everything else…

“Stay *awake*!“

The words came with a rough shaking, and she opened her eyes again to look.

It wasn’t a dream at all.

……

Not far away, Finn had just followed Luke out the TechnoUnion ship entry when the other ship opened fire on the shuttle. Instead of completing the run by blowing the ship they’d just left - and them – to bits, the intruder banked hard, then climbed steeply up and out of the crater. The odd maneuver only puzzled him for a second, though; the intruder had come to support the TechnoUnion ship and its occupants by attacking the intruder ship. And it worked, too; Luke had started toward the sealed cockpit with purpose, but then suddenly veered off and raced toward the rear entry. The Jedi Master must have sensed the danger approaching, but they reached the outside too late to warn anyone.

It was a scene straight out of Finn’s nightmares.

The shuttle was on fire; flames shot up and out in drunken bursts as everything inside reached ignition temperature and popped explosively. Twisted metal wreckage squealed with heat and sagged into the blaze like wood in a funeral pyre. Finn was grieving for the two lost inside when she spotted movement in front of it.

Dar Na!

Finn looked at Luke for permission; the Jedi Master had sensed Dar Na, too. But instead of rushing to Dar Na’s aide, Luke slowed, then stopped altogether.

“Go!” He shouted to Finn, “Get them to cover – fast!”

Ignoring the danger, Finn raced to the walkway and ran as fast as he could.

Luke guarded him all the way. A lone escort stood up and took aim; Luke sent him flying with a brutal Force push into the crater’s outer wall. He watched Finn intercept Dar Na and the girl he was carrying, then they ran to the outer wall and disappeared into a crevice in the fractured rock.

With them out of the way, Luke turned to face the inner edge and waited.

It wasn’t a long wait; within seconds, the Incursion was coming through the notch for a second run.


They floodlights flashed on; the ship made a tiny course correction to target the fool who was just standing there waiting to die.

Luke raised both hands, stretching them out as if trying to surrender, then pushed down hard.

The Incursion ship obeyed instantly; it turned nose down, dove into the open vent at full speed,
crashed against the far side, then slid into the noxious little lake below. There was no explosion, only the faint sound of acid water gurgling as it flooded, then sank beneath the surface.

But Luke wasn’t watching; he was already walking back to the TechnoUnion ship to find Likit.

…..

The fight was over.

The rock balcony was eerily quiet now; the only sounds were crackles and pops coming from the burning shuttle. Leaving Kaydel resting on the rock crevice floor, Finn and Dar Na stepped out cautiously to see what they could.

In the flickering red glow from the shuttle, they saw bodies lying still and silent; most were easily identified as TechnoUnion, but some were lying in the shadows. Finn and Dar Na moved cautiously across the stone; this one was TechnoUnion, so was that one, but the third was one of Day’s team. Finn kept watch as Dar Na knelt to check on him.

“Dead.”

Finn and Dar Na continued on; another TechnoUnion, and another…

The fire was dying, but approaching dawn had lifted the sky from black to purple and blue; every minute the sky brightened, the shadows retreated, revealing more and more. A sudden movement off to the side caught their attention, and they turned together.

“Don’t shoot!” Day stepped forward into the light, followed by the two remaining members of his team. “Three here.” He walked to where Finn and Dar Na were standing. “Where’d the Jedi go?”

“Back inside the TechnoUnion ship.” Finn replied almost absently; he was looking past Day and his team expectantly. “Where’s Poe?”

Nobody answered.

They exchanged looks that confirmed none of them knew what had happened to Poe Dameron, and they immediately split up, heading out in all directions to search for him.

Day didn’t join the search, though; he turned and started toward the TechnoUnionship, but only took a few steps before he saw someone emerge from the ship’s entry.

It was Likit.

His steps seemed slow and jerky, like a puppet's. And right behind him, Luke Skywalker appeared; his steps were solid and purposeful and his left hand was raised as if he was grasping for something. The two of them marched along the walkway toward Day, but then turned onto the side walkway that led to the inner edge that overlooked the crater vent. One of his team noticed; Day waved him off and started to follow, keeping a respectful distance between himself and the Jedi.

This was a *personal* matter, and he would not interfere.

…..

The dawn was merciless.

The morning sky was aglow; purple was becoming crimson now; in a few more minutes, the sun would rise and skylight would fill the crater, exposing all of its secrets.
Unable to resist the power of Luke’s Force choke-hold on him, Likit had been herded to the very end of the walkway, to the exact same spot where Dar Na had stood earlier. Once there, Luke released him from the choke-hold, then stepped forward to stand beside him.


“No.”

A jolt of pain, and Likit felt his head being forced down. His eyes followed.

In the deep red and purple hues of predawn in the vent, he could barely see them, but he didn’t need to.

He knew they were there.

Feet and hands, paws and ears; *thousands* of them.

Each and every one of them paid for, then tossed into the vent like garbage; strewn all the way down the wall in rotting piles.

The stench stung his eyes.

“You see them?” Luke hissed. “I felt *every* one of them die. I felt their *fear*, I felt their *pain*; I heard their *screams*; now I hear them calling out for justice.”

“You’re *Jedi*,” Likit argued, too arrogant to beg, “you’re *not* going to kill me.”

“You’re right; I’m not going to kill you.” Luke replied.

He released the Force hold, then put his hand on Likit’s shoulder; the gesture made Likit sneer with confident contempt.


It was a simple act; one motion, over and done with - by Luke Skywalker the man, not the Jedi.

Likit lurched forward, going over the edge so gently that he quickly hit the side wall, then slid down it, plunging through pile after pile. As he slipped deeper and deeper, the decomposing hands of his victims grabbed hold, binding him in layers of putrid flesh and bone. The sticky addition slowed his descent, then stopped it.

He settled into a pile deep down and stuck there, buried up to his neck.

*Alive*.

A high-pitched shriek of pure horror echoed up from below, but Luke didn’t look down. Instead, he looked up, watching the sky go bright blue with morning.

“Qir’ Qorit.” He sighed; the words were barely a whisper. “Here it ends.”

He was standing there appreciating it all when he heard footsteps and turned to see Major Day arriving.
Day stopped alongside of him, at the spot where Likit had been, then cautiously leaned forward and looked down into the vent. He made a face, but said nothing, then leaned back and joined Luke in gazing up at the sky.

“Hello, Luke,” he said casually, “been a long time.”


“*That*.” Day pointed a thumb over his shoulder at the TechnoUnion ship. “The Technology Guild has dismissed Ronjir Likit for, well... *this*. They’re confiscating everything he owns to pay reparations.”

“Hmm.”

“And I have a message for you, from them.” Day continued. “We extend our most profound apology for these unfortunate events...”


“I know,” Day conceded the point, “but there’s more: ’as a gesture of our sincerity, we join the Rim Guilds in offering you and yours full and perpetual citizenship here on Qir, along with a substantial credit account that will assure you the status and comforts an individual of your stature deserves.”

“Hmmm.”

“Not my words,” Day said, “all I can offer you is a way off this mountain.”


They turned together and were starting back towards the main walkway when Luke noticed the activity going on around them.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“We’re missing a man,” Day replied, “One of yours; Poe Dameron.”

....

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Wishing you all happy holidays. :-) Gonna try to have next chapter up by New Year’s, if the week lets me.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

Hey gang, guess what I got for Christmas? Sick! Here's a small chapter; it's not my best work, I know, but it will keep things moving.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The summit of Qir’Qorit; Qir, The Outer Rim.

The morning sun had cleared the horizon.

Its light hit the summit like a beacon from below, making it stand out crisply against the sky and casting a shadow upward like a dusky finger pointing out the way to go. At this early hour, no direct sunlight reached the crater within, but the blue overhead was bright enough to make it morning there, too, so the aftermath of the night’s struggle was now in full view.

What remained of the shuttle was still smoldering on the blackened landing pad and bodies were strewn across the balcony floor like discarded dolls; some still clutching their weapons, others bent, broken and contorted. That made it easy to see who had a quick and possibly painless death and who didn’t.

If the victorious survivors moving from one corpse to the next noticed, they kept it to themselves; nobody said anything at all as they checked and moved on, listening all the while for someone to call out that they’d found Poe Dameron. Neither Luke nor Day joined in the physical search; as a command officer, Day remained where he was in full view of his team, watching everything, staying available while keeping track of the time being spent. By now, the Outbound should have arrived; it would be in high orbit overhead, waiting to hear from them. Luke stayed with Day, not to be a symbol to his ‘team’, but because he could search from where he already was. After a lifetime of scanning aftermath sites, always hopeful and so often disappointed, Luke made himself to reach out one more time…

Inside the TechnoUnion ship, no need to look there.

Those in the cockpit were all dead; he’d done that himself when he went for Likit. It was quick, and they didn’t suffer.

The crevice in the outer wall, one survivor; a girl.

Luke saw Dar Na break away from the others and disappear into it.

The burning transport wreckage; empty. Behind it, two bodies; one dead, one alive.

Luke saw one of Day’s team walk carefully around it, then vanish behind the rising smoke.

A second later, he heard the shout.

“*Here*!"
Finn had never run so fast in his entire life.

He crossed the balcony floor, stepping around and leaping over bodies and carnage, then through the smoldering debris field surrounding the shuttle, then behind it. He pivoted hard in the direction the shout had come from, and stumbled over something soft that was still smoldering.

An instant of horror, then guilty relief when he saw it *wasn’t* Poe.

Finn steadied himself, then looked ahead, into the space between the landing pad and the outer wall. In the smoky shadows there, he saw what he was dreading.

One of Day’s team was kneeling over a crumpled body, carefully turning it over. At first, it didn’t even look real; it was painted with ash and soot from the shuttle that made it appear like a finely-crafted sculpture; something that belonged in a museum, not here. The sight paralyzed Finn; he staggered toward them, then stopped, then stood rigidly watching as the sculpture’s head and shoulders rolled into view, revealing the face.

“Noooooooo!”

That single word screamed volumes; a cry of anguish so powerful that it made the mountain ring, bleeding through space-time entirely, flooding into the Force...

........

In another part of the galaxy, it was being felt.

Stone meadow highlands, The Edge.

Noooooooooo!

It hit Ren first.

His bond with Finn was stronger than Rey’s, an unpleasant side-effect of the confrontation in the meadow when he hammered everything he knew about fighting into Finn’s head. The connection that had been left open between them was like a leaky faucet, sending Ren unexpected and unwanted flashes from Finn’s mind, most of which stung viciously because Finn hated him so much.

But this time was different.

Unbearable pain, nothing physical like a broken arm or leg or a blaster hit, but pure agony coming from a soul being shattered, exploded in Ren’s mind like a bomb; all he could do was put his hands to his head and bear it.

Everyone noticed.

“Ren?” Leia was first to say so. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

“What’s happened?”

“I’m not sure.” Ren replied.

It wasn’t a lie; the connection that brought him Finn’s distress also brought Finn’s hatred, and that
clouded everything. Ren couldn’t see why Finn cried out, he only knew that he had; telling his mother that would put more stress on her than she was already under. Putting her off was also stressful; Ren knew that, but he also knew that trying to Force contact Finn right now would be dangerously distracting for him.

“Not sure of *what*?” Leia asked pointedly.

“It’s Finn.” Rey answered, preempting the interrogation because she felt Finn now, too. “He’s...”

“*Unharmed*.” Ren interrupted her.

Rey gave him a questioning look, but didn’t say anything.

“Is he all right?” Leia pressed for more information, “are *they* all, all right? What’s happening?”

“I don’t know,” Ren replied, “I’m trying, but I can’t... see.”

“Then try *harder*.”

A few seconds of unbearable silence passed while mother and son stared at each other, reenacting one of their oldest rituals. He knew that *she* knew he was holding something back, and she *knew* that he knew, so there was no escape; it would be a standoff until one of them, which was always him, caved...

Dar Noaa saw what was happening and became concerned for both of them. Until now, they’d been working so well together that he’d kept himself out of their way, but things were threatening to go seriously off course, and he couldn't just stand by and let that happen. He moved up behind Leia put his hand on her shoulder.

“Leia.”

His touch, his voice, broke the spell; Leia turned around to face him.

“*What*?”

“Dearest General,” Dar Noaa advised her gently, “stand down; your son knows what he’s doing. So does *Luke*; we’ll hear from him as soon as he has something to tell us.” He dropped his arm from her shoulder to her waist, then pulled her close so he could whisper the rest. “You know that.”

Leia sighed and leaned against him.

As he slid his other arm around to keep her there awhile, Dar Noaa looked at Ren and saw gratitude on his face.

........

In another part of the galaxy, things were happening very fast...

The high balcony, summit of Qir’Qorit, Qir, the Outer Rim.

Dar Na found Kaydel lying exactly where he’d left her.
Sensing that she was lost in the fog of concussion, not unconscious, but still very dazed, the young Sith knelt beside her, then gently touched her forehead, reaching into her mind with the Force. The skill was self-taught; every private instructor that his family brought in to teach him the ways of the Force was only interested in teaching him how Force intrusion could be used *against* an enemy, not how it could also be used to *help* a friend.

With Dar Noaa, it went no better, because the Sith Master flatly refused to teach him *anything*. Dar Na arrived at Dar Noaa’s door believing that he was part of a prophecy unfolding: master, apprentice - and the Rule of Two. That belief was promptly extinguished by a painful slam against the wall followed by the words “*Never* say that again.”

Which Dar Na never did. He did, however, pay attention.

Even though Dar Noaa refused to teach, he seldom, if ever, bothered to hide how something was being done, so Dar Na learned through observation, not formal lessons. One of the things he learned from watching Dar Noaa was that a Force intrusion always reflected the motive behind it. Called from hatred or rage, it would cause confusion and pain, but if called from another strong passion, it could ease both. Dar Na wasn’t thinking about that right now, though; he just needed to know that she was all right.

Kaydel opened her eyes and smiled up at him.

“Do you see me?” Dar Na asked.

“Yes.”

“Who am I?”

“You’re...” Kaydel raised her hand to touch his face, stopped short, then made a face, trying to get her eyes to focus better, “… *you*.”

Dar Na smiled a little; that answer was accurate enough for now.

“Yes.”

“You know what?” Kaydel’s fingertips found his cheek, “This is the wildest dream I’ve ever had...”

_Suddenly they were adrift in the fog; her touch held him prisoner; his eyes held her captive. They were together, outside of everything, suspended someplace where nothing else mattered but the two of them. It felt totally wrong and yet, so absolutely *right*. Everything he’d been told about how it would be, and everything he’d been warned about; all of it was... *true*._

He heard the words inside his head; coming one after another. _You are... the... one._

The words went no further, though, because just then, the sound of Finn crying out bled into the crevice. Finn’s sorrow crashed onto them; the moment shattered like crystal, dumping them back into grim reality.

“Wake up!” Dar Na pushed her hand away roughly, got to his feet, then reached down to pull her up onto hers. “We must go.”

Kaydel didn’t understand what the rush was, but she didn’t resist as he made her stand, put an arm around her back to support her, then walked her to the mouth of the crevice and out onto the stone
balcony. The daylight there hurt her eyes; she had to squint to see things clearly.

Someone was running across the balcony, carrying someone, shouting loudly as he ran.

.....

Moments later, Kaydel found herself sitting inside the TechnoUnion ship.

Pursuing the runner, Dar Na had mostly carried her all the way there, then set her down at the first open door he passed inside the ship before continuing on. She was caught up by other arms, pulled inside the room, moved to one of the empty sleep platforms and deposited there. As soon as she hit the bed’s surface, she tried to roll herself off, only to be pressed down again firmly.

“Stay down, Lieutenant,” the voice revealed that it was Major Day holding her there, “we have a lot to do and not much time to do it, you must remain here, out of the way.”

Kaydel stopped struggling; Day released his hold on her.

“Is it over?” She asked.

“Most of it.” Day replied.

“Vix?”

“No.”

“But I saw someone being carried.”

“That was Dameron.”

.....

Down and across the corridor, in the TechnoUnion Ship’s axillary room, Day’s team was racing through the steps required to bring the medical software online so they could assess the damaged Resistance pilot’s condition. They’d arrived seconds after Finn had, pried Poe out of his arms, pushing Finn out of the way.

Now all Finn could do was watch as they worked to save Poe.

The medical system was as state-of-the-art as everything else on the ship, but when not in use, it was stored collapsed in a compact unit against the wall, so precious minutes were already lost just setting it up. One of day’s team carefully positioned Poe on the table while the other moved scanner over Poe’s body and activated it.

The quiet hum was the only sound as everyone watched the scan progress. The scanner display’s holographic image hovered over Poe’s body like an evil spirit rising from a dying fire; bright red points of light told the story: dozens of tiny shrapnel shards had struck Poe all along his right side from his head to his ankle; a jagged red line across the image of his right radius revealed the break there, but it was clean; the bone had not splintered or broken through his skin.

Another red line was more ominous; it ran down the right side of his skull, curved over his ear, then out onto his cheek. Day’s man operating the scanner made an adjustment, and the image became more detailed; now Poe’s brain was on display with red points of light mapping the trail of damage done. Day’s men exchanged a long, silent look, then the operator switched the scanner off.

“*Wait*!” Finn lunged forward, reaching for the scanner control pad. “It wasn’t finished!”
“We’ve seen enough;” Day’s man replied flatly, “nothing can be done for him here.”

“What are you saying?” Finn asked in disbelief. "Are you just going to *stand* there and let him die?"

Ignoring Finn, Day’s man looked past him, toward the entry.

“His best chance,” he said, “is getting him to the Outbound, sir.”

Finn turned and saw Major Day standing in the open entry.

Day came forward, passing Finn as if he wasn’t there, then went to do a quick visual assessment of Poe’s condition.

“Agreed.” Day said. “Get him stabilized; the rest of us will get the ship ready.”

“Yes, sir.”

Finn came forward; he was ready to confront, ready to fight, ready to *beg* if necessary, but the Major turned to face him so abruptly that it made him stop, even take a step back.

“*You*,” Day commanded, “take the Sith and get those bodies *out* of my cockpit. You have *five* minutes - is that understood?”

"Yes, sir."

The reply was a blend of conditioned obedience and desperate hope; Finn was willing to do anything, whatever it took, if it would help Poe.

…..

Down the corridor, Kadel’s head was finally clearing.

She’d given her word to stay on the bed and out of the way, but the sudden burst of activity in the corridor beyond the open door proved irresistible, so she eased her legs over the edge and then sat up. Her head ached with the motion, slowing but not preventing her from standing, then making her way to the open door in small steps and carefully placed hand-holds. When she reached her destination, she leaned against the entry wall to steady herself before attempting to lean out and have a look.

Finn and Dar Na hurried past, carrying a body.

They were followed by one of Day’s team and *Luke Skywalker* doing the same thing.

The mission was a success; they had Luke Skywalker!

As soon as she saw him go out the entry door, Kaydel stepped into the corridor to follow, but that idea vanished when she heard voices coming from the other direction.

"Initiate pre-ignition cycle."

"Pre-ignition cycle initiated."

She knew the sounds of a pre-flight check well, and this one was being performed with *extreme* urgency. She could hear Major Day barking out orders, but she wondered to who; CT teams were known to have broad skill sets that included flight training, but a ship like this one required more than
that - it needed a pilot who'd been trained by the *best*.

Shaking the last of the fog out of her head, Kaydel went to claim the seat.

……...

_to be continued..._

Chapter End Notes

If you haven't gotten a flu shot yet, get one. Just sayin'.
Chapter 39

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Qir’Qorit was quiet.

HE was gone; the starship that invaded the mountain’s domain first was gone, taking him with it. The departure was modest; the ship lifted off from the stone balcony almost vertically; spinning slowly like a fallen leaf caught up by a sudden breeze, rising until it was high enough to clear the crater walls. It hovered there for a few seconds before speeding away, leaving nothing but destruction and the dead behind.

A few moments later, the mountain stirred.

A single, powerful quake born somewhere far below made the crater walls tremble, then groan loudly as the surging strain found every weakness where the balcony and the wall met, then ripped it loose with the ease of a zipper being drawn. The balcony separated from the crater wall cleanly, but only remained intact for the few seconds it took to tip forward and shed all the evidence into the crater vent before crumbling into huge blocks that disintegrated into ashy rubble as they tumbled down, burying everything below.

Satisfied, the mountain went back to sleep.

By the time all of the fine dust kicked up by the quake settled, the crater looked as if nothing of any significance had happened at all. Only the few who survived the fight on the mountain knew the story, but they would never speak of it.

And Qir’Qorit would not remember.

The Run’numble valley, Qir, the Outer Rim.

Laci Kin was sitting in the Millennium Falcon cockpit, keeping Chewbacca company while they waited for word. It was probably the other way around, though, because the Wookie was the quiet one; Laci was unable to bear the silence of waiting, so she filled it with words, most of which were about Luke in one way or another.

Chewbacca listened.

He was no stranger to waiting; he’d done this, exactly this, many, many times. He’d waited for Han, then he’d waited with Leia for Han, and then he’d waited for Han again. Now that Han was gone, he’d waited for Luke, and now he was waiting with Laci for Luke. He’d rather be doing anything else at the moment, but Laci needed a friend right now, so here he was, sitting and listening as she stared out into the morning light and drowned her thoughts in an endless stream of mind-numbing chatter.

Suddenly she fell quiet.

Chewbacca waited a moment to see if she was going to say more, and when she didn’t, he reached over and gave her a gentle pat on the shoulder. She reacted to the touch, and turned her head to look at him.
“Oh, Chewie,” she sounded totally drained, “what if he doesn’t come back?”

The Wookie purred, then patted her several more times; she reached her hand up and across her body to lay it on his. He purred a little more, a soft comforting melody that had served him well in the past when Leia had said exactly this same thing. He never insulted Leia’s intelligence with empty reassurances, and he wouldn’t do so now with Laci; what she needed was support and affection, not words.

Ten monumentally slow minutes later, the comlink brought their vigil to an end with six words:

“Chewy, we’re on our way home.”

It’s was Luke voice.

Chewbacca tapped the com and replied with a deafening, happy howl.

“They want me… to tell you,” Luke’s words came with pauses, as if he was talking and listening at the same time, “we’re coming back… in a different ship… so please don’t shoot us.”

Chewbacca acknowledged with a grunt; nothing surprised him anymore.

“We should be there in about… five minutes.”

Laci was up instantly; she stepped between the seats without a word, and then disappeared into the corridor.

Chewbacca watched her go, exactly the same way he’d watch Leia go, knowing exactly where she was headed and what for. He also knew exactly what was going to happen once Laci had Luke home, safe and sound, standing right in front of her with no possible escape. And Chewbacca would do exactly what he’d always done; stand back and let them fight it out.

A sudden surge of energy infused him; Luke sounded fine, but Chewbacca knew him well enough to pick up the trace of urgency in his words. Like in the old days with Han, the unspoken message was to be prepared to leave, so the Wookie tapped the control to get the drive system pressurized, then pressed the comlink to recall BB-8. Since being left behind, the little droid had kept itself occupied by escorting Pok’Tha to check on his family in their safe place, then commenced a series of perimeter security runs. Chewbacca knew that BB-8’s self-assigned mission was unnecessary, all it did was duplicate the Falcon’s scans, but he could see that the droid needed that sense of purpose, so he played along by making regular checks on BB-8’s whereabouts.

The droid replied with a series of excited chirps.

All that remained to be done now, was to put R2D2 and Threepio on alert, after which he would head out to meet the incoming ship, return the data cartridge the Luke and find out if it was time to go, but not before he took a minute to pick up his bowcaster.

Just in case.

Outside, the sky was clear and blue; except for a thin gray column of something, smoke or steam, Chewbacca couldn’t tell, rising from the summit of the mountain. The brightness irritated his sensitive eyes, so instead of looking himself, Chewbacca scanned for the expected ship using one of the Falcon’s portable monitors. A tiny, crisp blip on the grid gave him direction, distance and speed of approach, and after a few seconds of hard squinting, he spotted it visually. It was a point of dazzling white, sun reflecting off polished metal, that quickly morphed into a bar, then into the vaguely familiar shape of a starship. It slowed as it approached, then hovered for several seconds
before descending in an almost vertical drop to land where the Resistance shuttle had landed before.

Chewbacca was walking toward it when he saw the entry door open, and almost immediately after, he saw Luke emerge, then Dar Na, then the CT officer, Major Day. Luke and Day saw him at once and headed toward him, but the young Sith lingered behind, just outside the entry door, probably waiting for Finn and Poe.

Chewbacca meowed a relieved greeting, but he could see by the expression on Luke’s face that not all was well. By the time he and Luke were face to face, the Wookie was ready to hear bad news.

“It’s Poe.” Luke wasted no time with details. “He was trying to save one of the shuttle pilots when he was hit. There’s a Resistance transport in orbit right now; Poe has a good chance if they can get him there fast enough.”

Chewbacca studied Day menacingly. Day stood his ground.

“There’s no time for discussion, Chewy.” Luke put his hand on the Wookie’s arm. “Major Day is taking Poe, and I agree with him.”


“Finn?” He growled.

Luke hesitated, considering before he replied because the single word question demanded several answers.

“Finn’s all right,” he answered the most important question first, “but he’s taking Poe’s injury very hard. Major Day’s giving him a moment to say goodbye.”

“A moment is all we have to spare,” Day added, “then I must put him off the ship.”

“They can’t take Finn back,” Luke explained, “The Resistance would have to arrest him on sight.”

_The Resistance_...

Chewbacca remembered the data cartridge; he fished it out of his bandoleer with a squeaky mew, then held it out to Luke.

“What’s that?” Day asked.

“This,” Luke picked the cartridge from Chewbacca’s hand, “is something for Rolan Lexde sent from General Organa; the plan was for Poe to deliver it.” He offered it to Day. “You do it.”

“No.” Day’s reply was unexpected, but firm. “You forget - I’m CT, Luke, if you hand that to me, you’re handing it over to CT, not the Resistance.” Then Day glanced back toward the TechnoUnion ship, where his pilot was now standing and having an intense private conversation with the Sith.

“Give it to Lieutenant Connix; Lexde chose her for this mission himself, and she’s a personal friend of Dameron. I think she’ll feel honored to do it, and it would take her mind off... other things.”

Luke studied the pair for a moment.

“I see what you mean,” he said.
Just outside the entry door, they had no idea they were being watched.

They’d gotten past the formalities; Kaydel thanked him for saving her life in a clumsy rush of words that barely made sense because she didn’t know how to fully express how she felt. Dar Na accepted her thanks with a single nod of his head, and after a curiously awkward pause spent avoiding each other’s eyes, he asked her if she believed taking Poe back to the Resistance was the right thing to do.

“Don’t worry,” she looked up, directly at his face, “the Outbound has everything Poe needs, and I intend to stay close and make sure that he gets it. And when he’s well, we...” she felt herself falling under the spell of those eyes, and her words took on additional meaning, “…we...we’ll find a way...”

The Sith raised his hand as if to touch her face, but then stopped himself and pulled it back.

“Yes,” he answered, his words echoing hers, “we'll find a way.”

It was at that moment, when important words were still unsaid, that they realized they were no longer alone. Even with Luke at his side, Day’s return meant that it was time to go, and the unsaid words remained unsaid as the two of them turned to face the inevitable.

“Lieutenant,” Day spoke first, “Master Skywalker would speak with you in private.”

“Yes, sir,” Kaydel replied, instantly curious and more than a little bit awed that the legendary Jedi had anything to say to her. Luke waved her forward, and once she was at his side, he led her away from the others.

Dar Na was watching them intently when Day made a comment.

“I had serious doubts about you,” Day said, “but you impressed me up there. You're everything you said you were.”

An admission like this coming from someone like him was surprising, and Dar Na did not know what to say in reply. Day seized the opportunity.

“You know what’s coming,” he continued, “what she…what *we* have ahead of us.” He saw the reaction he was hoping for; a fleeting change in the young Sith’s eyes confirmed his observations and he didn’t hesitate to use what he knew. “The Republic is in desperate need of individuals with your ability,” he let his eyes drift away from Dar Na, back to the girl, before he made the offer, “if you decide to join us in this fight, I can make it happen.”

Dar Na saw Luke give Kaydel something; he saw her tuck it out of sight. Then he saw her turn and hurry back, so he answered before she was close enough to hear.

“I will consider it.”

....

Just as Kaydel returned, she saw Finn being firmly ‘assisted’ out the entry door by one of Day’s team. He stepped onto the ground with an angry grunt, and then stood there, staring out at nothing, clearly fighting the urge to turn around and force his way back into the ship. Day’s man in the entry leaned out far enough to see his commander and give a warning.

“Now or never, sir.”

Then he vanished inside. Day looked at Kaydel and gave the order.
“Time to go.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kaydel headed for the entry, but slowed as she passed Dar Na to let herself have one last look at his eyes and for a moment, she was caught in them again. No words at all, they just shared the moment before she had to move on. When she passed Finn, she paused long enough to take his hand and press it with hers.

“Take...” Finn choked on the the words. “… care of him.”

“I will,” Kaydel whispered, “I *swear* it.”

Then she disappeared into the ship. Now only Day remained with Luke and his fighters.

“Thank you,” he addressed them all, “for your help.”

“And thank you,” Luke replied, “for coming after me.”

“Luke,” Day gave the Jedi his full attention, “I know it’s a lot to ask, but when you see the General, tell her that the Republic needs her now more than ever.”

Day’s words cut through Luke like a knife; Day had just asked him to deliver a message to Leia that he knew would tear her apart. He didn’t know if he could that to her, especially now, but refusing the man who just helped save his life was both ungrateful and unnecessary, so there was only one one way to reply.

“I’ll think about it.”

....

They were walking back to Pok’Tha’s barn and the Millennium Falcon when they heard the whine of the TechnoUnion ship’s engines, followed by the whoosh of moving air as it lifted off. Chewbacca stopped to watch it, but the rest just kept on walking without even a glance. When he saw that they had continued on, the Wookie recognized the situation for what it was.

The mission here was accomplished, but *nothing* was over.

....

The closer Finn and Dar Na got to the Falcon, the faster they walked; it had been an exhausting mission and they knew they could expect to find the galley table filled with Laci’s efforts to keep herself from worrying too much. Her food was good, and both of them were eager to fill the emptiness caused by the TechnoUnion ship’s departure.

Luke, on the other hand, slowed down, then fell behind.

He was tired.

The nightmare was over; Likit was done, gone to judgment, but there was no sense of satisfaction in that for Luke. The dead were still dead. And his plan only succeeded because Finn and Poe showed up to rescue him, and they only showed up because Leia - and Ren – told them he needed to be rescued.
He *needed* to be rescued.

Maybe that was the result of clouded judgment or simply because he was getting old.

There was another successful mission, though; Leia’s data cartridge would soon be in the hands of the Resistance, and those charts could make all the difference in the war. That was something he *could* tell her when he saw her, and perhaps that would be enough.

Now only one thing remained to be dealt with, and *she* was standing on the Falcon’s ramp waiting for him. He watched her greet Finn and Dar Na, then send them on up the ramp, watching them until they disappeared inside before turning back to watch and wait for his arrival. Her posture alone told him that she was far beyond being angry with him for leaving without telling her; she’d wrapped her arms around herself tightly, forcing herself to stay where she was, to make him come to her.

Suddenly Luke wanted to do just that, in fact, it was the only thing he wanted to do.

When Laci realized he was finally coming, her body betrayed her; Luke saw her wilt a little bit, then quickly regain her composure. She held her ground as he crossed the distance between them, stepped onto the ramp and walked up to where she was standing. There was a silent stalemate as they both waited to let the other speak first; he knew he deserved whatever was coming and she was a complete mess, furious that he left her in the dark and almost hysterically happy that he’d come back. He saw that she was trembling, and put out his arms to embrace her, only to see that he was trembling, too.

He looked at his hands; one shaking, one cold and still. They mocked him mercilessly; he was old and tired and broken down in so many ways…

Laci saw the expression on his face and her anger vanished; she grabbed his hands and, holding them tightly, stepped in close, until her hands and his clasped together were pressed between their bodies. He could feel her heart pounding and she could feel his; it was a moment of absolute truth that swept everything else out of the way.

“Welcome home.” She said.

He raised her hands to his lips and held them there. It was more than a kiss; he breathed her in, the warmth of her fingers, the soft, sweet scent of the soap she liked, the delicate salty taste of the tears she’d wiped away before he could see them.

“I’m so,” he whispered, “sorry...”

“It can wait,” she replied, “you’re tired and hungry, and *what* is that smell?”

“Oh. It’s ozone, I think; there was this...”

“It can wait.” She pulled her hands back, but didn’t let go. Instead, she started to walk backwards, up the ramp, pulling him along. “Let’s go inside, get you fed and cleaned up, and after that, you can tell me the whole story...”

....

As soon as they were gone, Chewbacca stepped out from the shadows at the barn door and headed for the Falcon’s ramp. He hadn’t meant to be a witness, but he arrived at the barn just as Luke and Laci met on the ramp, and rather than interrupt them, he stopped in the shadow and waited. He couldn’t hear them, but he didn’t need to; he’d witnessed this, exactly this, many times before. He couldn’t help but think what Han would have had to say about Luke finally letting someone love him.
the way he deserved to be loved.

It’s about time.

There were still a few tasks to get done before they could go home, but Chewbacca could take care of those himself. He’d leave Pok’Tha and Thia with a shopping list and a bag of ore ingots to pay for it and for storage space in the barn, and enough extra to provide for them, too, for a very long time. While he was doing that, the droids would get the Falcon locked down and ready for flight, and if Finn and Dar Na needed to sleep, R2D2 could serve as copilot.

With luck, they’d be back on the Edge in a matter of days…

Han.

Chewbacca snarled; he’d been so immersed in this mission that for awhile, he’d actually forgotten! Once he was back there, on the Edge, back in the stone meadow, he’d have to be clear in his mind, committed and ready to avenge Han Solo’s death, no matter the cost.

He would kill Kylo Ren.

………….

It was lost in an ocean it could not see, caught in a current it could not feel; a hundred thousand tiny fingers gently pushed it relentlessly forward toward the edge of an abyss it could not comprehend.

And then over that edge.

It floated, then fell, then landed against something warm and wet and sank into it. The something flowed over and around it and then, in an instant, it was securely bound in place.

Safe now, protected, it reached out…

Millennium Falcon en route to the Edge, Hyperspace.

Laci Kin opened her eyes. She didn’t know why she was suddenly awake; she just knew she was.

Luke…

He was still there, lying on his side with an arm stretched over her protectively. His face was hidden behind wayward tendrils of graying hair, so she couldn’t see that his eyes were closed, but the quiet, comfortable sounds of sleep coming from him assured her that he was. The tangled mess was her doing; she liked to play with his hair in the peaceful moments that came afterwards, when they talked about everything and nothing at all until they fell asleep.

He made a little grunt that told her that he sensed her watching him and didn’t mind, but he wasn’t going to wake up.

She’d worn him out. Again.

Here in Hyperspace, they had lots of time and once she’d gotten past her anger, she found it impossible to keep her hands off him. She’d make sure that there was plenty of distractingly delicious food on the galley table, and then excuse herself while the others were busy eating it. A short time
later, Luke would come to find her, and he always found her ready and willing. They’d be missing for hours at a time, but as long as that table was filled with food, everyone pretended not to notice. Laci saw the illusion of privacy they let her and Luke have as a gift, a sign of the deep respect and affection they all had for him, so she made sure that not one minute of that precious time was wasted on anything other than him.

_**Look at you…**_

They’d come to an understanding: He promised to stop torturing himself with doubts about why she loved him and how much older than her he was. She promised to feed him what he liked, listen to his stories, and be there when he came home.

It was a done deal; the best one either of them ever made.

….

Not far away, in the communal space, Chewbacca had found something to disassemble and clean.

His project had completely taken over the Dejarik table, so Finn found himself relegated to watching, but since he didn’t speak Wookie, and the Wookie was completely absorbed in minutia anyway, he decided that he wouldn’t be missed.

He wandered slowly along the corridor to the cockpit; Dar Na was standing watch there. Finn knew he’d find the Sith staring out into the meaningless blur of Hyperspace, silent and surly because he, too, was feeling the pull to turn the Falcon around.

_**Go back.**_

A feeling, not words, that echoed in his mind.

_**Go back.**_

When he reached the cockpit, he walked to the copilot’s seat and flopped into it, but Dar Na didn’t even glance his way. There was no need for words; they were both strong with the Force and could sense each other’s feelings.

_**Go back.**_

Right now, he couldn't; the whole point of this nightmare adventure was to get supplies so Rey and the others wouldn’t starve out there on the Edge, but once those supplies had been delivered, he would find a way to convince them to let him go back because he knew in every atom of his body that his place was back there, with the Resistance.

With Poe.

He finally understood. The General and Dar Noaa, Luke and Laci, even Rey and Ren; they saw in each other what no one else could see, they shared something so powerful and deep that words weren’t even needed, and they cared so much more about each other than about themselves. All of that was there, right in front of him, beside him, caring for him, but it wasn’t until he thought he’d lost it that Finn understood.

_**I’ll find a way.**_

Settling himself in the seat, Finn let his gaze drift out into the void and listened to his heart.
Go back.

…………..
To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Being sick was no fun at all, getting better, though. Sorry about the long delay in posting a new chapter. Not at all sure if this one is any good at all, so feel free to comment.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

A short little chapter, just to let you know that (1) I'm not dead, and (2) I have not abandoned this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

KT06F was old.

The last of her generation, they all looked to her for guidance now that everything had gone so wrong. But she had no answers for them; she’d made a disastrous miscalculation, but it wasn’t her fault.

Who could have guessed that the mother would have so much power in her?

KT06F remembered when the First Order came much too well; that bitter memory had been her sole reason to live since the night she was taken. Her particular skill was probability management, something the Order considered valuable, so she was treated better than most; after they harvested all her eggs for the breeding program, she was put into service in their technology division.

And she excelled there.

As the years slipped by, her services were in great demand; she was placed in progressively higher security level programs, often working closely with the Order’s “best”. Those technicians, even the gifted ones, all had a serious flaw in their thinking, though; they lacked imagination. The idea that their submissive captive Kourin might be collectively plotting against them was simply beyond their ability to comprehend. Even now, as the remnants of the Order struggled to reorganize, they had no idea that their Kourin technicians were still quietly and methodically undermining everything they did and soon the Kourin dream of revenge would become reality.

Revenge.

That was the thought that kept KT06F going now, when it looked like everything they’d accomplished here in the mountains was about to be lost. Her intention was to bring the Kylo Ren here, to see it for himself before she made the offer, but that plan went terribly wrong and she had no ideas left.

Here. Site One.

That was the only name they ever gave it; it was the best kept secret in galactic history.

KT06F was standing in one of the launch bays, high above the little city, remembering how it came to be. The Kourin knew of an uninhabited world, far out, on the Edge, where no one ventured, and slowly, secretly, they undertook the task of ‘losing’ the best of their kind. The First Order’s dependence on bookkeeping and blind, arrogant trust in their Kourin technicians made that surprisingly easy, and before long, Site One was firmly established. At first it was only a few simple domes, but as the years passed and the First Order fell more and more under their control, materials were brought in for the larger buildings. Now the steep slopes of the mountains were
covered with homes and workshops, all built to service the secret that once filled the cavernous space behind her. They’d moved everything of importance and everyone but those few who refused to leave without her to Site Two on the far side of the planet to hide while she desperately tried to think of a way to make amends and cool the Kylo of Ren’s wrath.

Ever since, she’d been spending most of her time here, looking at her domain sadly, fully expecting the end to come at any moment.

But it didn’t.

The hours passed, then the day, then another day and days after that, and slowly the realization came to her that perhaps it wasn’t the end after all. The drone monitors reported that, despite the unanticipated destruction of the technician’s workshop, all three of the captives had survived and returned to the stone meadow safely. The Kylo of Ren had his companions back, so she no longer had hostages to stay his hand, and yet, he’d done absolutely nothing. She’d seen the images of him standing there in the stone meadow, looking toward the mountains as if he was expecting something.

But what?

........

Stone meadow highlands, the Edge.

**We’re coming home.**

The news that all was well and Luke was on his way back to the stone meadow did two things for the crew of the Visitor: first, it was a tremendous relief and second, it made them remember what they were doing before they were sidetracked by the events on Qir. To be more precise, it was Irno who made them remember that they were sitting inside a crippled starship that could not fly, within reach of the Kourin. The Kourin hadn’t made any new attempts to capture them, but Irno was adamant that they would try again. The discussion was brief; everyone agreed that replacing the resonator should be done as soon as possible, so that task was assigned to Ren and Irno.

And so far, things were proceeding nicely.

Ren was sitting on the corridor floor, right hand outstretched, holding the up Kyber crystal cluster. It was suspended high over its cavity because the energy sink implanted in Ren’s left palm was performing its job flawlessly, making the task of keeping it there almost effortless for him. That made it possible for Irno to climb down into the cavity and stand comfortably underneath it while he worked, but the Kourin seemed rushed and nervous and kept asking Ren the same question every few minutes.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” Ren knew Irno well enough now to be curious about why that question kept coming up. “Why do you keep asking me that?”

“No reason,” Irno replied, “except my fear of getting crushed in here.”

Now Ren was even more curious; the first time he’d lifted the cluster, when there was a real risk of his dropping it, Irno dived underneath without hesitation. It was true that Irno didn’t know about Ren’s problem that first time, but he knew now and, according to him, he’d fixed it. So why was he asking Ren how he felt instead of whining about the need to get off this planet and away from the
Kourin like he had been doing? Irno had been reciting that like catechism ever since he, Rey and Dar Noaa returned from his workshop.

Right now Rey and the Sith were outside, working to seal the hole Irno left in the coatings when he fished out the energy sink that was now part of Ren’s hand. The energy sink was vibrating as it vented; a sensation somewhere between a tickle and an itch that took some getting used to, but on the scale of annoying sensations that Ren had experienced, it wasn’t bad. He quickly learned how to interpret what the vibration indicated; the more it processed, the higher the frequency of the vibration. Ren hoped that knowledge might help him find a way to control how – and how much – energy flowed through him. He tried to discuss the possibilities with Irno shortly before they started work here, but all Irno did was grab his hand, stare at it intently for several minutes, then offer only the words “we’ll see” before rushing off to see Dar Noaa about something. When the Kourin returned, he jumped into the cavity and immediately set to work, effectively ending the subject for the time being.

Ren was thinking about asking again now, because Irno was quiet. The steady stream of mumble had ceased, so had the sounds of hands at work, which should mean the task was near completion.

“How much longer?” Ren asked.

“Almost finished.” Irno’s reply was a little smug. “Fits perfectly. I made it, you know.”

“Yes, I know.” Ren looked down at the tiny object in his hand that had saved his life. “Did you make this, too?”

“Make what?”

“This energy sink.”

“That?” Irno replied casually; the task at hand had his attention, so the words were unguarded. “I can’t remember, but I’m sure I did. When we’re done here, I want to work on some modifications.”

“Modifications?”

“Oh… yes…”

Ren was waiting to hear more but instead of continuing, Irno climbed out of the cavity, stood there for a few seconds in complete silence, then started walking, right past him, without even looking at him.

“Are we,” Ren called after him, “done here?”

“Not yet.” Irno answered without looking back. “Keep it where it is; I’ll be right back.”

Ren watched Irno until he disappeared through the cockpit entry, then turned his attention back to the Kyber crystal cluster.

…..

Leia was in the cockpit when Irno entered.

She was standing at the waveform, watching the red display that Dar Noaa started before he and Rey went outside and waiting for his call to activate the ship’s coating sensor system. If the Sith had replaced the missing energy sink correctly, activating the system would integrate the replacement instantly and the network would be complete again. Irno would have preferred to do that task.
himself, but the ship needed both the Kyber crystal cluster and the sensor system operative for space travel, so he had to trust the lesser job to Dar Noaa to save time.

Irno went to the waveform and placed his hand on it; the display divided into two, presenting him with the white technical display. Leia acknowledged his arrival with a smile.

“How’s it coming?” She asked.

“Almost...” Irno was already tapping in commands, “… done.”

A holographic image of the Kyber crystal cluster appeared, floating in front of the waveform like a rectangular cloud because at the moment, the cluster was inactive.

“See this?” Irno pointed at the image. “When we replace the cluster, the ship will automatically start a diagnostic, and you’ll see detail being added. That’s good. If you don’t see it, or if the waveform sounds off, shout for me right away. You got that?”

“I got it.” Leia replied. “How’s Ren holding up?”

“No problems.”

“Good.”

“Yes,” Irno agreed quietly; he even managed to smile as he said it. “Good.”

Then he left as quickly as he’d come, hurrying back to the Kyber crystal cluster and Ren.

…..

“I’m back. You can do it now.”

Irno’s return startled Ren; keeping the cluster suspended was easy, so it was boring, and he’d drifted into a daydream. It was good one, too:

A beautiful room with a balcony on a mountainside overlooking a deep valley; a luxurious room where a small table for two filled with delicious and exotic food welcomed them and a great bed with soft pillows and silky sheets waited for their pleasure.

And it was all for her.

He enjoyed watching as she explored and discovered, then holding her in his arms on the balcony as the valley below slipped into evening’s shadow, then letting her coax him into tasting everything on the table, and later, tasting her...

And then Irno spoiled it.

“Take your time,” Irno instructed, “make sure it’s level before you let go.”

“I’ve done this before, you know.”

“I know, but that was different.”

“How so?”

“That time,” Irno kept his eyes on the moving cluster as he spoke, “it wasn’t active. This time, it’s going to initiate as soon as its base membrane hits the cavity membrane below. If you do it right, we
won’t need any calibration adjustments; those can take time.”

“Understood.”

Irno took a step back as the cluster reached the cavity and descended smoothly down into it.

“Steady, steady…” he directed Ren, “… *Now*.”

Ren released his hold.

Irno turned away from watching it to give Ren a nod of approval. He was looking at Ren when he heard the distinctive hiss of membranes fusing as the cluster activated, and what he saw next terrified him. Suddenly Ren’s body flew back, slamming against the wall behind him as if something powerful had just struck him. The invisible blast pushed him further, right up the wall, and held him there for a second before releasing him.

Ren slid back down and landed hard on the floor.

He sat there looking dazed for another second, then fell over.

……

Leia felt in the cockpit. They felt it outside.

It would have sent Rey flying if Dar Noaa hadn’t grabbed her arm and pulled her back, and that was only possible because his other arm was pressing the energy sink down into the coating and that absorbed some of the Force.

“What was *that*?”

Rey gasped out the question because whatever just hit them had knocked the air out of her; she wasn’t hurt, just breathless and scared. When Dar Noaa didn’t answer, she checked and saw that he was reaching out with the Force, seeking, then finding something.

“There’s been an accident,” he said grimly, “inside the vessel. The Kyber crystal cluster…”

Rey didn’t need to hear the rest; she’d already sensed it and was climbing down as fast as she could.

Ren!

……………..

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

"Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans."

Please bear with me as I get myself back in the saddle and writing again.
“Soon he will come and destroy it all.”

KT06F was in despair.

Saying it out loud even though she was all alone somehow made it real; she’d been standing out here too long, wasting time, waiting for a sign that would never appear and everything they’d worked for, everything they’d sacrificed themselves for, would soon be rubble, ashes and death. The words seemed to drain her, causing the last of her hope to dry up and die. Perhaps that was for the best, considering; the Kourin here would perish, but the Kourin still enslaved by the First Order might survive to begin again…

The sound of footsteps interrupted the requiem playing in her head, and she turned to see one of the subordinates that refused to abandon her hurrying toward her.

“Something’s happened!” He called to her breathlessly as he ran, then almost skidded past her because he was moving so fast. “They reactivated the Kyber crystal cluster!”

KT06F gasped in horror.

“Are you sure?” She asked.

“Positive; the activation pulse signature is confirmed.” the young Kourin replied. “We should have anticipated that KT1097M didn’t escape without taking what he’d come for. He must have done the installation without consulting the procedure files.”

“It’s not in the procedure files.”

“It isn’t?”

KT06F sighed deeply. The young one’s disbelief wasn’t surprising; he’d been raised here, so he knew only what he’d been told about life under the First Order. The Kourin knew about the pulse; their sensors detected it the very first time they tested the Kyber crystal cluster design, but it had no effect on them. Since the First Order was being told they should never touch the device, there was no need to mention the pulse to them, and the Force-sensitive conscripts under Kourin ‘protection’ were all placed in positions that would never put them at risk; they served in kitchens and custodial services, safely far away from Kyber crystal clusters and anything else that could channel the Force. The risk was minimal; it was only the Kourin habit of hiding everything that made them omit a single footnote from the procedure that warned about the energy pulse.

Now that lie of omission had come back to seal their doom. There was no way that the Kylo of Ren and the other Force-sensitives down in the stone meadow would view this as anything other than another ‘attack’, and they’d surely blame KT1097M…

KT06F had to *do* something. Right away.

“Come with me.”

She was already walking, and the young Kourin scurried to catch up.
Stone meadow highlands, The Edge.

“I didn’t know! I didn’t know! I didn’t know!”

Irno was on his knees and elbows, his head pressed to the floor beside Ren.

“I didn’t know! I didn’t know! I didn’t know!”

The scene Dar Noaa and Rey found when they entered the ship terrified them both. Leia was sitting on the floor holding Ren up, but he was limp in her arms. And beside them, the Kourin was on his knees, shaking, repeating the same anguished words over and over.

“I didn’t know! I didn’t know!”

When the two reached Leia, she looked up at them but said nothing.

“How is he?” Dar Noaa asked.

To his relief, Ren responded to the question himself. He opened his eyes, looked up at him, then at Rey, then waved his left hand to let them know that he was stunned, but nothing worse. Leia nodded in agreement, then looked over at the Kourin, directing their attention that way.

“I didn’t know!” Irno seemed utterly unaware of their presence. “I didn’t know! I didn’t know!”

“Do something.” Leia pleaded. “Please.”

Rey stepped up, then dropped down beside Irno and put her hand on his back.

“Irno?”

“I didn’t know! I didn’t know!”

“Ren’s all right, Irno,” Rey said softly, “We all are.”

Silence.


“Irno?”

The Kourin turned his head to look at her.

“Rey?”

“What happened?”

“The cluster...” Irno sniffed loudly, “… I was finished… Ren put it back and… I didn’t know!”

“What didn’t you know?”
“I didn’t...” Irno pushed his shoulders up from the floor and rocked back onto his knees. “Wait…” he stared blankly for a moment as he struggled to regain control, “…a Kyber crystal cluster activates automatically when installed, then it integrates… wait… “ His expression changed from confusion to anger. “…an activation pulse? What the… there’s an *activation* pulse and they didn’t put it in the procedure?” Then he answered his own question angrily. “They *didn’t* put it in!”

Rey looked up at Dar Noaa for guidance, but he’d heard enough.

“**Irno!**”

The Sith said it loudly, seizing the Kourin’s attention; Irno looked up at him with dread.

Dar Noaa sensed a surge of concern in Leia; she was worried he was going to be Sith about this, but he wasn’t angry at all. Since their escape, Irno had been motivated by only one thing and would have done nothing deliberately that might delay getting the vessel repaired and ready to go. In another time, Dar Noaa would have felt wounded that she didn’t trust him, but now that she was his, now that she was part of him, the gentle flutter of her presence in his mind was a welcome addition.

He gave her a quick, reassuring glance before addressing the Kourin.

“We *believe* you.” He said. “They omitted it from the procedure for the same reason they erased your memory,” he explained, “their obsessive need for *absolute* secrecy.”

“I didn’t *know*.” Irno hissed viciously. “They made me hurt that Ren. If I...”

A light poke in his back interrupted Irno’s rage; he twisted his head around as far as he could and saw Ren. He was sitting up; his mother was sitting beside him, but she wasn’t supporting him.

“*Look*.” Ren’s voice was hoarse and dry, but there was no anger in it. He raised his left hand, showing his palm and the implanted energy sink. “You didn’t hurt me, you *saved* me.”

It took a moment for Irno to realize what Ren was telling him. His knowledge of activation pulses was limited, but he knew enough about Force engineering to understand what a Kyber crystal cluster was capable of; even a small one was enough to power a starship. To a Kourin, the pulse was nothing, but to a Force-sensitive standing a few meters from it, the shock could easily be fatal. There was no way to know what it could have done to Ren had the energy sink not been there.

Irno spun around on his knees, seized Ren’s hand and pulled it, along with Ren’s arm and Ren, closer to check it.

“It’s working perfectly;” Ren assured him, then added, “thank you.”

The words ripped Irno’s eyes away from Ren’s hand; he looked at Ren with an expression so full of awe and adoration that after an awkward moment of silence, Ren couldn’t stand it any longer.

“**Irno?**” He casually pulled his hand free of the Kourin’s as he asked, as if nothing had happened.

“Yes?”

“What about the integration?”

The reminder worked; the Kourin was instantly refocused. He practically popped to his feet, then was already moving before he replied.

“Yes,” he said over his shoulder as he pushed through the little group to run to the cockpit, “it should
be almost done by now. We can *leave*..."

“Irno,” Dar Noaa called after him, “*wait*.”

No reply.

Dar Noaa looked down at Leia.

“Go,” she told him from her spot on the floor, “I’m right behind you.”

As Dar Noaa hurried after Irno, Rey leaned over, took Leia’s hand and helped her up.

“Stay here with Ren,” Leia told her, “We can handle Irno.”

Rey nodded, and Leia headed off to the cockpit. Rey watched her go, noting that the General didn’t look back. She admired how Leia could switch gears, going from worried mother to cool, focused leader as quickly as a situation demanded. Ren would be all right, Rey could feel that, but there was a serious possibility that the situation in the cockpit might quickly get out of hand.

Suddenly the corridor was quiet.

Using his legs to push himself, Ren slid backwards on the corridor floor until he was sitting against the wall. Rey joined him there by putting her back to the wall and sliding down beside him so closely that their bodies were touching. For a moment, they sat there in silence, looking at the spot in corridor floor where the Kyber Crystal cluster was back in place. It was fully engaged now, channeling the Force as it calibrated the new resonator to match the others, and every time the device adjusted itself, they’d sense it. Like a sudden cool breeze on wet skin, it sent chills racing through their bodies. It was a new experience for both of them and the shivering made them move even closer together.

Rey's hand found Ren's; touching him instantly told her that, aside from a headache and some lingering muscle spasms in his arms and legs, he wasn't hurt at all. She'd witnessed his amazing ability to heal before, during those first rough days on Dagobah, where she watched him pull himself back from what should have been certain death in a matter of hours. She remembered his silent determination there, too, so she gave him have the quiet, letting him choose when he was ready to talk.

It wasn’t along wait; the shivers ended abruptly, meaning the Kyber crystal cluster had completed integration. Now there was only the tiniest trace of energy emanating from the device, and that was the familiar and comfortable sensation of the Visitor’s systems active again. The ship’s recovery energized Ren; he announced his own recovery by closing his eyes and taking a long, deep breath. Then he exhaled just as deeply, opened his eyes and turned his head to look at her.

“Well,” he said, “that was a… surprise.”

“We felt it outside,” Rey replied.

“Are *you* all right? I didn’t realize...”

“I’m fine; the pulse almost swept me away, but Dar Noaa pulled me back.”

Ren slumped a little; the assurance that she was fine needed a few seconds to push back the fear that she could have been hurt. Worse than that, that he didn’t see it coming. And worst of all, that he wasn’t there to save her; once again, it was Dar Noaa who was there to save someone that Ren loved.
Rey. His mother.

The General trusted the Sith completely, and for some reason, so did Ren. Dar Noaa seemed to understand him instinctively; there were no interrogations, no accusations, no judgments.

Ren leaned over, putting a little weight onto Rey, not for support, but so he could snuggle.

“This time,” he rested his head on her shoulder, “I won’t fail to thank him.”

Rey relaxed, putting a little weight back onto Ren, bringing balance to them both. In the quiet, there was just them and the ever-present energy that flowed between them. Ren would have been content to remain like this indefinitely, but as he let his mind drift into fantasies about him and Rey, he suddenly sensed another presence.

*Something’s coming.*

He was alert now. Rey was not; she was lingering in the fantasy, but soon she would sense it, too. Ren didn’t wait for that.

“Rey?”

“Hmm? What?”

“Let’s go outside; I need some air.”

.....

When Leia reached the cockpit, she saw Dar Noaa and Irno silently staring at the waveform. It was active from top to bottom; line after line of swiftly scrolling white data streams that were meaningless to her had both the Kourin’s and the Sith’s rapt attention. They didn’t seem to notice her arrival, so she stopped just inside the entry to watch without disturbing them.

“Look, *[there]*!” Irno pointed to one of the passing lines with his grip hand, “that’s where it should be, *[right]* there, but there’s *[nothing]*.”

“Stop defending yourself,” Dar Noaa replied without taking his eyes from the waveform, “I believe you. If you don’t calm down, we’ll never get...” he stopped mid-sentence because the waveform had suddenly gone dark. “… what now?”

“I don’t know.” Irno tapped the surface to reactivate it, but the waveform didn’t respond. “This is odd... very odd.”

Dar Noaa leaned forward and touched the waveform; his red display activated instantly, but it did not present the expected command display. Instead, the display screen filled with symbols that Irno didn’t recognize at all.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“A message,” Dar Noaa replied, “for me; it’s written in Sith.”

“It’s from *them*, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Do you want to hear what it says?”

“No... yes.”
It says,” Dar Noaa began to read, "we have detected an activation pulse from your vessel, and are aware that it may have had an unpleasant effect. KT1097M was unaware of this fact because the information regarding the pulse was deleted for security reasons. KT1097M is not responsible for any harm that may have resulted from the activation pulse. We are responsible. We apologize.”

“Apologize?” Irno asked. “They never *apologize*.”

“They do now,” Dar Noaa replied. “This is an attempt to absolve you of blame.”

“Why?”

“So we won’t kill you.”

“Really?”

“Perhaps they care more about you than you think they do.”

Irno frowned. He stared suspiciously at Dar Noaa for a moment, and was opening his mouth to dispute what the Sith had just said when the Visitor’s proximity alarm sounded. Dar Noaa immediately dismissed the message and the command display appeared. The security map was already active; a location indicator flashed twice, then went dark.

At the same instant, the proximity alarm fell silent.

“I don’t like this,” Irno mumbled nervously, “I don’t like this at all. It’s *them*.”

“In that case,” Dar Naa replied, “we must take a look outside.”

He turned around to look at Leia, expecting her to agree, but only caught a glimpse of her as she rushed into the corridor on her way to the entry. Her instant departure was confirmation that Irno was right.

“They* were back.

…..

Ren and Rey were already in the meadow.

A short distance away, they saw a short figure cloaked in gray walking toward the ship. The intruder’s steps were cautiously slow, but not alert; it’s movements were tentative, as if walking required effort. Ren set out immediately to intercept it; Rey went, too, but his long strides quickly outpaced hers and she fell behind.

As Ren closed the distance between them, the figure stopped, then swayed and trembled as it dropped to its knees. Then it fell forward onto its arms, and then it simply collapsed onto the grass and rough stones, arms outstretched, completely prostrate.

KT06F could hear his footsteps, and when she thought he was close enough to hear her, she raised her face from the dirt just enough to make the speech she’d come to deliver.

“Kylo of Ren,” she called out, surprising herself with the strength of her voice. His footsteps stopped. “Hear me, my lord, my clumsy attempts to bring us together have failed and I have greatly offended you.”
Female… old… Kourin.

The quiet authority in the voice rising from the creature crumpled in the grass commanded Ren’s attention. He was close enough now to see the aged gray hands with crooked fingers that confirmed what he suspected; the Kourin sent her; her age alone made her special and her presence here now made her a sacrifice.

He waved a hand to tell Rey to stay back. Then he listened.

“I was afraid;” KT06F confessed her guilt eagerly, “I allowed my fear to make me reckless; I allowed my fear to put your companions - and then, *you* - in danger. I lie in shame at your feet.”

Her words touched Ren deeply; regret and shame were something he knew well. Perhaps that was why he knew what was coming next.

“I *beg* you, my lord,” KT06F continued, “spare my children! Let your wrath fall on *me*...”

She looked up at him, but he saw no fear in her face; her ancient eyes met his with gentle resignation as she finished her plea.

"... for *I* alone am to blame."

*Those eyes...*

Suddenly, Ren was back on Jakku listening to Lor San Tekka lecture him about "truth". When the old man had said his piece, he looked at Ren with the same eyes; resigned but not defeated.

And Kylo Ren killed him.

The horror and disgust of that memory overpowered Ren; he closed his eyes and winced, as if it was physically agonizing. Then Tekka's eyes became Han Solo's eyes, and that was unbearable. Ren felt his eyes burning, filling, then spilling over...

He dropped to his knees in front of the old Kourin; she pushed herself up with her arms, kneeling to face her fate with as much dignity as she could muster. Confusion flooded her face when she saw the tears.

Ren reached for her hands, then holding them gently, he said the words to her that he could never say to Lor San Tekka. Or to his father.

"*Forgive* me."

KT06F had no idea why he was saying that, but she understood the tears. She forgot for the moment what he was and why she'd come; she saw only a child in need.

"You cannot change the past", she answered; the words seemed to be coming through her, not from her, "but you can *learn* from it." The advice was gently given, as if he was one of her own. “Light become Darkness shall be Light again.” Then she leaned forward and whispered, as if sharing a secret. "I can help you."

“Help *me*?” Ren asked weakly. “How?”

“Come with me,” she replied, “and I will show you.”

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Chapter End Notes

Hi. Sometimes bridging from one part of a story to another takes more time than one would like, but it did give me a chance to explore Ren's efforts to come to livable terms with his past. It would have been easier to pull the old amnesia trick, but in my fanwank universe, history doesn't simply get erased when it's inconvenient. Ren is making progress, but it's slow and there is always the risk of a relapse; there is no miracle cure, no happily ever after, just the daily struggle to live.

Anyway...

Luke's return next chapter!
Chapter Notes

Sorry this took so long to get posted; work's been a bear lately.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Leia Organa’s life had been one of extremes.

Not even her early years as a princess were free from loss; after her mother died, her father became obsessed with teaching Leia everything he knew about politics and self-defense. Whenever his daughter would question the necessity of learning a new skill, he would reply “Because things happen.”

And nothing more.

As the years passed, Leia came to understand what her father meant.

The Republic rotting from within. Palpatine. Alderaan.

That was followed by darkness and death on a scale no one anywhere had ever imagined, and during rare moments when she was alone, Leia tortured herself with remorse and doubt over things she had done and things she failed to do. And with every new challenge, there would be some point at which she would whisper sadly to herself, “If only there was another way.”

There wasn’t.

But even in the darkest hours of all that, the Light would find Leia. She was lying in a cell deep inside the Death Star waiting to be executed when Luke Skywalker came through the door to ‘rescue’ her, and there was something about him that made Leia believe in absurd and utterly impossible possibilities.

Escaping certain death. Destroying the Death Star. Han Solo.

It all seemed so long ago now; the highs and lows were dulled by time and Leia had long since resigned herself to the fact that, for good or bad, life goes on. Han stayed only long enough to give her a child to love, probably because, deep down, Han knew he wasn’t staying. Leia swore that her son’s life would be different than hers had been, so she never told him the ugly family secret about Darth Vader. Luke argued against it; he even begged her to reconsider, but she made him swear his silence.

Leia Organa was prepared to do whatever it took to protect the child she loved.

She was her father’s daughter.

Stone meadow highlands, The Edge
“Come with me and I will show you.”

Leia, Dar Noaa and Irno were standing with Rey; they’d arrived at the scene in time to witness the entire exchange between Ren and the Kourin visitor and were under its spell. Seeing how her son responded to the Kourin’s plea broke Leia’s heart and filled it with hope at the same time, completely paralyzing her until those words tried to slip past her. The Kourin had lured Ben before; was this a new approach serving the same purpose? Leia didn’t need to consider the answer to that question because it didn’t matter. She already had the answer.

No.

Leia stepped forward instantly, hurrying to reach Ben, to be close enough to protect him, but Dar Noaa caught her by the hand, stopping her. She reacted instinctively, turning to threaten him with a look, but that only made him grip her hand more tightly.

“Let go.” She growled.

“*Wait.*” He replied calmly. “Ren is in no immediate danger. He’s making progress; don’t interfere.”

It was exactly what Leia needed to hear. The only thing more powerful than her need to protect her son was her desperate desire to have him well. She turned her head to look at Ren again, just in time to see him get to his feet, then bend over and take both of the Kourin’s hands in his to help her get up. There was so much gentle confidence in the gesture that Leia felt a burst of cautious joy.

Dar Noaa was right; Ben was making progress.

She turned back to Dar Noaa, not sure what to say, but the look on his face told her that there was nothing he needed to hear. She stepped back, returning to his side to wait and see what Ren would do next, but she didn’t let go of his hand.

What she saw next was Ren leading their unexpected guest by the hand toward them.

Ren was being so mindful of Kourin’s age that the two of them were almost there before he realized that he was about to introduce her without knowing her name. He looked down at her to ask, but she answered before he could.

“I am called KT06F.”

Ren knew First Order nomenclature well; it told him what she was without telling him *who* she was. Under the Order, the Kourin were regarded as property rather than beings, so there was no need to give them an identity beyond what was required for keeping inventory.

“KayTee06,” Ren repeated her name as they arrived before Dar Noaa and the General, “This is...”

“Dar Noaa,” KT06F finished for him, unintentionally cutting him off because she knew all about Dar Noaa and was awed to be in his presence, “Lord of the Sith.”

There was a moment of absolute silence because nobody knew what to do.

Not even Dar Noaa.

He was looking down at the stranger in total disbelief. It was bad enough to have heard that title
before from Dar Na, but at least that time, it made some sense. Dar Na was Sith, his cousin’s child, so it wasn’t surprising that he had an opinion on the subject, even if that opinion was idiotic. And that time, Dar Noaa simply slapped the title away, which was something he couldn’t do this time. The Kourin intruder displayed courage by coming to face the Kylo of Ren alone and then offering herself as appeasement for his wrath. Ren was obviously impressed by it and now that he’d brought her to meet his family, it was unlikely he’d permit Dar Noaa to be Sith about it. As Dar Noaa was arriving at that conclusion, he felt Leia squeeze his hand, then he heard her whisper in his head.

*Just go with it, Noah.*

It was exactly what Dar Noaa needed to hear. He nodded politely to acknowledge the greeting, then leaned over the newcomer slightly, inspecting her the way a Sith Lord would, before he replied.

“Welcome.”

KT06F looked from Dar Noaa to Leia.

“And *you*,” she said with the same awestruck tone she’d used before, “are Leia Organa, princess of Alderaan, senator of the Republic and the general who ended the Starkiller.”

“All that,” Leia answered, “lies behind me now.”

“And so much,” KT06F replied, “still lies ahead.”

It was a curiously leading thing for the Kourin to say. Leia wanted to hear more, but KT06F moved on, resuming her recitation of who everyone was.

“And *you*,” she said, “are Rey. You are...”

“I’m...” Rey replied self-consciously, “… nothing.”

“Not so,” KT06F protested, “but for you, none of us would be here now.”

Rey didn’t know what to say. It was true that she played a part in saving the galaxy, but not on purpose. All she did was fall in love; the rest just followed naturally. But she could feel Ren and the others agreeing and encouraging her to accept the compliment, not just because she deserved it, but because they loved her, and suddenly, she knew exactly what to say.

“You mean,” she said; her voice almost cracking with emotion, “but for my *family*.”

KT06F surveyed the ‘family’, moving her gaze from Rey to Leia, from Leia to Dar Noaa, and then finally to Ren.

“Thank you,” she said, then turned back to the others, “thank you all. The galaxy does not know what you’ve done for them.”

“And,” Dar Noaa grumbled loudly, “I trust it will stay that way.”

KT06F took that as a warning, and responded accordingly.

“Of course.”

Then she looked around, searching. KT06F hadn’t finished her inventory; there was still one left to speak with, but she didn’t see him here. She looked behind the group and spotted him there.

Irno.
He’d been backing away slowly, hoping to go unnoticed.

“And *you*,” she called to him; something familiar and authoritative in her voice stopped him in his tracks, “I know well; KT1097M, who named himself… Irno.”

Hearing both of his names in one sentence was like a slap in the face; Irno’s reply was sharp and filled with resentment.

“I don't know *you* at all.”

If KT06F noticed the hostility, she didn’t show it.

“That is true.” She admitted. “We did what we had to do to protect ourselves. And you, too.” She walked right up to him, coming close to study his face. “You are precious to us, Irno.” Then she pulled up her left arm cloak sleeve, exposing a little device strapped like her wrist like a bracelet. “You know this.”

It was a question asked in a statement, and Irno didn’t remember it, but he knew what it was – an interface! That was why he was so sure he could make one for Ren, because he’d already made one for them. He answered the question automatically.

“Interface.”

KT06F moved even closer; she lowered her voice, as if sharing a secret.

“You made it.”

“Yes.” Irno whispered. “I made it.”

Movement behind KT06F shattered their illusion of privacy. It was Ren, who’d followed KT06F and heard the entire exchange. He was looking at the object on her wrist with great interest.

“May I see that?” He asked.

“Yes.” KT06F raised her arm to let him view the device, but made no effort to remove it from her wrist for his inspection. “He made it for you, Kylo Ren.”

“His name,” Dar Noaa said loudly from behind, “is *Dar* Ren.”

Absolute silence. For the second time in minutes, nobody knew what to do.

Stunned by what she’d just heard, Leia yanked her hand free of Dar Noaa’s. The two of them had many discussions about Ren, but Dar Noaa had never brought up the subject of changing Ren’s name and she could not understand why he would choose this moment - and this way - to do it. Perhaps he was playing the role she'd just asked him to; a Sith Lord could lay claim to anything he wanted, and there was a Sith kind of logic to it: she was his and so, by extension, so was her child.

But Ren was *her* child, not his.

Confused resentment flooded Leia's mind; Ren was Ben, and Ben was Han's Solo’s child! Han was gone, killed by the son who’d rejected both his father and his father’s name. Han Solo was never coming back, and if there was one thing that kept Leia going, it was the belief that somehow, someday, if she didn’t give up, Ben Solo would.

There was no place in her plans, or her heart, for someone called “Dar Ren”.

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Absolute silence. For the second time in minutes, nobody knew what to do.
It was a bewildering conflict; Leia loved that Dar Noaa accepted Ren without hesitation despite knowing how dangerously disturbed her son was. But right now, she hated the idea that Dar Noaa thought he had the right to erase Ben Solo outright without even consulting her.

She felt Dar Noaa’s hand slip around hers again; this time, taking hold gently.

*Trust me.*

His voice in her head was as gentle as his touch, and it told her so much. There was a reason behind what he’d done, but now was not the time to explain. Leia looked at Ren to see how he was taking it, and saw that he was staring back at her. The expression on his face was total uncertainty, as if he was waiting on a cue from her for what he should do.

So she gave him one. A slight, controlled, yet, encouraging, smile.

Satisfied, Ren relaxed. He locked eyes with Dar Noaa, nodded once, then looked down as a sign of submission and respect.

It was settled.

KT06F only saw the silence as expectation; the Dar family was waiting for her to acknowledge her error and then correct it.

“Yes, of course.” She said, then addressed Ren again. “Dar Ren.” She lowered her arm slightly, watching his eyes follow the device on her wrist. “Would you like to see what it does?”

“I know what it does.” Ren replied coolly. “Show me.”

Using her right hand, KT07F extended a finger toward the device and gave it a delicate touch. A soft white light flowed outward from beneath her fingertip, widening as it spread until the entire device surface was aglow. A second fingertip touch and the glow began to shimmer, demanding Ren’s attention, drawing him in…

A blast of air stung his eyes. The Visitor’s proximity alarm chimed.

Blinking dust out of his eyes, Ren looked in the direction the sudden breeze came from and saw it sitting there. It was identical to the one the Kourin had sent before.

“What’s it called?” Ren asked.

“A transport facilitation pod,” KT06F answered, “but when we speak of it, we say TFP.”

“TFP,” Ren said, more to himself than to her. Even though he’d seen it before, his memory of that event was foggy at best, so it felt like he was really seeing it for the first time. Again. But this time, his fascination was tempered with caution, so he stayed where he was, beside KT06F, studying it from a distance.

“So,” he asked, “this is how you travel between star systems?”

“No,” she replied, “We can only use it here, on this world; local calculations are not very complex. To go… *further*… requires more power than it can channel by itself. To go further, it requires…”

“*Me*.”
“Yes.”

“It looks much too small,” Ren raised his hand in front of his face, then framed the pod between his finger and thumb for a quick estimate of its size, “for such long trips.”

“Long trips?” KT06F was amused by the naivety of his comment. “Not at all. It’s as big as it needs to be; time and distance are unimportant when you’re folding space.”

*Time and distance are unimportant? Folding space...*

At first, Ren’s mind was unable to grasp the concept; the words ‘time is unimportant’ contradicted everything he knew - or thought he knew – about space travel. A hyperdrive could reduce interstellar travel time from ‘you won’t live long enough’ to ‘you can be there in this many hours, days, weeks, months or years’, but it all depended on the distance between here and there. As a result, starships had to be large enough to hold cargo, passengers, and everything required to keep them intact and alive, for considerable amounts of time. Folding space made all of that unimportant because folding space made time itself unimportant.

“How… Quickly?”

“Too quickly to measure.” KT06F replied. “For all practical purposes, it is instantaneous.”

“I see.” Ren didn’t really ‘see’ it; the concept sat in his head like a heavy meal that needed time to digest. And it vanished completely when he sensed the General coming towards them. Dar Noaa was at her side, and Ren didn’t know how much of this he wanted the Sith to hear yet. “We’ll discuss this more,” Ren looked back, watching them approach, “later.”

“Of course.”

Because this was the first time that Dar Noaa was seeing the intruder machine, he walked right past Ren and the Kourin, heading directly to the TFP for a close inspection. Leia accompanied him just far enough ahead of them to place herself directly in her son’s way if a door opened, then she stopped and turned to her side, so she would only need her head to keep watch in both directions. It was double duty, because unlike Ren, Dar Noaa required no mind control to lure him inside; the Kourin object’s presence alone was enough to do that.

“This coating,” Dar Noaa passed his hand over the TFP’s hull without touching it, “is reacting to my hand; I can feel it… *pushing* me away.”

“Don’t touch it,” KT06F advised sternly, “it is bonded to me; it will reject *you*.”

“Yes,” Dar Noaa replied, mumbling absently, “I am aware...”

“*Been* there,” Leia reminded him, “*Done* that.”

“Exactly,” Dar Noaa’s hand, his face, too, were hovering dangerously close to the object’s hull as he tested to see how close he could get before the ‘push’ became something more memorable. “I have not forgotten.” He stepped back and dropped his hand to his side. “Ren, if you would...”

Ren took two steps before he found his mother blocking his way.

“Nobody,” Leia said loudly, making sure everyone involved could hear her, “is doing *anything*. Not yet.” She was looking at the Kourin, using the calmly confrontational stance she was famous for.
“We have a great deal to talk about first.” A hint of threat blended with the next words she spoke. “I’m sure our guest understands.”

“Of course,” KT06F replied; she looked toward Dar Noaa, then called to him.

“Step away from the pod.”

Dar Noaa complied immediately, backing away quickly while keeping his eyes glued to the TFP in expectation. The Kourin touched her wrist device again and the object vanished. Air rushed to fill the vacated space, coming hard and fast, making him struggle to stay on his feet. Then it was quiet; dust and debris drifted down to settle where the pod had just been as if it had never been there at all.

It was Leia who broke the awestruck silence first.

“Thank you.” She went to KT06F and offered her hand. “Now, let’s go someplace where we can sit and talk. I’m sure you have as many questions about us as we...”

*Luke!*

Leia was sure; her brother was close.

The feeling was confirmed seconds later when the Visitor’s long range scan detected, then recognized, an incoming ship and set off the proximity alert. The chirpy melody for ‘friendly’ vessels was unique for each ship stored in memory, so there was no mistaking the tune that announced the Millennium Falcon was in range. Ren felt his mother’s joy at the sound, and it set off a chain reaction of conflicting emotions inside him. The joy quickly degenerated into anxious anticipation; he’d be banished to his quarters as soon as the Falcon landed, excluded because of the terrible things he’d done. Luke’s request that he stay out of sight was still in effect, and he’d given his word to obey; it was precaution and punishment combined.

He felt Rey’s arm slide around him in a silent gesture of support. It was enough.

For Dar Noaa, it was simple. If Leia felt it, it was so.

As for Irno, he’d been among the Force-sensitives long enough now to recognize when they were doing ‘Force’ things without being told, and he knew they were expecting their companions’ return. To him, their impending arrival was a signal to make sure the Visitor was ready to *go*, which it wasn’t. He could get everything finished and tested while they were all busy celebrating, but only if he rushed it. The Sith and the others were already totally preoccupied, and they couldn't even see the Falcon yet, so that should make it easy.

Quietly, carefully, he took a step back. Then another... right into KT06F.

“What’s happening?” She asked.

She seemed unaware or uninterested in the fact that he’d just backed into her, and Irno jumped at the chance to keep her that way.

“It’s the *Force*,” he kept his voice dramatically low and the explanation simple, “their friends are back; they will be landing right *here*, and very soon. They can feel it.”

“Their friends?” KT06F asked.
“Yes. It’s that Leia’s brother and some others, and there’s a Wookie, too.”

“The brother...” KT06F’s tone suddenly became serious, “…the Jedi.”

“They call him that Luke.”

“Yes... Luke... the Skywalker.”

KT06F stared up into the sky. The strange, indecipherable expression on her face puzzled Irno, but he had no time for mysteries. He waited a few seconds to make sure she’d forgotten about him before heading off to the Visitor. There was no longer any need to be subtle about it, either, so he turned and ran as fast as he could.

With a little luck, he could be off this world by nightfall.

.........

to be continued...
matters later on, and doing it this way lets me devote the entire next chapter to the family reunion. I'm sure it will need edits and corrections, because I wrote most of it in the dead of night. It's really quiet at 4:30 AM...
Lacy Kin had never planned a party.

Her family didn’t celebrate anything; not even her marriage, because everything was business and the idea of spending time and resources without profit was unacceptable. In her marriage to Lutor Kin, Laci had served many meals to guests, but those guests were always there for business. If the business was successful, Lutor would reward her with some of the profit for her personal use – as long as what she used it for was in the best interest of the business. When circumstances forced Lutor to return to his family’s village, he would refuse all invitations because he saw no profit in them and as his wife, Laci had to decline, too, in order to keep peace between them. She never thought much about it, she just accepted it as part of her job.

All that ended in a single, horrific night, as she lay in the dirt waiting to die and heard his voice for the first time.

“I’m Luke Skywalker.”

And suddenly, she wanted to live.

He told her later that it was just a Jedi mind trick, and she shouldn’t see it as anything more, but she didn’t believe that for a second. Luke Skywalker was everything that voice in the dark promised he’d be and she loved him without hesitation or doubt of any kind.

She just wished she could find a way to make him believe it.

Unnamed star system, en-route home, the Edge.

When Luke rolled over in bed and asked Laci if she would do him the ‘huge favor’ of cooking up a ‘homecoming party’, it was an unexpected joy. Some explanation on his part was necessary before Laci understood exactly what a homecoming party was, but that hardly mattered because she was thrilled that Luke was asking her to do something for *him*. He was always putting himself last, looking after everyone else’s needs instead of his own.

The “yes!” was a given; she’d do anything for him, if he’d just let her.

She was oblivious to the final hours of their journey slipping by while she worked on the task of preparing something wonderful for Luke’s party, making sure that everything she made was something he’d like. The task was not as easy as it one might think, either, because Luke never complained about anything. She’d just completed the final touches and was hoping Luke would approve when he appeared in the kitchen as if he’d heard her thoughts.

“What do you think?” she asked.

Luke inspected her work closely, making sure that no item was overlooked before answering her.

“I think…” he tried to sound serious, but his eyes betrayed him and Laci saw that he was teasing her, “… that you need…” he gave her that little grin she so loved, “… someone to taste it.”
“Someone like you, maybe?”


Laci grabbed a small knife, sliced one of the breads, handed the slice to Luke, then watched him take a bite. He made her wait much too long while he savored the taste, and her confidence began to sag.

“Well?” She asked.

Pulling his hand and what was left of the slice away from his mouth, Luke looked at her with so much affection that Laci wished she was not standing at the other side of the table. She wanted to touch him; she wanted him to touch her.

“It’s *perfect*,” Luke told her, “absolutely perfect. And it’ll be all gone in minutes after we get there.”

A question had been rattling around inside Laci’s head while she worked. She knew it was a touchy subject, but it was just her and Luke here, so it was as good a time as any to ask.

“Will Ren be joining us this time?”

Luke’s reaction to her question was about what she expected; she’d asked about Ren’s absences before, and all Luke told her was that it was ‘necessary for the time being’. Laci didn’t know what the fight between Finn and Ren was about, but it bothered her that Ren was being punished when both seemed equally responsible. If Ren was not going to be included, the very least, she thought, was that she would take him something to eat, even if it meant displeasing Luke.

Luke stared at nothing for a moment before answering her.

“I don’t think so.”

“Then I’ll take something to him, if it’s all right with you.”


“You know what,” he said with surprising gentleness, “let me do it; I need to speak with him.”

“You do? Why?”

“Because we’ve been on this trip for days and days,” Laci cut another slice of the bread, “and I’ve heard lots of talk about Leia, Dar Noaa and Rey, but about Ren – *nothing*. No one mentions his name, not even in passing. All of you act like he doesn’t exist, but he’s always here, Luke; I can see it. In you, in Finn, even Chewbacca; side glances and grunts and long, pained pauses in conversation that scream of something dark.” She picked up the slice and looked at it. “I’m not stupid; I know you haven’t told me the whole story about him.”


“I’m not making a demand,” Laci replied, “I know you’ll tell me when you’re ready; it’s just that I hate seeing how hard it is on you to keep it locked up inside.” She moved around the table until she was on his side, close, looking into his eyes. “You’re not very good at faking indifference, you know.”

“I’m *not*?” Luke challenged her playfully, but quickly conceded the fact. “No, I’m not. I never
learned how to be indifferent. It’s my greatest weakness.”

“It’s your greatest *strength*.” Laci countered. “It’s part of who you are, Luke Skywalker, and one of the many reasons why I love you.”

Her words make him catch his breath. He opened his mouth, but no words came out, so Laci filled the silence by putting the slice of bread she’d been holding into it. Luke accepted the gesture by chomping down hard.


“I should put something aside now,” she shared her thoughts as she gazed at the table and considered what to choose, “and wrap it up, so you can just grab and go when you’re ready.”

Luke garbled something in agreement.

Suddenly Laci’s expression changed; she stopped talking and looked directly at Luke.

“What will happen with Ren?” She asked.

Luke swallowed hard so he could answer.

“I have a few questions to ask him, that’s all.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Laci replied, “I was thinking about the future. Will you be able to make things right again?”

“I don’t know,” Luke answered, “the future is always in motion.” His arms slipped around her, and with a single step, she was snuggling against him. “I *do* know,” he told her softly, “that Leia will never give up on Ren, and Dar Noaa will never give up on Leia. That’s two very strong arguments in his favor.”

“What about you?”

“Me?” Luke rocked her gently, swaying to a melody only he could hear, “I’m an optimist; I always want to believe, as long as you never give up, everything works out for the best.”

“So you’ll never give up on him?”

“I’ll never give up on him.”

………..

In another part of the same unnamed solar system, things were happening very fast.

Stone meadow highlands, The Edge.

KT06F was gone.

Hearing the news that Luke Skywalker was about to arrive seemed to throw the Kourin emissary off balance and suddenly she was saying that she was leaving, but she would be coming back later, after they’d had time to celebrate “the Skywalker’s” return. She tapped the interface on her wrist, the
transport pod appeared with a pop, then she walked inside.

Then she and it were gone.

As soon as the air burst settled and they could open their eyes again, Leia turned to Dar Noaa.

“Is it me,” she asked, “or was that a very hasty departure?”

“Hasty indeed,” Dar Noaa replied, “as if she was afraid.”


“I don’t know.”

“Maybe,” Leia suggested, “she knows that she can’t hold our attention with them arriving, so whatever she came here for will have to wait.”

“She knows *something*, that’s for sure.” Dar Noaa grumbled loudly, then turned his attention to Ren. “What do you think?”

“I think,” Ren avoided the Sith’s gaze by looking back at the Visitor, “that I should go see what Irno’s up to. He left in a big hurry.”

“Yes,” Da Noaa’s eyes followed Ren’s, “he did...”

Rey had been standing there quietly, paying attention to what was being said, but she’d had nothing to contribute to it so far. Back on Jakku, the Kourin’s departure would have been considered common courtesy under the circumstances, so the suspicion shown by Dar Noaa and the General puzzled her. Ren and Dar Noaa’s suspicion that Irno was up to no good back in the ship, however, was completely understandable. She caught Ren’s hand as he started to walk away.

“I’m coming with you.”

“No,” Ren replied, “stay here with the General. They’ll be here any time now and Finn...”

“I know. I feel it, too.”

They hadn’t talked about Finn; that wasn’t necessary because Finn’s distress had been rumbling in their minds like an approaching storm for days. Jumbled, conflicting feelings called to them, some directed to Rey and others aimed at Ren.

_Sorrow and rage, swirling, raging, out of control, and beneath the fury, desperate need..._

“You for Finn,” Ren gave Rey’s hand a gentle squeeze, “Me for Irno.... I have to go, anyway.”

Rey’s face replied for her; in her excitement, she’d forgotten.

“Yes.” She said sadly. “And if Finn wants you?”

“He will.” Ren answered. He had absolutely no doubt about that; he’d seen it many times already. Finn would come with many questions, but only one request. “Tell him that I’ll be expecting him.”

Rey released his hand, and Ren looked at his mother to give her a tiny, reassuring grin because he could feel how it pained her to see him go, then headed back to the Visitor to find Irno and confine them both to his quarters.
Finding Irno was easy; the Kourin was so obsessed with getting the ship flight-ready that there was really only one place he would be – in the cockpit, with his nose inside a diagnostic holodisplay. That was exactly where he was, too, and so completely absorbed in what he was seeing that he didn’t hear Ren arrive, stop at the open entry, then lean against it to watch him.

The holodisplay told the story: the Kyber crystal cluster had completed integration and was online and functioning perfectly. It was fully capable of powered flight again, but a small patch flashing in the image where Dar Noaa and Rey had been sealing the hull indicated doubt about its integrity.

A breach in atmosphere could be problematic; a breach in space could be *fatal*.

That reality could be the only reason that Irno and the ship were still here, but Ren didn’t believe that; Irno was obnoxious and self-centered, but he truly cared about Rey and the General. And despite his rude and combative attitude toward Dar Noaa, Irno respected the Sith - even liked him - in his own peculiar way. As for himself, Ren knew Irno had no choice in the matter; it was likely that the Kourin’s conditioning left him incapable of abandoning Ren for any reason.

Irno mumbled something that sounded like a curse, then dismissed the image with a tap on the waveform. He was just standing there, perfectly still, as if someone had switched him off, too, so Ren decided it was time to let him know he wasn’t alone.

“Bad news?”

Irno reacted to Ren’s voice; he stiffened, but didn’t turn around.

“Yes and no,” he replied, “the cluster is good, the hull, not so much.”

“So we’re still grounded?”

“No, we can fly; we just can’t leave the planet.”

“But we *can* fly?”

“Yes,” Irno finally turned around to face Ren, “We. Can. Fly.”

The irritation in Irno’s voice made Ren laugh, and that made the Kourin even more irritable.

“We can go now.” Irno walked back to where Ren was and glared up at him. “We *should* go; *now*, while we still have the chance.”

“Go? Now?” Ren asked. “Just us? What about about the others?”

That last question managed to crack through the wall of fear inside Irno’s head. He stared at Ren for a moment, then looked past him, into the corridor, as if he could see the others through the ship’s hull.

“They’d be…” he stammered, “… all right... with that Luke.”

“But I don’t want to leave them.” Ren said firmly. “Neither do you.”

Irno looked back at Ren with an expression of paralyzingly pure dread, clearly caught between the urge to run and the desire to stay. Reading the pain on his face, Ren asked a question he already knew the answer to.
“It’s KT06F, isn’t it?”

Irno’s eyes answered before he did. Ren was right.

“Yes.”

A single word, uttered breathlessly, as if it had Irno by the throat, choking him. Ren leaned over and put his hand firmly on Irno’s shoulder, hoping the gesture would comfort the Kourin. Irno’s immunity to the Force prevented any Force suggestions, so Ren relied on something he once believed he’s left far behind.

Empathy.

“She *terrifies* you.” Ren voiced the truth that Irno couldn’t. “Why?”

“I don’t *know* why.” Irno confessed angrily, finding courage to speak in the strength of Ren’s touch. “I can’t remember, but I can *feel* it - that’s what terrifies me.”

“Then come with me,” Ren patted Irno's shoulder as he talked, then slid his hand down Irno’s arm to take hold of his, “and keep me company while I sit this one out.”

“But what if...”

Ren cut him off with a look that said ‘enough’.

“All right,” Irno surrendered, “but only if *I* get the workstation.”

“We’ll see.”

Then they walked to Ren’s quarter’s, holding hands all the way.

..........  

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

There's a great line in the film "Ladyhawke" that goes something like this: "A great storm often announces itself with a gentle breeze." I had to choose between posting a short chapter now or a longer chapter maybe another week from now, and I went with now so you know I'm not dead and haven't abandoned my story. Please be patient.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Updates delayed awhile because I've been really, seriously sick. BUT home and on the mend now and I've got pages of manuscript that just need typing and edits.

I promise I will finish this story!

For those who enjoy the yukky details, kidney stone... Kidney infection... SEPSIS. I might just a story about it.

Please be patient, I'm grateful to you all for sticking with me.

Love.

Jan
Chapter Notes

I'm sure by now, you've moved on to other stories, but I will keep my promise to finish mine. It's so not easy to hit the keyboard again, I can only hope this isn't complete garbage...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luke Skywalker had lived two lives.

His first life was as dull and monotonous as the drifting dunes on Tatooine; the second was a series of huge and unexpected moments; exhilarating highs and horrific lows, each and every one of which changed him forever. That life began with fire and smoke and the sight of the two people he loved more than anything reduced to charred skeletons smoldering in the merciless afternoon glare of Tatooine’s twin suns. That was the moment when Luke Skywalker died, but it was also the moment when Luke Skywalker rose from the ashes reborn.

Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru...

Luke hadn’t thought about them for a very long time; that terrible vision was locked away, buried deep in his memory, behind the endless boredom of growing up on a moisture farm in the middle of nowhere and the long-lost illusion that, although he was bored, he was also absolutely safe there. Uncle Owen had the hardness desert life demanded, but beneath it, there was a kind and loving father determined to protect Luke from his own foolishness. And Aunt Beru was a devoted mother who’d pick him up, wipe his tears away and encourage him to ‘never give up’.

Never give up.

As he sat in the Falcon’s cockpit, more keeping Chewbacca company than co-piloting, Luke wondered why the memory had suddenly surfaced. He’d been sitting for some time, sharing nothing but silence with Chewie as the Falcon slipped from space into atmosphere on final approach to the stone meadow highlands and home. He felt his waiting family’s growing excitement as their sense of each other grew stronger with every kilometer passed. The mission was accomplished, justice was done, soon he’d be on the ground celebrating and getting caught up on their adventures while he was away.

So why had the memory flared up now?

Looking back on it with the wisdom of age and experience, Luke noted that everything that followed that terrible moment was fueled by suppressed grief and rage. It was Obi Wan who set the course he followed, giving him a clear sense of purpose.

Save the girl.

Joining the rebellion was really only a way to do it; Leia was the rebellion. The Death Star, Hoth, his training with Yoda, the second Death Star… Luke did it for her sake.

Well, not all of it...
Luke the hero, Luke the Jedi, could finally look back on his greatest moments with true perspective. 

*I did it for love… and revenge.*

And a generation later, he did it again. It was true that he killed Palpatine to save the galaxy, but there was something more in it; he also did it for Owen and Beru.

And for Ben.

Luke looked over at Chewbacca, who was keeping himself focused on flying the ship he’d been flying since before Luke met him. It was forced concentration, rigid and stressed, as if relaxing for even a moment could bring on disaster. Luke recognized it because it was exactly what he’d done, long ago, when the heartache inside him would rip with invisible claws, silently screaming for revenge. Luke’s heartache was merciless, unrelenting, and only justice – and revenge – freed him from the pain. Now he was sitting here, next to his friend, unable to offer any words of comfort.

Luke understood Chewy’s pain; there’d been no justice, no revenge, for the Wookie.

Han Solo was dead.

……..

Stone meadow highlands, The Edge

The final minutes of waiting was taking forever.

Rey was standing behind the General and Dar Noaa, staring up, but her patience was quickly running out. Sensing Finn’s approach made her ravenous for his presence; Finn was part of her, part of Ren, and his return would make them complete again. It was becoming unbearable, so she distracted herself by intruding on the quiet expectations in front of her.

“Dar Noaa?” She asked.

“Yes?” He answered without turning to look at her.

“Why did you give Ren your name?”

“Yes,” Leia instantly joined the interrogation, “why did you do that?”

Her words made him turn, and the look on her face made him pause to consider his reply before speaking.

“Katy-six.” He started, putting a curious accent on the Kourin’s name. “You saw how completely awestruck she was with Ren?”

“Yes.” Leia replied.

“It makes me uneasy.” Dar Noaa said. “The Kourin only know Kylo Ren; everything they believe about Ren, and us, too, is based on that. But Kylo Ren is gone and Ren – our Ren - is...” he had to search for softer words than the ones in his head, “…is a... work in progress, and extremely fragile right now.” He turned to Rey as he was saying it. “You know that better than anyone.”

Rey’s face answered for her. There was never a moment when part of her wasn’t worried about how precarious Ren’s mind was. She’d shared his nightmares and his dread that he would fall back to the
Dark Side and destroy everyone he loved, when all she could do to help was wrap herself around
him and hold him until the terror subsided. She had no words for that.

“So, until we know more about the Kourin,” Dar Noaa accepted her silence as a reply, “the further
Ren is from his past, the better.”

“I agree,” Leia replied, “but what does giving him your name have to do with it?”

“*You* gave me the idea,” Dar Noaa answered, surprising her, “You told me to be Lord of the Sith,
so I was. The Kourin seem to have a collective mentality; right now, Katy-six is back there,” he
 glanced quickly toward the mountains, then returned his gaze to Leia, “telling them all that the Sith
Lord has claimed Kylo Ren as his own and from now on, they will know him as Dar Ren. They will
obey her words without question.”

He reached for her hand, then pulled it gently toward him, and then up, until it was resting against his
chest.

“I admit,” he said quietly, “it was a purely instinctive thing to do; a Sith show of power; the illusion
that *I* am the one in control here, not Ren. It might put them off track awhile and buy us time to
find out what their intentions are. If we’re lucky.”

Leia said nothing; she was waiting to hear more. And there was more.

“I’m *not* taking him from his father,” Dar Noaa assured her. “There are only a few beings left in
the galaxy who know the connection between Kylo Ren and Ben Solo, and *we* are most of them.
Time will take care of the rest,” he pressed her hand firmly, so she could feel his heartbeat, “and
someday, when Ren is ready, he can be Ben Solo again, free to travel the galaxy as his true self. I
swear it.”

Leia’s eyes were glossy with unshed tears; a tiny smile was holding them back.

“You believe that?” She asked.

“I am confident.” Dar Noaa told her. “He has Rey. He has *you*.”

Rey was staring past them, up at the sky, giving them what was known on Jakku as ‘eye space’ and
keeping watch for the first physical sign of the Millennium Falcon and its crew. A bright star
appeared in the blue, then grew larger and brighter, until it became the familiar shape of the Falcon.

“They’re here!” Rey said excitedly. “See? There!”

The Falcon came in low, curving gracefully as it descended, spiraling around, then over, the little
group below before touching down in the exact place it had departed from. A twinge of sorrow shot
through Leia as she watched the show; it was something that Han and Chewbacca would do to greet
her when they returned from their adventures. This time, it was Chewy memorializing Han in a way
only she would understand. Leia was sure that the Wookie meant only to remember Han, but the
sweet pain of remembrance reminded her of Chewy’s anguish and rage and the absolute necessity of
protecting her son and Chewy from each other.

Then the familiar thump as the Falcon touched solid ground freed her from the prison of those fears.
It settled down like an ancient beast; metallic vibrations and hissing vents whispered weariness, then
quiet relief.

Luke’s mission was over; the Falcon was home.
Not far away, it was quiet in Ren’s quarters; silent, in fact.

Irno was at the workstation, totally engrossed the data log of the Kyber Crystal cluster’s reactivation. Ren’s question about it produced only an irritated grunt, so he decided to just let it go for the time being and get some rest. He was sitting on the sleep platform, eyes closed, having a peek of sorts at the welcome home going on at the Millennium Falcon by sensing everyone’s feelings out there.

He felt Dar Noaa and Dar Na; their reunion was curiously strained, but Ren could not tell why.

He felt Finn and Rey; their reunion was powerful, even passionate.

He felt the General and Luke Skywalker, but their bond as twins was a wall of energy he could never get past. He could only imagine what they were sharing.

Then there was the newcomer, Laci. She was transparent; all of her feelings were about Luke, and aside from a few moments when she felt a tiny bit tired, the woman was simply glad to be “home”.

And yet…

Ren reached out, looking deeper.

Oh. Master Luke, you’ve been *busy*...

He was sitting there considering the implications of his discovery when he sensed something else. It washed over him like a storm surge, completely expected but still surprising.


Ren felt the Jedi crossing the distance, stepping inside the Visitor, coming toward the closed entry. With an effortless gesture, barely a flick of his fingers, he released the entry lock and it slid open to let Luke enter. The sound of the opening door startled Irno; the Kourin’s head jerked around quickly to see who was there, but that was all he did. The Jedi was carrying something, but it was hidden inside a well-wrapped bundle, and that became the Kourin’s only interest.


“Yes,” Ren still had his hand outstretched, so he waved Luke forward, “please.”

“I came here first,” Luke walked toward Ren, “because it looks like the homecoming party might go on for a quite awhile, and I wanted to see you.”

“Here I am.” Ren opened his arms. “In my quarters, as you requested.”

“Good,” Luke replied, “now your mother can relax and enjoy herself for awhile.”

Ren winced slightly; although unintended, the Jedi’s words stabbed into his heart like tiny thorns. He knew the terrible weight of what he was and what he did and what it cost the General to choose him over everything else in her life. His mother had given up everything for him.

“And here I stay,” he reaffirmed his promise quietly, “as long as you wish it.”

There was a moment of silent understanding between them, but it was not master and student; Luke
was looking down at him they way he used to a long ago, when Ben Solo was very young and not a monster. That memory hurt, too, but for some reason, it was also comforting.

“Anyway,” Luke broke the spell with surprising cheerfulnesses, “all of you have been getting by on the meager rations we left behind,” Luke held the bundle out in front of him, “but you can’t attend her party, so Laci thought you might like something *new* to eat.”

The words spurred Irno to action; he slipped off his seat and quickly placed himself directly in front of Luke with his arms outstretched. Luke delivered the bundle into his hands, and Irno turned around, carried it back to the workstation, and began to open it immediately.

Luke looked at Ren, who let him know with a small wave that it was all right.

“Tell her ‘thank you’,” Ren said, “for both of us.”

“And thank you, Ren.”

“*Me*? What for?”

“For saving my life on Qir’Qorit.”

“That was Finn.”

“That was *you*.”

“What does Finn say?”

“Nothing, so far. I wanted to talk to you before I talked to him.”

“It *was* Finn. Even if I helped, it was Finn. He was *there*. He took the risk.”

“Yes, he did.”

“Then there’s no need to bring me into it, then, is there?”

“You were inside his head, manipulating him. He might want to know about that.”

“I can’t get into his head; his hate keeps me out.”

“Then how?”

“I wasn’t alone;” Ren explained, “Rey helped me help Finn help you. It was all three of us working together.”

“Finn might want to know about that, too.”

“*No*,” Ren protested, “please. Don’t.”

The emotion in Ren’s voice made Luke curious.

“Why not?” He asked with calculated coldness. “Give me a reason.”

“Finn *needs* Rey;” Ren explained, “she’s the center of his universe. If you break his trust in her now, he’ll be *lost*; he’ll be... vulnerable... to the Dark Side.”

Suddenly Luke was seeing Ben. Young Ben, looking up at him with eyes full of sadness. Luke remembered that day well; it was the day Ben was delivered to his Jedi Academy. Leia was busy in
session and Han was off somewhere doing something, so the boy had been loaded into a transport for three weeks to get there.

By himself.

Ben never talked about it. Not even once.

Time passed, and Luke forgot about that day; he never intended to leave Ben, but in the end, he did. There was always another mission, another crisis, another need for Luke the Jedi to be somewhere doing something. Luke would feel guilty about leaving the boy behind, but he went anyway. *That* was how Snoke was able to seduce Ben. Cold comfort, reassuring lies, and empty promises made in the depths of Ben’s despair succeeded because Luke wasn’t there to dispel them. Now the man looking up at him was the child again; Ren was remembering his past to warn about Finn’s future.

“At least,” Ren pleaded, “let Rey tell him herself.”

“All right,” Luke replied, “but make it soon.”

“Understood.”

With that, Luke turned and walked to the still-open entry, only to stop there for a minute before turning around to look back at Ren.

“Training tomorrow morning.” He said. “First light. *Be there*.”

And then he left.

For a moment, Ren was paralyzed with simple joy – Master Luke had just released him from his promise! Ren didn’t know why the Jedi had done it, but that didn’t matter. He looked over at Irno, who was oblivious to everything but the food in front of him.

And *that* was rapidly disappearing.

“Irno,” Ren got to his feet, “leave some for me!”

Then he went to claim his rightful share.

...........

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

typos, brain farts, let me know and I'll fix them. Any and all help is appreciated as I stagger toward the finish line...
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A galaxy is an island of matter and energy adrift inside a universe that is finite but unbounded. There are an infinite number of actual realities, probable realities, even merely possible realities, but those are all found in the obvious universe; the rest of reality is invisible. Faced with this one overriding reality, any being anywhere in the galaxy was doomed to go through life suspecting there had to be something “more” out there, but knowing that the more was a secret the universe didn’t share.

The universe kept secrets.

The galaxy kept secrets.

And in the galaxy, nobody was better at keeping secrets than the Oldblood Sith.

Their private bloodline preservation project had continued for generations without being noticed by the ruling Jedi invaders and their hybridized descendants, but their success did not come easily; many sacrifices had to be made along the way to ensure their survival. Natural pigmentation was eliminated. Newborn males would have their facial tendril buds burned out, leaving only pits that passed for dimples. Most, but not all, had their eyes permanently dyed to match the hybrids’ eyes. And every Oldblood Sith child was taught to follow one very important rule:

Stay unnoticed and you stay alive.

That rule would be broken time and time again, until only a few of the Oldbloods remained. The Dark Jedi descendants and their followers took the name “Sith” for themselves, then spread their evil throughout the galaxy until the word “Sith” no longer meant the species, but the politics of Dark Siders. The word evoked fear and disgust everywhere, so no biological Sith was welcome anywhere, and the species was almost extinct. It was then that the Dar, the oldest noble family of the Sith, made one last desperate attempt to save their species by seeking asylum within the Republic.

And that was how Dar Na ended up here...

Stone meadow highlands, The Edge.

Dar Na was getting desperate for a way to escape.

He’d been listening politely for hours. First, there were the greetings; hugs and laughter and moments of uneasy silence when nobody knew what to say. Then came the storytelling. Dar Noaa asked the Jedi to go first, and Luke’s modest account was quickly followed by Finn’s account, which was as dramatic as it was inaccurate. When Finn reached the moment when Dar Na had rescued the ‘lieutenant’ from certain death by carrying her through fire, he looked at the young Sith expectantly, but Dar Na had nothing to add. Fortunately, Luke intervened, saying that they were lucky that Dar Na was with them, which required Dar Noaa to express praise, which required everyone else to add theirs, which required Dar Na to maintain ‘dignity under praise’… which freed him from having to say anything at all. This was not the first time that Luke’s knowledge of Sith custom and culture had come to Dar Na’s rescue, either; Luke seemed to know instinctively when Dar Na needed what Luke referred to as “a little help”.
Then Luke assumed full command of the story, telling about his confrontation with Likit and how Finn came to his aid, deftly shifting all the attention in another direction, leaving Dar Na to shelter behind a mouthful of food. Now it was Finn’s turn to show dignity under praise, and while he tried his best, his effort failed miserably when Leia surprised him with a heartfelt hug. Seeing Finn near tears was a sudden reminder of how much he’d gone through, how much they’d all gone through, and the room fell silent.

And in the silence of that moment, Dar Na saw his chance.

Dar Noaa turned to look at him and, with a slight twist of his head toward the entry corridor, Dar Na silently asked permission to go outside. It was getting late, night was already falling, and he had not yet done a reconnaissance, as was his routine assignment since the day his mother handed him over to the elder Sith. He needed to be out there, alone in the dark, away from them all for awhile so he could think.

Dar Noaa consented with a single nod, and Dar Na slipped away without anyone really noticing.

In moments, he was into the brush, moving silently in the shadows, listening to the sounds of nightfall. Solitude flowed over Dar Na like a shower after a hard day’s labor; listening to the humans was exhausting work. They talked fast, often over each other, and had an annoying tendency to use expressions he could not understand. One would say something nonsensical and everyone would look his way, forcing him to guess what facial expression was needed to make it look like he understood what it meant. Luckily, humans were usually so self-absorbed that they didn’t realize that most of the time, he was just reflecting their own expressions back at them.

Out here, no one was watching. Out here, he could relax.

And yet… there!

It was hovering nearby; so tiny and noiseless that Dar Na almost missed it. At first, he thought it was some native insect, but he sensed no hint of life there and realized what it was. Dar Noaa had spoken about them briefly, but not in depth.

One of their spies.

The Kourin.

Dar Na was intensely curious about them; Dar Noaa’s tone while describing them earlier suggested that elder Sith was holding back, measuring his words to avoid diminishing the joyful reunion with troubling information. He saw Luke notice it, too, but aside from a quick shared look between him and the Sith, the Jedi said nothing, meaning the subject was being reserved for later, when the two elders went for one of their walks. It also meant his curiosity would remain unsatisfied until they decided otherwise, but that didn’t exclude him from investigating on his own- and here one was, practically daring him to do so.

So he took an openly-deliberate step toward the hovering device.

It held its ground.

Dar Na paused to consider his options. When Dar Noaa gave him permission to leave, he was also granting permission to use his own judgment regarding anything he found out here. Caution was always advised, but there were many ways to interpret what that meant...

Suddenly, the little intruder turned and zipped away.
Dar Na reacted reflexively; he reached out with the Force, freezing it in flight, then pulling it all the way back until it was in his grasp.

The ease of it surprised him; his power had grown stronger under the Jedi’s influence!

Luke encouraged him to explore his ability; something Dar Noaa forbid. Aboard the Falcon, Luke allowed Dar Na to stay and observe Finn’s training sessions and would respond to questions in a manner so simple and direct that the words would take root in Dar Na’s mind and grow there:

“Do. Or do not. There is no try.”

Dar Noaa would have said “Do not.” And that would be the end of it.

*Luke and Dar Noaa...*

*Light and dark. Yes and No.*

*Then and Now.*

Dar Na could feel the Force flowing between them like a raging solar storm; it pulled him both ways at once. Someday, it would come to confrontation and Dar Na would be forced to choose between them, something he had no desire to do.

*It’s inevitable. And yet...*

There were moments Dar Na felt that Dar Noaa and Luke were simply the opposite hands of one body; each different, both the same...

*More! *Many* more!*

Indeed, he was being swarmed; he’d let his guard down for a moment and now he was paying for it.

A cloud of hysterical activity hummed all around him. The uncountable horde enveloped him completely for a full minute, then departed as quickly as it had arrived. Now it was just Dar Na and his captive again, so he opened his hand and stared down at it.

“I am Dar Na.” he warned it; warned all of them. “Keep. Your. Distance.”

The captive rose silently, hovered for a second, then flew off into the darkness.

Dar Na followed it.

Inside the Millennium Falcon, a lull had fallen; too much food, too much talk, had finally tired them out. Laci made use of the break to clear away abandoned bowls and cups and Leia immediately joined her, leaving Luke and Dar Noaa to the private conversation she knew was coming.

“I believe,” Dar Noaa was first to announce it, “that I need a walk.”

“I’ll join you.” Luke replied

They passed Rey and Finn on their way out without speaking to them.
As soon as he was sure they had gone, Finn grabbed Rey’s hand and pulled her into the corridor as if to follow them.

“What are you doing?” Rey protested. “You know we’re not invited...”

“I’m not following them,” Finn replied. “You and me; we have to talk.”

“I really should be helping...”

“You’re helping *me*.”

He led her down the ramp, then away from it, just far enough to be out of the light. Then he turned to face her, pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her in an embrace was that was much too intimate and paralyzingly tight.

“Thank you.” He breathed into her ear.

“What for?”

“For saving Luke.”

“You saved Luke.”

“*Ren* saved Luke.” Finn confronted her with the truth. “Not me. Not you. I know Force lightning; I used it once, just once, but I remember how it felt. Destroying that stone on the wall cost somebody a lot of pain, but it wasn’t me - and there’s *no* way Ren would let that somebody be you.”

“I bore my share of it.” Rey pulled back, loosening his grip on her. “We worked together; all three of us, because that was the only way. We protected you - so you could save Luke.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Yes, Finn, it hurt.”

“Good.”

Rey cringed at his words, but composed herself - and then changed the subject.

“He wants to see you.”

Finn’s response was to stare at her in silence for much too long, and when he did finally reply, his tone lacked conviction.

“I,” he said it forcefully and slow, as if convincing himself as well as her, “have nothing to say to him.”

The effort failed completely, as he knew it would. Ray’s days of naively taking him at his word were long past, and not just because of the Goazon. The First Order demanded loyalty and truth, so he had no skill in deception, and if that wasn’t enough to sink him, he was sure that Rey sensed the conflict inside him between his hatred for Ren and the relentless, merciless pull toward him. That was the price for saving the galaxy; he was perpetually bound to to them both.

“You’re lying, Finn.” There was no accusation in Rey’s tone, just understanding. “You do want to see him. You need to see him. I can feel it.”

“You know what *I* feel, Rey? I feel *you*!” He snarled. “Even when you’re...” The conflict and
confusion churning inside him became chaos and his next words bled out with no thought about their impact. “… *with* him.”

His words struck hard; their meaning was clear. Rey’s mouth opened, but nothing came out.

“Yes, Rey, I can *feel* it...” Finn pulled her tight again, his face coming close to hers this time; his lips almost grazing hers. “I feel you and him... All of it… Everything... Like this...”

Frozen in the moment, Rey didn’t resist; Finn’s touch, the warmth of his body and breath felt welcome and familiar...

Irresistibility familiar.

_All I have to do, she thought, is close my eyes and you’d be..._

_Ren._

It was a stunning revelation: here was another current in their bond, secretly flowing between the three of them all the time, connecting them on *every* level! Even their deepest, most private, sensations and desires were being shared in a way that was making it almost impossible to sense where Finn ended.

And Ren began.

_Stop this. She told herself. Right. Now._

“*Finn*."

She said his name coldly, to break the spell. It worked; Finn pulled his face back from hers, staring in confusion that lasted for a second or two before he was himself again. His grasp softened as he studied her face before surrendering to the obvious.

“But, as always,” he whispered sadly, “you’re just beyond my reach.”

“I’m so... sorry,” Rey struggled to find the words, “I didn’t… we... didn’t… realize...”

“*Stop*!” Finn's sadness burst into anger; his arms shot away from her body as if scorched. “Just… Stop.”

“Finn...”

Her voice, softer now, made him pause, but only for an instant this time. He let out a tight-lipped laugh of restrained rage before responding to her.

“You know what, Rey?” His voice was frigid now. “You’re *so* right – I do need to see Ren.”

“Finn...”

But Finn wasn’t listening anymore; he’d turned and was already walking away. Rey started to follow, but had only taken one step before her feet suddenly refused to move. She protested instantly.

_Ren!

Go back to the Falcon; this is between Finn and me._

But...
Trust me. Please.

The Force loosened its grip, freeing her feet, and after getting the last word by letting out a deep and uneasy - but resigned – breath, Rey turned around, ran back to the ramp, up and inside before she could change her mind.

As she entered the corridor, she automatically looked in the direction of the cockpit to check for Chewbacca, who revealed his presence there by snoring softly as he dozed off his meal. There was so much Rey wished she could say to him, but slumber was his only respite here, and she was neither willing nor welcome to disturb it. Female voices from another direction drew her on to the communal space, but she found it empty. Then she heard laughter coming from further on, so she followed the sound to the galley, then through it, and finally to the private sleeping quarters, where an open entry beckoned her inside.

Where she stopped in her tracks instantly.

The room had been *transformed!* It was no longer a bedroom; the bed was covered in neatly arranged piles of folded fabric and footwear, and nestled among those were little treasures of every shape and size. It looked like the kind of shop she would peek into when she was a child on Jakku, only to be chased away by the shopkeeper with insults, threats and an occasional stone or two to make sure she learned the lesson that she was not wanted there.

And the lesson was so deeply ingrained that she automatically took a step back, in preparation.

That’s when the two women noticed her.

“Rey!” Leia greeted her happily, “Finally! We wondered where you went.”

“I, um...” Rey replied quietly, “… Finn wanted to talk.”

“Look what Laci brought us.”

“It’s for us?” Rey asked uneasily. Old habits die hard. “Me... too?”

“Of course, you, too!”

Rey took a step forward, only to pause again, but the General and Laci rushed forward, making her their prisoner as they pulled her toward the treasures. She had no experience at all with anything like this, and it was overwhelming. It became a blur; frenzied moments of trying to see everything at once resulting in seeing nothing at all.

Then she saw something that made everything else fade away.

It was draped gracefully over the chair; the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. It was as if someone had captured the dusty pink sky of a sunrise on Jakku and somehow made it something she could touch; that she could hold.

Or wear.

“That...” she sighed breathlessly, “… color.”

“Yes, I know,” Laci agreed encouragingly, “that’s exactly how I felt when I found it. Try it on; if it fits, it’s yours.”
Across the stone meadow, Finn had stopped at the Visitor’s entry to compose himself before continuing on. The sensation of Ren’s presence so close now swirled around him like a sudden fog, at first overwhelming, then oddly pleasant. Finn didn’t know what that meant, and he didn’t like it.

So he closed his eyes and recited to himself.

“Honor and the Order. Honor and the Order. Honor and the Order...”

The sound of his own voice drowned everything else; the words were meaningless now, but the conditioning that made them effective was still powerful. He’d been chanting it since he was a small boy, repeating it over and over every time the First Order made him do something frightening, just as they taught him to.

Because it worked.

He stepped through the entry and strode down the corridor to towards Ren’s quarters like a robot, keeping his feelings locked down tightly beneath habit. It was no easy task, because the closer he got, the stronger his connection to Ren became, just as it did with Rey. Ren had to be aware of what had just happened between the two of them outside in the dark, but Finn wouldn’t permit himself to think about that because the possibilities of what Ren might do about it were simply too terrifying. Meaningless words were the only armor he had against that terror, so he repeated them again, only louder.

“Honor and the Order.”

The entry to Ren’s quarters slid opened before he reached it.

Still numb with Stormtrooper conditioning, Finn walked inside without hesitation, but what he saw inside was so unexpected that it slapped him back to reality.

Ren looked *terrible*.

The most powerful being in the galaxy was sitting on the sleep platform with his long legs stretched out and his hands resting on his knees, waiting for him. His hair was fallen forward hiding his face, his pants were hanging from his legs as if hung on a drying line and not much else, then there were his hands. They told the story of a body wasting away; the knuckles on his fingers were like knots on a rope and the bones and tendons stood out like the stark features of a desolate landscape. This was now the only thought in Finn’s head, and it shot out of his mouth instantly.

“You look *terrible*.”

Ren turned his head to look at him.

His face was thin, but the scar was only slightly more obvious than before. He was pale, but his eyes still had the dark fire Finn remembered so well and his face showed none of the hostility Finn expected.

“It’s good,” he said sarcastically, “to see you, too.”
“I don’t get it,” Finn didn’t catch the tone at all, “they all said you were doing well...”

“I am.” Ren sounded more hopeful than certain. “It’s not as bad as it looks.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

Ren chuckled softly, as if there was something funny about his question, and it was a few seconds before he was able to set the mystery amusement aside and reply.

“Where would you like me to start?”

“That isn’t what I meant.” Finn caught the reference immediately; asking a psychotic killer like the Kylo of Ren what was ‘wrong’ with him did sound ridiculous. He pointed at at Ren’s knees. “Your hands...?”

“Oh, that.” Ren lifted his hands up, then pulled them back just long enough to look at them briefly before turning the hand with the Kourin energy sink embedded in it to show Finn. “It’s this thing,” he explained, “there’s a problem.”

“What problem?”

But Ren didn’t reply; his attention had shifted someplace else, and the someplace else was already in motion.

It was Irno.

The Kourin appeared out of nowhere, almost leaping into the space between him and Ren, then stood there with his arms crossed and his mismatched fingers twitching nervously as he glared up at Finn. Finn hadn’t even noticed Irno sitting at the workstation when he came in, so the ‘intervention’ was a surprise and Irno took immediate advantage of having Finn’s total attention.

“I’m *working* on it.”

The Kourin said it with condescending authority, as if that was all Finn needed to hear, while blocking Finn’s view, silently defying him to come any closer. The idea of this weak and tiny creature trying to - what, *protect* Ren - was absolutely absurd, but in a strange way, it was also deeply touching.

Finn decided to ignore the body language and get on with his questions.

“Working on what?” He asked.

It’s not your concern.”

After a lifetime of hearing those words, from instructors, from commanders and anyone who outranked him, Finn interpreted the reply as a dismissal. He let out a dramatically loud sigh, then leaned just enough to look around Irno, silently asking Ren the same question.

Ren replied with a shrug, then extended his hand, not reaching out, but signaling 'wait'. He pulled his legs back for support as he leaned toward the Kourin’s back.

“You know what, Irno?” He spoke quietly, demanding Irno’s attention and getting it. “I’m still hungry; maybe you could go see if there’s any food left...”

“But...”
“Finn will stay with me until you get back.”

“You just want me out of the way.”

“Yes.”

For a few seconds, the Kourin struggled with some inner voice, but the resentful snort that followed indicated that Ren had won the argument that hadn’t happened. Without another word, Irno stepped forward, then slipped around Finn and went out the entry door.

They listened until they could no longer hear the sound of him grumbling to himself before returning to the subject at hand.

“This thing;” Ren fingered the device with his other hand, “it’s not working as well as I, as we, hoped it would. Most of the time, I can keep things under control, but not all the time – and not everything. I overload it; it shuts down and resets...” He rubbed it a little, as if it was sore. “… but every time that happens, it could fail outright. And then...”

He stopped playing, turned the hand over and let it drop.


“Yeah, something like that.”

Silence.

It lasted only for a moment, though, before Ren shifted his body into a more comfortable position, took a deep breath and looked up at Finn as if the conversation had never happened.

“And now,” he patted the empty space on the platform beside him, “have a seat and tell me about Master Luke on Qir’Qorit.”

And Finn, who came so ready to kill, so ready to be killed, did exactly that.

……..

Across the stone meadow, Rey was slowly making her way down the Falcon’s ramp; she had to be careful, to keep it perfect until Ren could see her in it.

It was Laci’s outfit, but Laci had given it to her.

The bodice was still a little bit loose even though Laci had pulled the laces as tight as she could, but the rest of it flowed over her body like a morning mist on the distant mountains. The fabric was so light, she barely felt it against her skin, and even the slightest movement set it into motion, making every step she took a dance.

She pranced across the stone meadow, slipping from the Flacon’s lights into the shadows, delighting in how darkness made the color fade into shades of nighttime campfire smoke that magically turned sunrise pink again at the first touch of the Visitor’s lights.

She stopped just before the entry, taking time to inspect the outfit from top to bottom one more time before going inside. Maybe she just needed to reassure herself that yes, this was real and yes, it was
hers. But as she stepped through the entry, her excitement took over, and she covered the remaining
distance to the sleep quarters in a spirited trot, pausing only to tap the panel to open the door before
making a grand entrance.

“I’m back…”

Two faces, one pale one dark, looked up in surprise. Two pairs of dark eyes met hers.

The pink outfit had made her forget about Finn!

She covered her mouth to hide her stupidity, but most of her fingers dropped away as she realized
what she was seeing. Ren and Finn were sitting peacefully, side by side, and judging by the
expressions on their faces, neither had sensed her coming. Why was that?

The two young men quickly got to their feet and came toward her, but neither said a word. And once
they arrived at the entry, they just stood there, staring.

“Laci gave me this.” Rey said. Her voice was a whisper; eager and afraid at the same time. “What do
you think?”

“You,” Finn replied, “look… beautiful.”

Rey breathed out softly; she’d been holding her breath for an answer.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

Then she looked at Ren expectantly.

“And you?”

Ren stepped close, and put his hand out, letting it hover close to her face, but not touching.

“You… are…” He stopped his words like he’d stopped his hand. Rey put her hand on his and pressed
it against her cheek, closing her eyes, letting the feelings that were overwhelming him flow freely
into her, easing the fear. “…*always* beautiful.” He murmured. “Always.”

They felt Finn turning away; they felt Finn leaving quietly; they felt Finn closing the entry door
behind him.

It was just them now.

Ren reclaimed his hand so he could give the pink outfit the appreciative inspection he knew she
wanted. Starting at her waist, his fingers glided over the soft fabric, around her hips and back again,
then up the lacing of the bodice until they found where it was tied.

“Hmmmm…”

“What?”

“This is a problem.”

“What?”

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, “all I want to do is… take this off. Right now.”

She giggled; he swept her up for a kiss. Her lips, her ears, her neck; all the places he knew she liked.
Then he set her down, and together they fumbled over those stubborn lacings.

That’s when they heard it.

It was soft and tentative, barely a tap.

They exchanged a quick, puzzled look, then Rey eased Ren’s hands out of the way, went to the entry and opened the door.

Finn.

He was standing there, helpless and lost, with his hand raised to knock again.

Rey looked back at Ren; his face showed only wide-eyed curiosity.

And that was enough.

She looked back to Finn and silently offered him her hands.

He accepted, and she led him inside.

.......... 

_to be continued...._

Chapter End Notes

The real world has been so difficult of late that I'd forgotten how much I love this galaxy so far, far away! And how hard it is to put images into words, even when you know nobody is listening. It's gotta be a marathon, not a sprint, but I'm in it to the very end.
A very short chapter this time, which is kinda embarrassing for someone as long-winded as I am. And if you’re not watching season 2 of the History Channel’s "NIGHTFALL" - GO! GO NOW!! Mark Hamill is everything you wished for in TLJ. But didn't get.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Light and Dark.

Two absolutes, but by designation only; between absolute Light and absolute Dark, lie an infinite number of possibilities – and infinity is a hard thing to fathom.

What is absolute Light? What is absolute Dark? If they exist as singularities somewhere in an infinity of singularities, how could anyone ever be sure of what and where they were at any time, ever? And how to find them? Even if one stands in a completely sealed, dark room with their eyes closed, the internal noise of their own living eyes and brain still sparkles faintly, making absolute Dark impossible. The same can be said for absolute Light; standing in blinding light with one’s eyes wide open fails because a living body defends itself, increasing pain until eyes must close. The paradox of something being absolutely real but absolutely impossible to experience was what pushed the concepts of Absolute Light and Absolute Dark out of ordinary physics and into metaphysics, where they quickly became religion because nobeing could ever know them.

That all changed in the Goazon.

It was there that three beings embraced Absolute Light... no wait...

… they became Absolute Light.

Together.

It was in that timeless, immeasurable place that the first and only act of Absolute Light took place and the galaxy was saved, but the galaxy would never know about that. For all anybeing anywhere knew, that was when the Holonet failed; they would complain bitterly about it for generations to come, but never hear how and why the most infuriating event in galactic history happened. They would never hear about the three or know their names or that the first and only act that saved them all was an act of absolute, selfless love. That was probably just as well, because Absolute Anything comes at a terrible price for those who achieve it.

Together. Forever.

Stone Meadow Highlands, The Edge.

It was either very, very late, or very, very early when Finn stepped out of the Visitor entry and started to cross the meadow. The meadow was still dark, with only the Visitor’s lights to start from and the Millennium Falcon’s lights to head for and a river of darkness flowing between them.
Finn walked quickly, moving from light to shadow to dark like a furtive animal trying to avoid being seen. By the time he slipped into the dark, he was practically running, but once inside the cover of unresolved night, he slowed, then stopped altogether.

Standing very still, he put his hands over his nose and mouth. His fingers still carried their scent, and he breathed them in.

… their hands on top of his, guiding them gently, teaching him as if he was a child; sensations, scents and sounds…

Even now, his body reacted.

*I had no idea it would be so … Poe was *right*.*

**Poe.**

The thought sobered Finn instantly. Poe was gone; he was out there somewhere, terribly injured, maybe even dead…

*He’s alive; I’d know if he wasn’t. I’d *know*.*

What would Poe say if he ever learned about last night? About the first part, Finn wasn’t sure what Poe would say; the man was always vague about his own ‘experience’, but Dar Na had said more than once that Poe’s interests were wider than his own.

Whatever that meant.

There was no doubt how Poe would react to the second part; he was adamant that Finn needed to stay far away from Ren. Finn shouldn’t have gone back, he shouldn’t have stayed when Rey fell asleep, and he shouldn’t have spent hours more sitting on the floor, talking.

With Ren.

But he did it. He did it all.

Not that the talk was a momentous event; almost nothing of immediate substance came up. That was because he couldn’t make himself talk about *it* and Ren didn’t seem interested, either. Instead, the hours slipped past while they talked about the First Order and what would happen when the Order and the Republic finally got on with it face-to-face. Somehow the topic shifted to how terrible Stormtrooper armor was and that quickly decayed into bad jokes about getting hurt and that put Finn at ease just long enough to forget where he was and who he was with to ask Ren about the scars on his wrists.

And Ren told him.

“It was me.” he stared down at his wrists as if talking to them. “I did it.”

Until now, the little Finn knew about Ben Solo seemed more than enough: he was Han Solo and General Organa’s son, someone who had every advantage in life but still became the monster Kylo Ren. But the monster was answering the question without hesitation, and as he listened, Finn could sense that Ren was telling him the naked, ugly, unvarnished truth. Ben Solo’s privilege was cold and lonely, his advantage came with terrible side-effects, and when the horrific family secret was exposed and the entire galaxy judged *him* for it, he was utterly alone.

So Ben Solo decided to end it, but he failed at everything.
He couldn’t even *die* well.

The rest of Ren’s story seemed to parallel Finn’s own: found and taken by agents of Snoke, conditioned mercilessly, then sent out to crush everything and everyone that stood in the First Order’s path. In very different ways, they were both victims of Snoke’s insatiable lust for power and willing participants in the brutal quest to attain it. In the end, it turned out that the Knight and the Stormtrooper had more in common than the girl sleeping peacefully between them. But Ren made no excuses; he blamed no one else, not even Snoke.

“So,” he said quietly, “now you know. I did it... I did it all.”

Then he ran out of words, and the silence that followed felt like death.

It ruled the floor for quite awhile, as both men withdrew into their own thoughts. Ren remembered that he had some ration bars stuffed between the sleep platform pad and the wall, so he turned as far as he could, wrestled the pouch out, then turned back, and offered it to Finn. Finn took the pouch, removed a bar, then handed it back. They spent the rest of the time quietly sharing the contents of the pouch until it was empty because the Kourin never did come back with food from the Falcon. And when Finn finally got to his feet to leave, Ren acknowledged his departure with a single nod and nothing more.

It was only when he found himself outside in the glare of the Visitor’s lights that Finn began to have second thoughts about everything.

*Everything’s *changed*. Especially *me*.

The sight of the Falcon’s night lights turning off felt like cold water on his face; they were a harsh reminder that the night was over. While he’d been standing in self-absorption, morning crept in and now the night mist was morning mist, already falling, making the dark stones and boulders of the meadow shine with dew as if polished. The beauty couldn’t hold his attention, though, because it meant he only had minutes left to get to the Falcon, strip, shower and dress again to be ready for training, and he wasn’t going to disappoint Master Luke.

*Everything else can wait...*

He started walking again, quickly, this time and was at the foot of the Falcon’s entry ramp, about to start up, when he felt it.

*Behind me.*

He stopped, spun around to look and saw a lone figure emerging from the brush, heading toward him. Everything about it was familiar; Finn admired how it moved through brush and across the meadow in a manner so smoothly graceful that it disturbed absolutely nothing along the way.

*Perfect silence for perfect stealth.*

Dar Na.

Finn waited until the young Sith was close before asking the obvious.

“Were you out all night?”

“Yes,” Dar Na answered, “as were you.”

Finn caught his breath; it never occurred to him that anyone would be up now, or that anyone would
witness his leaving the Visitor. At least, it was only Dar Na, and he was unlikely to be curious.

The Sith studied him intently him for a few seconds, then leaned forward a bit and sniffed.

“Oh...” Dar Na said approvingly, “… finally.”

“What?”

“This is good.” Dar Na replied. “Now you can decide.”

“Decide? Decide *what*?”

“Do you stay?” Dar Na’s tone suddenly became serious. “Or do you go?”

Finn understood instantly. They hadn’t spoken of it, but they didn’t need to; Chewbacca was caught in an impossible situation here. If he stayed, it was only a matter of time and opportunity before he would try to avenge Han Solo’s death and Ren would kill him. And if by some miracle, he killed Ren, the act of killing the only son of his best friend would destroy Leia Organa and haunt him forever.

Dar Na saw that Finn understood what he was saying, and continued.

“The Wookie will leave soon,” he told Finn, “When it happens, it will happen quickly, so you must be ready if you are going with us.”

“with *us*?” Finn asked. “As in *you, too*, us?”

“Yes.”

“Will Dar Noaa permit...”

“I need no permission,” Dar Na interrupted, “I choose my own path.”

“And choosing your own path,” Finn nodded, remembering how he left the First Order, “will happen ‘quickly’ because you’re going to sneak out without telling him.”

The tiniest reaction on Dar Na’s face admitted as much.

“It’s the same for me.” Finn confided, confessing the fear he’d only just realized. “If I don’t go now, I may never get another chance.”

“That is true.”

For a few moments, both of them were lost in their own thoughts because leaving this time could mean never coming back and neither of them was prepared for how painful that idea was. For Finn, it meant abandoning his new family to whatever this place held for them but never being free of them, ever. For Dar Na, it meant rejecting Dar Noaa, who he'd come to respect and admire greatly, which was the same as rejecting everything it meant to be Sith. Just as they finally looked at each other again, ready to discuss the situation, a strong tremor in the Force alerted them both.

“Dar Noaa and the Jedi,” Dar Na confirmed it for Finn.

“They were out all night, too?”

“Yes.”
Suddenly Finn remembered why he’d been in such a rush to get back to the ship and cleaned up.

“Maybe,” he said said quietly, “I should get going.”

“I agree.”

Finn gave Dar Na a look that was part grin and part grimace, then turned and hurried up the ramp into the ship.

Dar Na watched him go, but did not follow. Instead, he turned to face the direction he could feel the elders approaching from and waited. It would only be a few minutes more now, and he had something to report.

*Earlier that night, while tracking the Kourin spy devices, he’d spotted a group of the Kourin themselves. He worked his way quickly through the dark brush, but when he arrived at the location where he should have intercepted them, they had vanished without a trace. That fact was more disturbing to Dar Na than their presence, since the gray creatures had evaded him much too easily. He decided to retrace his path until he found them again.*

*Several circles later with no success, he did spot Da Noaa and the Jedi.*

*The elders serious-sounding conversation fell silent, indicating that they sensed Dar Na’s presence, but they made no attempt to summon or dismiss him and resumed their discussion.*

*Dar Na knew his place; he stayed where he was and kept watch.*

*From his vantage point, he could see them below and the lights coming from the ships back at the meadow beyond but little else. The Kourin were probably long gone by now, along with their flying spies, but their activity so close was reason for vigilance. The night had gone cool and quiet, making it possible to stay alert while thinking about about other things.*

*Only one thing, really.*

Kaydel.

*He’d thought about her many times since Qir’ Qorit. With every parsec passed, he thought about her more and more and by the time they landed in the stone meadow here, he was thinking of little else. She was human, yes, but she was just like Leia Organa, strong and brave; she was someone a Sith could spend a lifetime exploring...*  

*Our children would be *formidable*.*

*As he stood there, silent and still as the rock and stone at his feet, he came to clarity about her.*

*She is the one.*

*The rest came easily; he would find her and claim her as his own. He would take her before the war did. The Wookie would not refuse his request for transport because Dar Na could serve as copilot now.*

*The only *real* problem was Dar Noaa.*

*The Sith Lord would certainly object to such an inherently dangerous plan – and he would not be wrong about the risk. Kaydel was with the Republic fleet, on her way into battle. In order to take*
her, Dar Na would have to locate the fleet, find a way to get on board, get her, then get off again
without being captured. And he’d probably be doing all that in the company of a suspected First
Order spy and a Wookie, in the very ship that helped the First Order spy escape from them before. It
was the kind of thing that only a Sith would attempt because only a Sith could expect to succeed.

Great risk.

Yet that risk was nothing compared to the wrath of a Sith Lord; there was no way Dar Na would
fight his Lord and no way he would win if he did.

So he would say nothing of it.

The Kourin activity, however, was another matter...

As the elders emerged from the brush, Dar Na saw Dar Noaa raise a hand to summon him and
started walking to meet them immediately. He’d report what he’d seen, then get out of the way
before the Sith Lord sensed what he was feeling and asked about it. As soon as he saw a chance, he
would speak with the Wookie privately and together they would make a plan.

It was going to be an eventful day.

.......... 

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Reactions are invited. I honestly don't know if what I've written came across the way I
wanted it to.

Also, since I've been really stressed for time, and just plain stressed, if you note any
typos and brain farts, please point them out so I can fix them. Thanks.
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

Type, read, edit, re-edit, read again. Repeat. And now, head aching, finger unsteady as it taps to upload...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Morning on the stone meadow highlands was a time of quiet.

As morning mist resigned itself to dew, night creatures returning to dens, some satisfied, some still hungry, slipped silently from view while day creatures were taking that first cautious peek outside. For a few precious moments, a truce between weariness and anticipation existed, just long enough for a changing of the guard.

There was nothing spectacular or special about it; it simply happened.

In fact, the only unusual thing about this particular morning was how awake and active the alien ship on one side of the meadow was while the alien ship across the meadow from it was silent and still.

Stone Meadow Highlands, The Edge.

Ren was awake.

Anticipation roused him; he awoke in childlike excitement about being granted permission to attend training with Master Skywalker. It had been such a long time that he’d forgotten most of the bad times that happened while he studied under the Jedi master and this morning, only good memories filled his head. He cautioned himself about expecting too much; the fact was he deserved absolutely nothing. Still, just being allowed to stand in Luke’s presence again held so much meaning that he could not resist feeling a tiny bit hopeful about it.

He washed, dressed, then sat on the sleep platform to put on his boots, but as he leaned over to pull the first boot on, his eyes drifted past it to gaze on her.


Looking at her now, Ren thought about last night. He wasn’t sure how he was supposed to feel about it this morning, but that didn’t matter because he would feel any way she wanted him to.

It was her party; he was just one of the guests.

Last night, she was a Goddess, giving and taking as she pleased, bestowing pleasure after pleasure on her two adoring slaves. That was another curious similarity between himself and Finn, neither of them wanted to take; they both wanted to be taken. It was Rey who wanted, who needed, to be in control, so they gave it to her.

And after that, totally confusing and breathtakingly amazing things happened.
The three of them shared everything. *Everything*.

He was Rey. He was Finn. They were him.

And that’s when *It* happened.

They became One.

For a glorious, incomprehensible instant, the Singularity was with them.

It *was* them.

And then it was not.

They were separate again; arms and legs tangled, hands touching, a sloppy mess on the floor.

At first, he was unable to even glimpse in Finn’s direction, and when he finally found the courage to try, he saw Finn staring off into nothing. They stayed as they were for quite awhile, dazed and silent, until their Goddess closed her eyes and fell asleep. The contentment on her face was like a campfire on a cold night, and they basked in the warm glow of a job well done.

Later, he and Finn talked about everything but *It*.

It was a surprisingly good conversation, too; perhaps that was because they were just too tired to do much of anything else. They shared insights and speculations about the inevitable confrontation between the First Order and the Republic and came to the same conclusion: it would be catastrophe on a scale the galaxy had never experienced before. Both sides were already crippled; neither side would back down.

Almost all would die.

Those who survived would have won only chaos and ruin.

Then another thing happened; Finn asked about his wrists. Ren saw no reason not to tell him; he remembered the worst day in Ben Solo’s life clearly and sharing that story would help to strengthen their bond, and that was what the night had been all about.

It was, in fact, the *only* reason he allowed it to happen.

A simple transfer; powerful knowledge, in the heat of the moment.

*Unnoticed*.

This morning, Ren knew two things: first, Finn was almost his equal now and second, Finn would never abandon Rey. Finn would come and go, free to find his own destiny out there, but if the worst happened – if Ren fell into darkness again – Finn would sense it instantly and come.

And then Finn would do what was necessary.

This morning, Ren knew that for sure. It was an enormous relief.

Finn, of course, had no idea what he’d been given last night; it was safely buried deep inside, for him to discover on his own. And with both Luke and Dar Noaa to guide him, Finn could someday become something extraordinary; a being for which there was no defined identity because no label was adequate enough or required anymore.
Finn will just be Finn. And the galaxy will better for it.

The quiet rumble of a snore coming from the Goddess at his feet broke the spell. The Force of Nature stirred slightly, and Ren wondered if his thoughts had crept inside her head. She looked so fragile lying there that no being anywhere would ever believe that last night, this 'girl' took on what were arguably the two most powerful males in the galaxy and made them bow to her will.

After that, she really needed the rest.

But she also expected to be at his side for morning training, which meant he only had a few minutes of quiet left before he would have to wake her.

He tossed his boots onto the sleep platform and dropped quietly beside her.

As he lay there, a vivid memory of their first night together on Degobah flashed in his mind. He remembered how good it felt to open his eyes and see her there, sleeping at his side, how he crept into her dream and met her again for the first time as himself.

I love you. Wake up.

……

Across the meadow, the Millennium Falcon was bustling with activity. The living beings were all inside eating the morning meal, leaving the chore of unloading the ship’s cargo to the droids. Most of that fell onto Threepio, because his two counterparts lacked the convenient accessories of arms and hands.

“Lift and carry,” The golden droid complained as he loaded another bundle into the service cart. “Carry and lift. And then, take it over there and do the same thing all over again.”

Below, R-2 was waiting for the lower and release so he could pull the cart away and escape the ceaseless whining coming from above. Threepio was not designed for the monotony of manual labor; he was designed to talk.

And talk he did.

R-2 had been hearing that talk for a very, very, very long time. And he had stopped listening to it a long, long, long time ago, too. Instead, he would periodically beep out a “yes” or “understood”, anything that gave the impression he was paying attention as long as it didn’t get Threepio’s attention. The new droid, BB8, was waiting nearby and its half-dome head was spinning back and forth, up and down, as it tried to follow the not-conversation to no avail.

“R-2, are you listening?”


“Easy for you to say,” Threepio replied, “all you have to do is roll that way; I’m the one stuck doing the rest.”

R-2 was about to offer another meaningless comment when a deep, throaty growl coming from up and inside interrupted the exchange. It was Chewbacca, fresh from feeding, arriving with more
bundles. He pushed Threepio aside, finished filling cart himself, then lowered it. R-2 released the
cable, then replaced it with another and started off with BB8 rolling behind. As the two little droids
made their escape, they could hear Threepio talking to the Wookie.

“My, you certainly are *motivated* this morning, sir...”

………

Inside the Falcon, in the galley, Laci was watching the food being consumed and trying to figure out
what seemed different this morning.

It was quiet.

Aside from saying yes or no to offered food, Luke and Dar Noaa ate in complete silence. It was true
they’d been out walking the whole night, so maybe they’d said enough out there. When she told
them how she left Leia for a few minutes last night and came back to find her sound asleep on the
bed, they both simply nodded as if they already knew it. Laci was still getting used to Luke knowing
things without being told and now, here was another just like him.

Dar Na seldom said anything at meals, so his silence was expected.

Finn, however, was a different story.

He loved what he called morning chatter, but this morning when he greeted her, he gave her the
same polite words he always did, but there was something about him this morning that seemed...
different. Subdued. Perhaps he hadn’t slept well.

Chewbacca came, took his food and left to eat it someplace else.

The droids were all at work. Someplace else.

So it was quiet. That's all. Just... quiet.

Still, with every passing moment, Laci felt more uneasy; something wasn’t right.

She just didn’t know what.

………

Across the meadow, Ren’s boots were still on the sleep platform waiting for their owner to put them
on; he was sitting right beside them, but all of his attention was directed elsewhere.

Rey was awake and rushing through getting cleaned up before getting dressed. That alone was
enough to deserve his interest, but as she washed and rinsed and dried herself off, she was delivering
a totally unnecessary summary of the ‘whats’ from last night while avoiding any of the ‘whys’. Ren
sat quietly, letting the flood of words flow past him without reply, patiently waiting for her to get to
the point, whatever the point was. Eventually, she paused for a deep breath, then turned around,
standing there naked, fresh and beautiful, to look directly at him.

“Well?”

Ren made a face. He had no idea what she said just before turning.
“Well what?”

Now she made a face. Confusion first, then uncertain. Then worried.

Ren had no idea why.

“About last night...” she lowered her eyes like a child expecting punishment, “… are we… all right?”

Ren stood up.

He’d been fighting the urge to go to her, to hold her, to kiss her, because they were expected outside any time now – but this was important. She needed to hear from his own lips that nothing had changed between them; she needed to hear something she could believe.

His long legs took him there in just a few strides.

She was weightless in his arms as he picked her up; weightless as he looked into her eyes; weightless as he pulled her close, then kissed her. It was a kiss born of absolute love, and it answered her question perfectly.

Then her put her down.

“Now, hurry up,” he said, “or we’re going to be late.”

……

Across the meadow, Dar Na was standing at the foot of the Falcon’s ramp idly watching the droid parade. Boulders, rocks and loose stone that he could avoid easily were a minefield for them, and it was amusing to see the wobbles, bounces and sudden halts that marked their slow progress across the meadow. Every obstacle encountered seemed to require a discussion of what to do. He was enjoying the latest delay when he heard Finn step out onto the ramp and start down.

A few seconds later, Finn was standing beside him, looking in the same direction, but not, Dar Na suspected, for the same reason.

The other ship's entry was open, but no one had come out yet.

Another outburst of 'obstacle' discussion snapped Finn’s attention away from the Visitor’s entry, and he only studied the situation there for a moment before pronouncing sentence.

“At this rate,” he grumbled loudly, “unloading the ship is going to take… forever.”

“Yes.”

“We need to work on that.”

“Yes.”

“As soon as Luke lets us go, we should...”

Dar Na didn’t notice that Finn had suddenly stopped talking, for the same reason. They both sensed it before seeing it; a powerful flow of the Force coming from the far side of the meadow. It was awesome and enticing, like an approaching storm, but the tall thin man and slim young woman who appeared at the Visitor's entry and stepped out onto the meadow seemed oblivious to it.
Dar Na heard Finn take a deep breath, as if resigning himself to something, then watched Finn start walking toward them, but he made no effort to follow. He didn’t know and he didn’t care and he intended to stay that way…

“Dar Na?”

The young Sith spun around to see the Jedi standing right behind him.

His surprise quickly became embarrassment - he’d been caught totally unaware of what was behind him because of what was in front of him! Awareness was *basic* training for Jedi and Sith alike and there was no excuse for such a failure; had Luke been an adversary, Dar Na would be dead right now.

He lowered his head in submission and waited for the correction that did not come.

“Everything,” Luke looked past him, toward the three out on the meadow, “it’s all so *new* now, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“All of us have a lot to learn.” Luke replied.

“Yes.”

“And I beleive,"Luke said, "we should begin this morning."  

“Yes.”

“Good.” Luke reached for his lightsaber, then studied it in his hand. “We'll learn a new way…” he held it out, offering it to Dar Na, “… for *all* of us.”

Dar Na stared at him in disbelief.

“It’s only on loan,” Luke urged, “you will train with this until you can make one for yourself, like I did.”

Dar Na reached, then hesitated, then reached again.

And took it.

……

Finn paced himself so they would would come together half-way.

He hoped the symbolism in that would mean something to Ren, and give this morning a chance not to end everything in one swift gesture of the Kylo’s hand. He’d left earlier without incident, but now that Ren had had some time to *think* about things, there was no telling what he might do.

They didn’t talk about Rey at all last night.

Finn feared that was a huge mistake now that *he’d* thought about things. If he’d had the courage last night, he could have told Ren that he understood now. He loved Rey and she loved him – but
their love was not the same as the love Rey shared with Ren, and as hard as Finn tried to make himself believe otherwise before, he’d known it all along. Now that he understood the difference, Finn knew that the special place in his heart, in his soul, yearned to be filled by someone *else*.

Last night, Rey taught him what love was, and Ren taught him where love would be found.

He was still coming to terms with that.

When the middle ground was reached, the three of them stopped, and after a few moments of awkward silence, Rey stepped forward to give Finn a brief hug. That was all there was to do. Nothing more was necessary.

They walked toward training together.

…..

Inside the Millennium Falcon, Dar Noaa was on his way to observe the how the Jedi was going to conduct this morning’s training. They’d discussed it only briefly last night, just long enough for Luke to say that his restriction Ren had been lifted and how much he would value Dar Noaa’s assistance for this first time having all the students together in one place. It was not an empty compliment; there was considerable risk involved and the Jedi could use an extra set of eyes on them. There was no discussion of exactly how they would handle anything that might go wrong, but between the two of them, they could handle anything that did. The only problem that might arise was the fact that "anything" in this case was precisely that because Ren was capable of *anything*. If Leia's son was provoked, if he lost control for even an instant, the outcome could be too terrible to imagine. Dar Noaa expected things to go well, but he knew that this was more an act of faith than of confidence and he had a bad feeling about it.

When the morning meal and Luke went to take command of his students, Dar Noaa stayed behind so he could check on Leia first.

He found her curled up on the bed amid the bundles, partly covered by a blanket.

She was dreaming… but *not* about him.

He chastised himself for peeking into her mind; the bed, the vessel, everything here had *nothing* to do with him and he had *no* right to expect otherwise. She was with Han Solo, far away in the past, reliving a time when a Sith named Dar Noaa did not even exist in her life.

It *hurt*.

Dar Noaa had no illusions about her love; Han Solo came first. He always would. That was the cost of loving Leia Organa now that she belonged to Dar Noaa, and it was a cost he was willing to pay. He just wished it didn't hurt so much.

He watched her sleep for another moment, then gently adjusted the blanket and left her to her dream.
He was still stinging inside when he stepped onto the ramp, looked out onto the meadow and saw Luke had the training already underway.

It was impressive; Luke standing before the line of students, the students all standing ready with lightsabers ignited.

Dar Na standing *with* them - and he was holding the Jedi’s *weapon*!

……

Chewbacca was keeping himself busy in the cockpit when he heard it.

He didn’t know what was being shouted, but he recognized the voice; the Sith was outside the ship, exploding in a fit of rage over something.

He had to stretch his body and then turn his head as far as he could to see what was happening out there.

Dar Noaa was walking rapidly toward Luke, ranting something he couldn’t understand, but the menace in both was perfectly clear. If it was anyone other than Luke, Chewbacca would have instantly gone to his aid, but when it came to Force-sensitives, especially Jedi versus Sith, the only wise thing to do was to wait for a sign that help was wanted.

So he watched.

He saw Luke standing his ground calmly. Luke’s eyes were fixed on the Sith, tracking every move, every gesture, without reacting to any of it. Luke’s posture was more patient parent than experienced warrior, though, and Chewbacca figured that meant he was simply letting the Sith burn himself out before responding to whatever had set him off in the first place. It was quite a show at that, everyone out there was totally captivated by it, especially the students…

… *All*. Of. Them.

This was his chance!

Every second was precious; he he raced for the entry, grabbing his bowcaster along the way.

………..

to be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Somebody, *please* - tell me if I've gone completely off the rails here or you can see it.
Chapter 49

Love and Loyalty.

Those two words alone were enough to describe Chewbacca; his entire life had been defined by one or the other, or both, which often resulted in conflict, sacrifice and pain. It was the conflict that invariably cost the Wookie more than any other sentient being could have borne. Doomed to end his life alone, locked in a filthy cell, starved until his spirit was broken and then kept alive for the entertainment of his captors. Other prisoners, some dead, some not quite dead, would be tossed into the cell to ‘feed’ him, and Chewbacca did what he had to do to stay alive. It was a nightmare where instinct and savagery ruled, because there was no place for anything else.

Then everything changed because Han Solo showed up.

The young human dropped into his life at the very moment he’d decided he’d could bear no more. The shard of composite concrete quietly, carefully, worked out of a crack on the floor that Chewbacca had created by stomping, pounding, anything he could think of, on the only weak spot he could find, then sanded against that same floor whenever the guards would not hear until the edge was as sharp as it would ever be. He was silently reciting the rituals when he heard the sound of the grate opening overhead; instinct took over and he went after the last meal he never ate.

Han Solo.

It should have been easy, but it wasn’t.

The little human’s only defense was language; that was something Chewbacca’s mind had simply stopped dealing with, but the nonsense flooding out of its mouth was strangely powerful. The youth, the intelligence, the energy, was like a warm breeze on a cold night; Chewbacca’s memory cried out for more and the conflict within made him hesitate just long enough to be listening when the human’s babble became Wookie...

… and after that, instinct surrendered to reason.

Nobody died.

From that day on, Chewbacca stayed with Han Solo. At first, it was because the two of them had the same and only goal: to survive. But as days, then months, then years, then decades, raced by, as their goals changed, their desires ebbed and flowed, their special partnership persisted. Chewbacca loved Han Solo unconditionally; nothing Han did, no matter how foolish, dangerous, or self-destructive, could provoke Chewbacca to draw the line.

Not even the one time he knew he should have.

Maz Katana tried to warn him. He should have listened.
The confrontation between the Jedi and the Sith had only been going for a few moments, but Finn was already irritated. That was primarily because he couldn’t understand what was being said; whatever set Dar Noaa off in the first place manifested itself in a torrent of words spoken in Sith. Except for the few obscenities Finn recognized because they were Dar Noaa’s favorites, everything was angry gibberish to him.

This was not the case with Luke, who appeared to understand every word Dar Noaa was saying and then replied calmly in what Finn figured was also Sith. Finn was not surprised that Luke Skywalker could speak Sith at all because, by now, Finn knew that the one thing he could always expect from the Jedi Master was a surprise. The same could be said about Ren, who was following the exchange so intently that it was clear he could at least understand Sith.

Dar Na was Sith and his face proclaimed that this was a serious matter.

That left only Finn and Rey as outsiders, but Rey had Ren. She was listening to an inner voice, understanding through her bond with him. Finn sensed he could use his bond the same way, but instantly rejected the idea because he had no desire to strengthen its hold on him. It was already much too strong.

So all he could do was watch. And admire.

There was simple genius in Luke’s approach to the situation; he gently undermined Dar Noaa’s fury by removing the language barrier so the Sith could express himself naturally. With the strain of translating his thoughts out of the way, Dar Noaa unloaded the what and why in a torrent of words that quickly ran him out of breath and forced him to pause for air. Luke didn’t take advantage of the situation; he said nothing and waited patiently for Dar Noaa to resume, showing the respect and empathy that was the foundation of their friendship.

And somewhere between breaths, Dar Noaa recognized that.

He closed his eyes, then took one more deep breath and held it for a very long time; when he opened his eyes again, the raging glow there was gone.


“I’m sorry.” He said quietly. “Forgive me.”

Now Finn was even more confused than before, and really annoyed. Why did Luke just apologize? Finn’s life as a Stormtrooper forbid interrupting his superiors, and after years of being told that ‘what he didn’t know, he had no need to know’, Finn resigned himself to finding out later after everything had blown over...

That was when he sensed it.

Weapon fire? NOW!

He acted automatically; moving so fast that it felt like a dream, activating his lightsaber as he whirled...
around, he leaped between the shot and its target, swinging the weapon wide, then up, just in time to intercept the energy bolt.

His lightsaber took the hit hard, but held together. So did Finn.

His hands stung from the impact, but he stayed alert as his gaze followed the shot back to its source and saw Chewbacca standing at the top of the Falcon’s ramp with his bowcaster.

The look on the Wookie’s face was pure disbelief.

Then dread.

Finn didn’t have to look to know why; he’d felt Ren turn. He’d felt Ren’s shock at being caught off guard, his astonishment that Finn had just saved him, and the absolutely horrific wave of fury surging from the darkness within.

What happened next was unreal, slow-motion, outside of time.

With a single gesture, Ren ripped the ramp out from under the Wookie. As the metal tore free of the Falcon, it splintered into hundreds of huge shards that fell straight down, creating a nightmare pile of jagged, razor-sharp spikes below.

Chewbacca fell, too.

Finn tried to scream; he tried to reach out, to help, but Ren would not let him - or anyone else – interfere.

NO.

Everyone was instantly frozen in place.

And yet, that same instant, Chewbacca stopped falling. His body hovered in the air like a tethered balloon, barely a meter above certain death.

This is between him and me.

Then Ren started walking toward the Falcon and no one could do anything about it.

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The Racing Guild Executive Spaceport, Coruscant.

When Chewbacca returned to the Falcon and found Han Solo sitting in the cockpit entering data, he knew it was a bad sign. Han left the ship very early in the day after receiving a message from someone he did not name, leaving Chewy free to do as he wished – and what Chewy wished was a good meal someplace followed by a quick stop at one of the lesser-known betting parlors where one could get really good odds. The Wookie didn’t play the races often, but this was a special event, a benefit race that had taken Han forever to get approved and scheduled. The Water-Sourcing Project was going to save millions of lives, but it was the most expensive idea Han Solo ever had, so he’d spent every available minute for months on end making appearances, getting commitments and pledges from any and every racing agency or industry he could find.

It was going to be a huge success, too; all because of Han Solo.
“It’s about time you showed up,” Han growled without looking up from the control panel, “I almost left without you.”

“We’re leaving?” Chewy replied. “Now? Why?”

“I have to see Leia.”

“Now?” Chewy asked. He’d been suggesting heavily for months that Han should do exactly that, but hearing him say it now, when the race was only a few days away made no sense. “What about the race?”

“We can be back in time if we go now.”

“So, you’re going to skip out on the banquet tonight,” Chewy flopped into the copilot seat, “jump to Hosnian Prime, then jump back here in time for the race? If we just stay here and complete this deal, then you can go home and stay… you haven’t seen them in months.”

“I’ve already notified the committee about missing the banquet,” Han still hadn’t looked at him, “and race time will be close, but we can make it.” He finally looked at him, and Chewbacca could see there was no reasoning with him about it, “and we will definitely *not* be staying… understand?”

Chewbacca did understand; this was another one of those times when he’d have to choose between his own gut feelings and just going along with Han’s. Even though Han never talked about it, Chewy knew that things weren’t going very well at home for him; communications from Leia had grown fewer and shorter, and half the time, Han didn’t even send a reply. Something had to be very important, and very wrong, for Han to leave the project he was so dedicated to this close to success, and Chewbacca could guess who it was about. If Leia was ill or in trouble, Han would have told him immediately.

Which meant it was about the boy. Again.

That meant there was nothing to do but go, so after grunting out a reluctant yes, Chewbacca leaned forward and activated the launch checklist.

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Stone meadow highlands, the Edge

It’s only a dream.

Chewbacca was was floating. Still stunned from the blow, suspended in time, for a few seconds, he thought he had to be asleep and this was all just a very bad dream. Anytime now, he’d wake up and be back in the cockpit. Then something turned his head for him, and he saw the boy coming.

No. This is it.

The Kylo of Ren was coming to kill him.

The tall, thin creature dressed in black’s approach was slow and calculated, as if the monster wanted Chewbacca to see, to watch, to understand the full depth of the horror he’d brought down on himself. And behind him, Chewbacca saw his friends just standing there, watching; their faces contorted, jaws clenched as they strained against invisible bondage. Even Luke Skywalker was
unable to do more than raise his arm more than a few millimeters without being exhausted, and that meant that no help would be coming.

Ren was getting closer, his body eclipsed the others one by one, until they were all blocked from view. A wave of unreasoning terror crashed over the Wookie, but he rejected it furiously, letting out a roar so full of fury and hate that it carried across the meadow, then beyond.

A weak echo replied from the distance to mock him.

By now, Ren was only three meters or so away, but he stopped there. He stood quietly, staring up at Chewbacca, adding to the terror by doing absolutely nothing. Digging deep into the pain of loss, the Wookie looked directly at Ren in defiance, only to see terrifying, glowing red eyes looking back.

An agonizingly long silence followed.

As the final minutes of his existence ticked away, images flashed inside Chewbacca’s head. He remembered everything; from the shining, pinnacle highs to the dark, terrible lows, his life had been full. A lot of that was because of Han Solo, who saved him so many times in so many ways that he’d lost count. No matter what, Han was always there…

Chewbacca was ready. He closed his eyes.

“Tell me, Chewy, what do I do now?”

With his eyes closed, hearing only the voice, Chewbacca realized how long it had been since he’d heard Ben speak. There was still a trace of the boy in the man, and it was painful to hear. That last day, the last time Chewbacca saw Ben Solo, he’d seen him from the Falcon’s cockpit; the boy was running fast to find his father, who was already inside the house with his mother, doing whatever it was that was so important it could not wait.

He opened his eyes again, for one last look.

“I’m asking,” Ren continued, “because I have no idea. I know you want me dead, and I should kill you now and be done with it, but…” he paused, listening to some inner voice, then sighed, “… I don’t want to do that.”

Completely confused, Chewbacca could only stare back at him.

“What happened, what I did…” Ren went on, “… was *never* about you.”

Chewbacca snarled a word in Wookie for which no adequate translation existed, but he knew that Ben understood its meaning well.

“Yes, I am.” Ren replied. “All that, and more. I’ve done things you could never imagine… things I can never forget…” He looked away as he said it, then made himself face the Wookie again. “… things for which no atonement would ever be enough…”

Another long silence.


“I know your pain,” Ren replied, “it’s something we have in common. I know you don’t believe that, but it’s true.” This time Ren said it like a confession. “My pain is different than yours, but it’s
*real*.” He closed a fist around the energy sink in his left hand, then struck his chest hard with it. “It’s *here*; it never stops; it never will.” He loosened his hand slightly, as if grasping an invisible weight. “You think killing me will avenge Han Solo and end your pain, but you’re wrong – it would only end mine. Yours would go on.”

Chewbacca tried to snort contempt, but what came out sounded unconvincing and he burned with shame that he was still able to feel sympathy for the boy.

That was Han’s fault…

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The Organa Residence, Hosnian Prime.

Chewbacca was waiting. Again.

Han was up and out of the pilot’s seat before they even touched down; shouting orders as he strode to the Falcon’s entry, he was onto the ramp and heading down before it was fully extended, then jumped off rather than wait for it to lock into place. Then he was off, almost running toward the gated wall that surrounded the place that he once called home.

Chewy watched him punch in the security code for the gate, then disappear through it with concern. Despite insisting that he had to come here and orders to take the engines offline but *idle*, not off – which he only did when he anticipated the need for a quick getaway – Han had told him absolutely nothing about why this trip was even necessary. But his words were “I have to see Leia”, not “I want to see Leia” and that was ominous enough in itself; idling the engines underscored that this trip was not going to be the happy homecoming Chewy had been urging Han toward for so long.

The ship’s proximity alert announced the arrival of another ship, and Chewbacca leaned over in time to catch sight of a small skipper transport landing. Chewy had seen ones like it before, right here, in fact; it bore the logo of the regional school system. The skipper remained only long enough for the entry to open so someone could jump out, then quickly lifted off.

For a few seconds, Chewbacca didn’t recognize the youth walking down the path from the landing pad, but then he realized that it had to be Ben. The boy was all arms and legs and not much else, showing signs of puberty and eventual height, which should please his father. Chewy had no experience with adolescent humans, and knew little beyond what Han had told him about “going crazy for ten years”, but he saw nothing about Ben that suggested the boy was in any state other than tired from a day at school. He hadn’t even noticed the Falcon sitting there yet, so Chewy started to get up and go to the entry to howl a greeting when movement from the other direction caught his attention.

Han was already heading back to the ship, walking very fast, with purpose.

The boy spotted both the Falcon and his father at the same instant and stopped where he was. After such a long time, Ben probably needed a minute to process the surprise, to believe it was real. Chewy watched the boy’s face go from shocked, to uncertain, then light up with joy, but just as Ben was opening his mouth to call out, something truly heartbreaking happened.

Han walked right past him.

Not a word. Not a look. Not even a glance in his direction.

Han’s stride never slowed; he went straight to the ramp, then up and inside, slapping the control panel as he passed through the entry. The metallic clang of the ramp retracting and the hiss of the
entry door closing sent a chill through the Wookie; it sounded so cold.

So *final*.

Suddenly Han was back in the cockpit, slamming himself into the pilot’s seat, flicking switches.

“Engines online.” He said through clenched teeth. “Now.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

Chewbacca couldn’t believe what he was hearing. The boy was still there, standing perfectly still, waiting. Han could *see* him from the cockpit.

“But...”

“*Now!*” Han ordered.

Every instinct inside Chewbacca was screaming that this was utterly, totally, horribly wrong; this was where he should draw the line once and for all. This was the time to say “no” loud and clear – and then hold to it. He didn’t move; he just stared at Han, demanding an explanation without saying a word. For a few silent seconds, Han stared back, then simply reached over and did it himself.

“I know what I’m doing.” He said.

Then they left. And that was the last time Chewbacca ever saw Ben Solo.

Until now.

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Stone meadow highlands, the Edge

Something was happening. Chewbacca could feel it.

There was a strange flutter in the force that was keeping him suspended and paralyzed; he could feel his fingers again, and he could turn his head ever so slightly away from the position it was frozen in. If Ren noticed, he didn’t care, which made it possible for Chewbacca to see more than just his face and those terrifying eyes. The Wookie saw two things immediately: Ren’s left arm had dropped and he was still clenching that fist very tightly, but now he was swaying slightly from side to side, like a drunk trying to maintain balance. Chewbacca had heard all the talk about Ren’s power; how it could become too much for him and what could happen if it was. If it was true, there still might be a way to take him down.

“If I kill you;” Ren was saying, “that would end your pain, but add to mine.”

“Then kill *yourself* and end it for both of us!”

“I tried that,” Ren replied, raising a fist and a hand, showing the scars, “more than once. I thought that would make it stop. I *wanted* to make it stop...” There was exhaustion in his voice now. “…but that didn’t turn out so well for me... or anyone else.”

“Meaning your *father*?”
“My father?” Ren asked. “I stopped thinking of him as my father a long time ago, after he left me...” he paused, remembering. “…after he left *us*.” His voice grew quiet. “‘Father’? That word has no meaning for me. It sounds so different when you say it, though; why is that?”

“Because *I* loved him.”

“And you think I didn’t?”

The question struck Chewbacca hard; it was simple and sincere, without a trace of malice in it. Chewbacca knew the answer, too; he never forgot the expression on the boy’s face that last day; the pure joy there was undeniable before Han crushed it and left, then never looked back…

The showdown came just as they were preparing to jump.

Han hadn’t offered one word of explanation for what had just happened, and Chewbacca could not bear one more minute of ignorance. As Han reached for the control bars, Chewy reached under his hand and seized it first.

“If you don’t tell me what’s going on right now,” he hissed, “I’ll *rip* this out and we’ll stay here - right here – forever.”

The threat of seeing his beloved ship crippled worked, and Han only resisted for a moment before answering.

“Remember that spice trader from Tatooine we worked for last year?” he asked.

“What about him?”

“When you weren’t around,” Han said the words as if each one was painful, “he told me a story he’d heard about Luke Skywalker. He knew that we knew each other, and wanted to know whether I knew if it was true or not.”

“What?”

“He said he was told that Luke’s father was someone named Anakin Skywalker, and the story was that Anakin’s mother claimed that there was no father; one day she just woke up pregnant. It was a lie, of course, he told me - but not the one you think it was, because she was one of several females who made that same claim at the time, all of which had been rented out by their masters to serve some secret agency.”

“It happens; servants get pregnant all the time, especially in places like Tatooine.”

“But that’s the thing, Chewy; even though *nobody* cared, the women denied everything. *Everything*.”

“So what?”

“He said after the owners complained to the secret agency, they all received ‘compensation’, a lot of ‘compensation’, but they were sworn never to say from where or who because some it involved those in high places doing illegal and ‘unnatural’ things. I sent someone I could trust to look into it; he found some old records that led straight to the Empire and... Palpatine.”

“And why does that matter? What does it mean?”
“Think about it, Chewy; Anakin Skywalker became *Darth Vader*: he became a *monster*. What if that was by design? What if that design could be passed on?”


“No.”

“I don’t understand; if not Luke and Leia, then…” Chewy cut himself off, suddenly speechless at the realization. Han was speaking about *Ben*! The Wookie was so shocked that the only thing he could manage next was a single word. “No.”

“He’s never been ’right’;” Han explained coldly, not even saying the boy’s name, “you know that as well as I do. Now I know why.”

“No.”

“Even when he was little, I could see it,” Han’s voice took on a mournful tone, “but I let it go for Leia’s sake…” He took a breath, hardening himself. “… but he’s not a child anymore; he’s grown; now he’s more powerful and less able to control it. If he is more Vader than Solo, he’s a danger to her… to all of us.”

“You said *that* to Leia?”

“No.” Han shook his head sadly. “You know how she is about him. I said it was time she gave in and sent him to Luke for training, at least until she was done with politics enough to stay home with him.”

Chewy was stunned by the hypocrisy he’d just heard; Han was the one who never stayed home for very long! He was little more than a visitor to his own family these days, and he was almost a stranger to Ben.

“You really *said* that?” He asked.

“I had to,” Han replied guiltily, “I know I hurt her, but I needed a reason. She never could say no to the Republic… still the princess…” he sighed, “… so she said yes.”

“Jedi school…” Chewy tried to imagine what that would be like for the boy, being sent there without even a word from his father. “What about Luke? Will he agree?”

“He already has.” Han answered. “Said ‘yes’ with no questions asked. He’s been asking Leia to send him for years.” He looked Chewy directly in the eyes. “I think he knows. Remember how quickly he left after seeing the baby? I think he’s always known.”

Finally Han had said something that made sense, and Chewy nodded reluctantly in agreement. He remembered the celebration when Ben was born, and how brief Luke’s visit had been. He’d made some excuse about an important mission that couldn’t wait, patted the newborn Ben gently on his head, kissed his sister and departed. Chewy never gave it a second thought because the Jedi always had another mission waiting. Now the incident had taken on a dark new motive; was it possible that Luke Skywalker left so fast because he knew something dark and terrible that he was unready or unwilling to share? It was a question that demanded an answer directly from Luke himself.

Suddenly Han reached over, grabbed Chewbacca’s arm and squeezed hard.

“Swear to me,” he pleaded, “that you will *never* speak about this to anyone. Ever.”
Chewy should have argued. He should have said no. He should have screeched until they were both
deaf that this was one secret he would not keep.

But he didn’t.

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Stone meadow highlands, the Edge

“I wish I could say I understand how you feel,” Ren was saying, “but I don’t understand. How could
I? He left me.” His voice sounded strained. “He left her. He never left *you*.”

For an instant, Chewbacca felt himself drop. Ren flinched in pain and the motion stopped.

He was floating again.

“I don’t understand,” Ren complained tiredly. “And I need to understand. I waited, you know; I
waited for him to come. I waited for him to come and take me home. I waited for him to love me the
way he loved you.” He sagged a little, and his eyes dropped to the ground. “But he never did. Not
when it would have mattered, anyway…”

Chewbacca saw the terrifying eyes go dark and brown.

“If only,” Ren’s voice dropped to a whisper, “he could’ve…”

Then the brown eyes closed.

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Maz Katana’s Palace, the Outer Rim

“Go *home*!”

It was always the same with Maz Katana; once she got an idea in her head, she would never let go
of it. How she learned that Han Solo had sent his son off to Jedi School and separated from his wife,
Chewbacca didn’t know, but she would be on Han about it any chance she got. Han would suffer
her lectures in silence until she exhausted herself, then he would offer the same excuse he always
offered.

“She doesn’t want to see me.”

Chewbacca didn’t know if that was true or not because Han hadn’t said anything about his wife and
son since he left them. Chewy had hopes that one day they would get a message from Luke saying
that things had been made right with Ben, but messages from the Jedi were few and far between and
always impersonal. The message would say that he was taking Ben along on a mission to someplace
and nothing more. Maz, on the other hand, seemed to have an infinite number of sources providing
her with information.

Han mumbled something about the Falcon and left, like he always did, and Maz sat down in the
empty chair that he hadn’t claimed, next to Chewbacca.

“You,” she said accusingly, “have to *do* something about this, and soon.”
“He doesn’t want to listen.”

“Then you must *make* him listen!” Maz insisted. “His place is with Leia and his son; now more than ever.”

“Why? What do you know?”

“There’s talk that the Republic is falling; dark forces are already inside, and they will destroy anyone who stands in their way. I fear that Leia is at the top of their list.”

“I doubt that,” Chewy assured her, “Leia’s position couldn’t be stronger; everyone *loves* her. Her security team is the best; Han made sure of that. No one can touch her.”

“Yes, they can,” Maz persisted, “in the one place she’s vulnerable – her *family*.” She leaned close to whisper the rest. “Somebody *knows* about Darth Vader.”

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Stone meadow highlands, the Edge

Everyone felt it.

The irresistible force that was holding them captive surged powerfully, pressing on their bodies, almost forcing the air out of their lungs.

They saw Ren tremble, take a staggering step forward towards the Wookie, then stop.

Watching, helpless, they braced themselves for the horror.

Ren reached out.

The gesture was weak and shaky, but strong enough to pull Chewbacca toward him, clearing the sharp wreckage below. The Wookie was floating directly in front of him now.

Then Chewbacca dropped gently onto the meadow as if he'd been placed there.

And Ren collapsed.

Instantly free to move again, they all raced to the two bodies lying side by side in the grass. Rey and Finn reached Ren first. Trying to connect, Rey grabbed Ren’s right hand while Finn opened his left hand to look at the energy sink. As he'd feared, as he *knew*, the device was inactive, shut down.

Rey saw it too.

“Irno!” she screamed. “Irno! IRNO!”

Luke had gone to Chewbacca first, but Rey’s cries quickly pulled him away, leaving the Wookie, who was shaken, but alert, to Dar Noaa and Dar Na. He knelt beside her, and pressed his hand to Ren’s forehead. A moment later, he pulled his hand away, then grabbed Rey’s hand and put it there in its place.
Then he grabbed Finn’s hand and put it on top of Rey’s.

“You know what to do.” He told them.

Rey and Finn looked at one another, unsure but unafraid. Their eyes began to glow; first ashen, then fiery red that flickered like a beating heart as the bond they shared took control.

Strong... steady…

Luke let out a sigh of relief; Ren was alive. Now all he had to do was keep him that way, but the solution to this problem could only come from the little Kourin, who was nowhere in sight.

“We need Irno,” he shouted toward Dar Noaa, “right now!”

Dar Na stood up from the Wookie immediately to go search, pausing only long enough to get a verifying nod from Dar Noaa. He was turning toward the Visitor, the logical place to look first when that ship’s proximity alarms suddenly went off.

The Falcon’s followed a second later.

Everyone one except Finn and Rey stopped what they were doing to look for the intruder, but saw nothing and kept searching the sky.


Standing at the Falcon's open entry, she appeared to be paralyzed by what she was witnessing.

“Laci!” He shouted. “Get back in the ship!”

She heard him - he saw her shake her head yes - but she didn’t do it. And then it got worse; Luke saw Leia appear at the entry behind her.


He saw Leia reach for Laci’s arm, take hold and tug. At first, Laci resisted, but then she turned to go with her.

That was the last thing Luke saw before everything exploded.

A tremendous POP, the loudest thing he’d ever heard, smashed its way through his head. He struggled to stay conscious, but a second hit – this time a powerful blast of air coming from all directions – slammed into him, lifting him completely off his feet.

And, after that, nothing.

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*to be continued....*
It's hard to say this, to tell someone, because hearing the words come out of my mouth makes it all too real. I've lost someone. My sister. It wasn't unexpected; she'd been ill for awhile, but lately she was doing better, and I lied to myself that maybe everything was going to be okay. It wasn't. She was at home, surrounded by those she loved; able to watch her garden bloom and birds at her feeders at the end of time.

So this chapter is raw and ragged, but this story will continue.
Chapter Delayed

Real life is mirroring my fanfic right now, and multiple family emergencies have kept me away from my keyboard, so the next chapter has been delayed. This story WILL continue - I'm shooting for upload and post next weekend.

I'm sorry and Thank you for your patience.

Everybeing everywhere who knew the Jedi’s name and deeds accepted that fact without question because the code of the Jedi forbid personal attachments. The concept was that the Jedi had to let go of their pasts in order to dedicate themselves entirely to serving a greater purpose. Only a very few knew of the irony that this was the Jedi rule that set off a catastrophic chain of terrible events, culminating with the destruction of the Old Republic and the Jedi Order.

No attachments.

The rule that set Anakin Skywalker on the path to Darth Vader; the first, then last, rule he broke.

And he died for it.

The impact of that act deepened a wound in Luke’s soul; Vader died because he saved the life of the son he never knew – and would never know. Luke felt the lost opportunity deeply because it was not the first time he lost a father.

Owen Lars. “Uncle” Owen.

In every way that mattered, Owen and Beru Lars were Luke’s parents; he was an infant when they took him in, and the only family he had. That’s what they told him, and while that turned out to be untrue, Luke was sure Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru were never part of the conspiracy that separated him from his twin sister. When, how and how much they knew died with them, along with every attachment Luke had to Tatooine. He left the planet willingly, following Ben Kenobi’s lead, but that attachment died soon after in the Death Star, only minutes after Luke met Leia Organa.

The rest of that story made Luke famous for awhile.

In those years, Luke was constantly being told about, invited to meet, or introduced to a an endless stream of females. Most of them were being pushed by families eager to add a “name” to their status, but some had their own agendas. It didn’t matter to Luke, because none of them could ever attain more than acquaintanceship with the Jedi; Luke made sure of that. There was always another mission, and Luke wanted to be the Jedi his fathers would have been proud of. He told everyone the same thing, and everyone, including Leia, believed it. Eventually, his youth and glory faded, and he was content to fade with them.

That was all behind him now. Except for one thing…

A woman’s voice.

It only happened at times when he was completely relaxed and unfocused; a sound as soft as a gentle breeze, yet as compelling as distant thunder, would pass through his mind like a shooting star. It seemed far, far away, but was it distance or time – or both – that put it just beyond his reach? And always, the message she whispered was the same two words.
“Help me.”

*Despite his efforts, Luke was never able to touch the voice or dismiss it entirely, and as the years rolled on relentlessly, he came to cherish the moments when her voice was the only thing he heard. For an instant, she who was nothing and nowhere became the only thing anywhere and for Luke, everything else would simply cease to exist. He told himself that she was only a dream, an echo from a life not lived, a memory of what never was.*

*He was completely wrong about that.*

........

Korin Colony Site One, unnamed mountains, The Edge

“*Now*, Jedi.”

Suddenly Luke was awake.

The first thing he saw was the shadow of an arm; the first thing he felt was a hand pressed against his forehead.

The presence in his mind was one of genuine concern.

Luke used his right arm to gently push the intruder off, giving him a clear view of Dar Noaa’s face looking down at him.

“At last!” the Sith’s irritated tone failed to mask his relief. “You test my patience, Jedi.”

Luke looked around, but did not recognize where he was. He was lying uncomfortably on a bed that was too short for him, in a dull gray room devoid of anything else except for a glowing overhead light panel. Dar Noaa was with him, and behind Dar Noaa, Dar Na was watching them intently, but that was all. Then he remembered seeing Leia and Laci at the Falcon’s open entry, and instantly started to get up and off the bed.

“Don’t,” Dar Noaa held him down with a firm force push. “She’s all right; we all are.”

“She...”

“She, your sister,” Dar Noaa replied before Luke could finish, “is with her son. So are Rey and Finn. She, your Laci, is with them.” He reassured Luke. “Calm yourself and you will feel them.”

Luke closed his eyes and reached out.

In his mind, he could ‘see’ Ben. His nephew was stretched out on what appeared to be two beds placed end-to-end, which was still too short, so his feet were hanging over. Leia and Rey were standing on either side of the bed, each holding one of his hands. Finn was behind Rey, with a hand on her shoulder.

Beings and devices were busy all around them, but Luke could not tell which were which.

He opened his eyes again.
“Dar Na and I,” Dar Noaa continued, “woke here. All I know is what I’ve been getting from Leia.”

“Where is here?”

“The mountains, I believe. They knocked us down, then picked us up and carried us home.”

“We’re prisoners.”

“At the moment, yes.” Dar Noaa admitted. “I suspect that’s because the Kourin have forgotten us for the time being. Ren is in real trouble, Luke. I’ve been feeling Leia’s desperation, her fear ...”

He fell silent, hijacked by his own feelings. Luke could feel it; the Sith’s love for Leia was urging him to act, not think, and resisting that impulse was physical torture for him.

But then there was a flutter in the Force.

It was Leia. Luke could feel her.

She was saying something that only Dar Noaa could hear and that settled him.

“Her fear,” Dar Noaa resumed his explanation as if it had never stopped, “is not for herself, or for us. It’s for Ren. The Kourin are trying to save him, but it’s not going... well.” A flash of anger blazed in his eyes. “That damned *Wookie*! If Ren had just killed him and been done with it, this wouldn’t be happening.”

“Chewy...” Luke started, then caught himself, “… the Wookie; where is he now?”

“Luckily for him,” Dar Noaa snarled back, “I do not know. The last I saw of him was when he was cushioning my fall. At least he got the worst of *that*.”

Luke looked past him, at Dar Na, who simply shook his head in silence.

………

Not far away, Laci Kin was trying hard to stay calm.

When the small army of gray faces separated her from Leia and the others, then herded her down a corridor, then another, and then into what appeared to be a medical facility, she’d almost panicked, but one particular gray face that was waiting there stepped forward and spoke to her.

“Don’t be afraid, Lady Laci,” the Kourin said, “we are honored to be in your presence.”

“You are?” Laci asked sharply; the gray face sounded sincere, so Laci didn’t let the opportunity slip past. “Do you honor everyone by *blowing* them up?”

“It was not meant as an attack,” KT06F replied apologetically. “It was a terrible misjudgment on our part. We were hoping to make an impression on the Jedi Master with our arrival...”

“You certainly did that.”

“No, no.” KT06F pleaded, ”we had planned something very different, but we saw what was happening. We saw danger and we just came. Together. At the same instant. We’d never done that before, and we underestimated the displacement pulse.”
“The what?”

“The, uh, air… blast.” KT06F looked around as she said it, as if seeking approval from the others. “Yes, the air blast.”

“*Enough*,” Laci put a hand up; if they thought she was royalty, she was going to *be* royalty. “Why am I here?” She asked. “Where are the others being taken?” Then finally, the most important question of all. “And where is Master Luke?”

“The Jedi Master is resting. He is well.” The Kourin replied. “Lady Leia, Lady Rey and Lord Finn are with Dar Ren.” She reached for Laci’s hand, offering hers. “You are here so we can make sure that you are unharmed before we return you to Master Luke.”

Laci faltered; the Kourin was saying what she wanted to hear.

“And I will stay at your side,” KT06F promised. “until that moment comes.”

Laci sighed loudly.

She wasn’t being asked to make a choice; there was no choice to be made. No matter how they’d sweetened their words, she was their prisoner and they were going to have their way.

Surrender here was her only way back to Luke.

So she extended a hesitant hand and allowed herself to be led toward the waiting gray faced attendants and their devices.

……...

Not too far away, in another gray room, The Jedi and the Sith were working together to assess their situation, but not making much progress when the door opened and Finn walked in. He stopped there, then waited until the door was fully closed behind him before continuing on.

“Are you all right?” Luke asked.

“Yes.” Finn replied wearily. “Tired, but yes.”

“What about Ren?” Dar Noaa asked.

“He’s alive,” Finn replied, “but the energy sink is *dead*. Nobody knows what will happen if he wakes up without it, and they’re deciding what to do about it. They’ll need me for whatever they come up with, so they sent me here to rest up. The General and Rey are still with him.”

“They *need* you?” Dar Noaa asked. “Did they say why?”

“They said I’m the 'best match', whatever that means.”

“I can’t say I like the sound of that.”

“Me, either.”

There was an uncomfortable pause they had no time for, prompting Dar Noaa to take the lead.

“Quickly then;” he urged, “you’ve been out there – tell us everything.”
“Where are we?” Luke asked.

“Inside a mountain.” Finn walked up to the bed and sat on it. “But it’s no cave; it’s a maze of machined tunnels and closed doors. No way to tell how big it is, but I know First Order excavator scars when I see them, which means it’s probably massive in scale.”

“The First Order has been here?”

“No,” Dar Noaa replied. “All First Order heavy equipment is Kourin design; most likely, the Kourin built them and then managed to misplace a few in order to bring them here.”

“And some innocent clerk,” Finn added, “was probably executed for incompetence because of it.”


“They’re alone here.”

“How do you know that?”

“Everything here is scaled for Kourin bodies,” Finn explained, “low ceilings, small furniture; the power panels are low on the walls…” Finn paused, remembering something. “… the walls… I saw two distinct series of power lines; one was conventional, First Order all the way, but the other… I don’t know how to describe it. It was high on the wall, but seemed to be floating alongside it, not attached. I can’t tell you what it’s for, but it’s being kept out of reach.”

“What about their numbers, their weapons?”

“I counted thirty four,” Finn replied, “but it’s so hard to tell them apart, I could be wrong. But someplace like this *isn’t* built for just a few; my guess is there are many more of them. No weapons at all. And they’ve showed no interest in us. Just Ren.”

……...

Not far away, in the gray medical facility, Laci was reclining on an examination table that was much too small and growing impatient because her dangling feet were starting to throb.

“How much longer?” she asked.

“Almost finished,” the plain but pleasant Kourin technician replied, “please remain still.”

Laci growled quietly, but complied.

The technician looked over at KT06F, who had kept her promise to stay close by, then gestured for her to come. Once KT06F was standing right behind her, she tapped the display, indicating something Laci couldn’t see from her position. There was a brief discussion in a dialect Laci didn’t recognize, and then KT06F turned to look in Laci’s direction with an odd expression on her face.

“Is something wrong?” Laci prompted. “I feel fine.”

“As you should.” the Kourin replied. “You’ve just given us a wonderful surprise.”

“I did?”

“There’s a child coming.”
Time *stopped*.

Laci knew she couldn’t be pregnant; Lutor hadn’t shown any interest in her for months. She couldn’t be pregnant, unless…

*Horrible images flashed in her head. That night, when Luke found her.*

*Before* he found her.

*Most of it was lost to unconsciousness, so her imagination threw up nightmare images that made her sick inside.*

“No.” Her protest was a desperate, whispered prayer. “No.”

KT06F stared at her in confusion, but only for a few seconds while she solved the mystery.

“Oh!” she cooed gently, “you didn’t know yet, did you?”

Laci closed her eyes, shutting it out.

“How *could* you know yet? It’s only just settled in, still organizing itself; it will be weeks and weeks until you feel it.”

Laci opened her eyes.

“What?”

“Almost too new to detect,” KT06F informed her proudly, “even we would have missed it, if not for the father.”

“What?”

“See for yourself,” KT06F leaned back and turned the display so Laci could see it. “This tiny point of light, sparkling there, like a star, right where it should be. This one is *strong* with the Force, just like the father.”

*Just like the father.*

Laci breathed out a sound that was part giggle, part sob. This was too much to take in, and she didn’t know how she felt about anything.

No, that wasn’t true; there was something she was absolutely sure of.

She loved Luke Skywalker - and she was having *his* child.

……...

*to be continued...*
Chapter End Notes

Just a short chapter, due to RW pressures. BUT there's more in it than you think, so think about it some.
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

A short chapter, for a holiday weekend.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You came for me!”

Ren could hear himself gushing like a child, be he couldn’t help it; the sight of his father materializing out of the Silence was pure *joy*. He’d been floating mindlessly, how long, he didn’t know, enjoying the absence of everything.

Here there was nothing to endure. No feelings. No pain.

Nothing.

Then his father came for him and changed all that.

But Han Solo did not reply to his greeting.

Instead, Ben’s father looked him up and down, then up again, with a strange, detached expression on his face, then looked down at his own chest, where a hideous black hole had appeared precisely where Ren had struck him down. That terrible moment instantly replayed itself in Ren’s memory, stabbing him through with shame, sorrow and regret.

It hurt so bad, Ren cried out loud.

Something about his agony seemed to please his father; Han Solo grinned slightly, then replied to Ren’s greeting in a tone of voice Ben knew well.

“No.”

Condemnation in a single word! It was so casually delivered - yet so horrific - that, for a moment, Ren was paralyzed by it. Ben’s joy had vanished, leaving Ren to face the consequences of their rage alone.

There was no way to undo what had been done. No words, no amount of remorse, no suffering or sacrifice, that could ever make things right again.

It was pointless to try.

Resigned, ready, Ren lowered his eyes in submission.

“I cannot undo what I’ve done,” he began, “and I am prepared …”

“You,” Han Solo laughed out the words, “have never been prepared for anything in your *entire* life!” His pale cheeks flashed red as he paused for a second to catch breath he no longer needed, then he spoke again, this time in a much softer, kinder, voice. “But then again, neither was I.”

Confused, Ren raised his eyes again. Han Solo was fading.
“Be prepared, son.”

Then he was gone.

“No…”

Devastated, Ren sought the comfort of the Silence again, but It was fading, too.

Distant voices he recognized were calling his name. Pulling him back.

He couldn’t stay; the Silence was rejecting him.

Again.

He could already feel the pain again, especially in his left hand...

………..

Kourin Site One, The Edge.

“No!”

Ren erupted from his coma so fast that nobody felt it coming. Not even Rey.

Before she could react, Ren freed his throbbing left hand from its restraints with a powerful Force push and everything in contact with the hand went flying in all directions. Loosened bandages and the tray that the hand was bound to dropped, then slid across the floor and the device inflicting the pain and the being holding onto it popped to the ceiling, then fell.

In the split second available, Rey’s choice for who to help was made for her. Ren was upright and moving and almost certainly about to attempt to get up and off the makeshift bed, so she threw herself across the bed in an attempt to keep him down.

That meant the being who just went flying was on his own.

She saw him hit the floor.

Fully conscious now, Ren was pleasantly surprised to find Rey lying across his lap, and the momentary distraction was enough to stop his escape attempt where it it was.

“Rey?”

“Don’t move!” Rey pushed herself up, twisting her head so she could see his face. He looked terrible, of course, but the life in his eyes was so beautiful, she felt her own eyes tearing up. “You’re hurt.”

“I know…” Ren inspected his throbbing left hand. A burning red wound now occupied the place where the energy sink had been and he could see through a hole in the center of it. His conditioning with the Knights kicked in automatically; he ignored the damage and the pain and focused on the being he could see lying on the floor beyond. “Who’s that?”

“It’s *me!*” Irno snarled back at him.

“Why are you on the floor?”
“Because,” Irno sat up and glared at him, “you just tried to *kill* me, you idiot!”

“What?”

The Kourin snarled loudly as he got to his feet, then wobbled to Ren’s bedside and reached for the hand in question. Ren pulled it back, but Irno stopped the retreat by grabbing Ren’s arm just above his wrist.

“See *this*?” Irno held the arm up, putting the wounded hand front and center for the accusation to come, “What did I tell you? ‘Do *not* overload the energy sink!’ But did you listen? *No*!” He pushed the arm forward, almost touching Ren’s nose with it. “This is all that’s left of *my* work and *your* hand; if not for Rey and Finn, you’d be dead now.”

Ren looked at Rey, silently asking.

“We...” she searched for the right words, but found only one. “… shared.”

It was as good a word as any because Ren understood what she meant. He could sense remnants of their presence in his mind lingering like faint echoes of a storm just past. They *were* sharing themselves: *their* power, *their* energy, their *lives* sustaining his through the worst of it.

Rey and Finn.

Rey’s presence was easy to understand; she loved him. Finn’s presence was another matter. Ren was utterly helpless, so the ‘sharing’ was a perfect opportunity for Finn to kill him, then take his place with Rey and the family – but Finn saved him instead. It was a humbling moment for Ren because, had the situation been reversed, he almost certainly would have made the selfish choice.

“Thank you.”

“Thank *Finn*.” Rey replied quietly. “He carried most of the load.”

“I will,” Ren promised. “Where...?”

“The mountains.” Rey answered. “At the moment, we are *guests* of the Kourin.”

“Guests.” Ren repeated the important word back to her. “Understood.”

“Right after you... fell,” Rey continued, “they attacked us and...”

“*Not* an attack!” Irno hijacked the conversation completely by leaning forward and placing his face between theirs, eclipsing Rey’s so he would have Ren’s full attention. “A *mistake*.” His voice sounded unusually apologetic. “An accident, really; they underestimated the atmospheric displacement, that’s all.” He insisted. “The shock pulse put everyone down, yes - but *nobody* was harmed.”

“Why?”

“I was told,” Irno answered, “they intended it as a formal visit; they wanted it to be special, to make an impression on ‘The Skywalker’.”

“You were ‘told’?*

“*Told*.” Irno’s tone went hard as he repeated the word. “They paid us a visit *last* night, too.” He said. “I was half way to the food when they hit me with a shot of Sub-4; the next thing I knew, I was here.”
“What’s Sub-4?” Rey asked.

“It’s a First Order drug,” Ren leaned to one side so he could see her again, “a chemo-hypnotic used to condition new conscripts. Makes them... compliant.”

“Meaning,” Irno added, “they - and me - do what they’re told when they’re told, but don’t remember.”

“Did they did that to Finn?” Rey looked past him, asking Ren.

“Yes.”

“Did they do it to *you*?”

“Yes.”

“And last night,” Irno hissed angrily, “they did it to *me*. That’s why you didn’t see me anymore.” He stopped just long enough to gulp down some air. “Thanks for not noticing I was gone.”

Ren and Rey exchanged a quick, embarrassed look. Many things had gone unnoticed last night and unmentioned in the morning, and Irno was one of them. Ren, however, had no interest in anything beyond assessing the immediate situation, so he ignored the remark entirely.

“Why take you last night,” he asked, “if they were coming anyway?”

“They *needed* me,” Irno moved Ren’s arm, lowering it to the bed without releasing his grip on it. “They had a problem only I could solve for them...” He stared down at the wound, inspecting it thoroughly. “… and you are as lucky as you are stupid – this looks *good*.”

“How can it be good?” Rey asked. “The energy sink is *gone*; what do we do now?”

“What *we* do now,” Irno replied, looking directly at her, demanding her attention, “is this: Ren. Stays. Calm.” Then Irno looked up at Ren with as much menace as a Kourin could muster. “You got that?”

“Understood.”

“Good.” Irno looked back at Rey. “And *you* will keep him that way.”

Rey nodded; the expression on her face told him she needed no explanations. She knew exactly how desperate the situation was.

“For how long?” Ren challenged him. “She can’t do it forever.”

“She won’t have to.”

Irno kept his eyes on Rey as he answered Ren’s question. The way he saw it, Rey was a critical component in solving this problem, and right now, she looked dangerously tired and worried. He wasn’t going to say anything about the insanely risky procedure the Kourin wanted to attempt and how soon they wanted to do it because he wasn’t sure how much more she could take.

“You know they’ve been watching us.” He tried to sound casual about it. “They saw the problem with the energy sink right away and got to work, designing something entirely new - just for Ren. He’s *very* important to them, you know. They wanted to present it as a gift, but it wasn’t... ‘ready’... and they didn’t know why. That’s why they took me.” He watched her face as he said the next words proudly. “It is now.”
Rey let out a tiny squeak and moved as if coming to hug him, but Irno backed off quickly.

“I had no choice.” He reminded her matter-of-factually, saw her reaction, then quickly added some reassurance. “But I am the best there is at what I do.”

The touch of arrogance in the statement had the desired effect; Rey’s face brightened again and, satisfied that he’d said enough to her for the time being, the Kourin turned his attention back to Ren.

“I have to tell you,” Irno’s tone turned serious, “there’s a lot I don’t understand about the device.”

Admitting that there was something he didn’t understand was hard, but Ren’s expression on hearing it meant his listener got the message.

“The nanocircuitry,” he continued, “is embedded in a new type of gossamer; something I’ve never seen before. All I could get out of them was that it makes the interface with their technology - and I’m quoting them here - “flawless”. I’ve never heard them say that about *anything*. Ever.”

“That’s a good thing, though,” Rey asked from behind him, “right?”

“What I do know,” Irno ignored her, “is that the device will do what you need it to do; what it might do *besides* that...”

“Understood.” Ren answered.

“The procedure is complicated; some of it will be... difficult.”

“Understood.”

“And you will have to be prepared for *anything*."

**Be prepared.**

For an instant, Ren heard his father’s laughter again.

He’d told himself that visit in the Silence was just a hallucination, something conjured up by his mind to punish him in a failed death struggle. Now it seemed like something more. Encouragement or a warning? Ren had no way to know for sure.

Maybe it was both.

“Understood.” He said.

“Then,” Irno replied grimly, ”whenever you’re ready...”

“I am.”

“So,” Irno studied Ren’s face, searching for fear but finding only resolve. “I’ll go tell them that you want to proceed as soon as possible?”

“Yes.”

Rey waited until Irno was gone and the entry door was closed before asking the question Ren knew
was coming.

“What was that all about?”

“It’s nothing.” He answered. “You know how he is; he doesn’t trust anyone – especially them.”

“I know,” she persisted, “but why does the word ‘flawless’ worry him? Why does it worry you?”

“It doesn’t,” Ren raised his left hand as he lied, “not as much as *this* does.”

Rey reached for his good right hand, then leaned in, pulled it to her heart and pressed it gently there.

“What can I do?” She asked.

“You’re already doing it.” He answered. Her touch made everything else unimportant and his injured hand slipped down to the bed again. He closed his eyes, drifting. “You always know what I need…”

*The sound of rain hitting metal.*

*Warm, humid air and the sweet-sour fragrance of irrepressible life.*

*Dagobah at night.*

It was just a dream, of course, but one they could share; a refuge for as long as needed.

Rey closed her eyes and followed.

………

*to be continued…*

Chapter End Notes

Clam before the storm? Maybe. I hope to get back on pace with uploading chapters soon; real life is easing up some. I will finish this story no matter what.

OH! Adam Driver has a new movie coming out in November!! Squee!
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

This chapter is long overdue. I'm sorry, but...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the beginning, there were the Jedi.

Despite being sworn to lives of selfless service, a few of the Jedi chafed under the rules and quietly broke them. They made attachments. Some choose love, some chose possessions...

... some chose power.

It was no secret that power was the most deadly and addictive thing in the galaxy; every being on every world knew countless stories about those who sought power, those who gained power and then destroyed anything and everything in order to keep it. And then, inevitably, they would fall.

So it was with the Jedi.

In order to hold onto their power, the Jedi were forced to purge their own ranks.

The details of the fallen Jedi trials were dutifully recorded, the convicted were exiled for life and expelled. Then they were forgotten by all but the few among the Jedi that knew that the expulsion solved nothing. The exiles traveled through the far reaches of the galaxy, searching for refuge.

And scheming, always scheming, for revenge ...

Kourin Site One, the mountains, The Edge

“… it was the Jedi,” Dar Noaa said, “who created the Sith as you know them...”

Finn was listening. He got his chance to ask what caused the argument in the stone meadow, but the answer turned out to be a lecture from Dar Noaa on the history of his homeworld. Although the Sith were violent by nature, they were politically and scientifically naive in many ways and so were quickly subdued by the invading Jedi exiles.

And as if that wasn’t bad enough, the Jedi discovered that, with a little ‘alchemy help’, they could interbreed with the Sith to create hybrids that were superior to both species. Selective breeding quickly became an all-consuming obsession among the Sith’s new masters, and every child born was expected to look more Jedi than Sith, with the goal being to create an entire population that looked like Core world humans but had Sith levels of aggression.

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Some of the noble families among the Sith tried to preserve their species as best they could by selectively breeding among themselves by hiding genetic choices behind political ones. Their Jedi masters had grown arrogant and lazy and failed to notice the subtle differences between their offspring. The end results were what were called ‘oldblood’ Sith behind closed doors. Dar Noaa and his cousin’s child Dar Na were now the last of that species; both could easily pass for human under
casual inspection. Tendril scars resembled high cheek dimples and honey-colored eyes could easily be hidden behind colored filters, or dyed, and passion and anger could be controlled with training and meds.

“… and that is why,” Dar Noaa continued, “I could navigate the Republic without being noticed.”

“But. I was taught,” Finn countered, “that the Sith were merely a political religious order that spread across the galaxy.”

“I’m sure you were.” Dar Noaa replied. “The Jedi absorbed my species, then stole our name and set out across the stars to seduce other species to their cause; siphoning power from authority with deception and deceit. And the galaxy being what it is, they found many willing students.” He paused for a second, considering what more to say, and when he began again, his voice was sad. “By the time Sidious, you know of him as Palpatine, signed on, a ‘Sith’ could be anybeing anywhere. And now, the word Sith is synonymous with evil throughout the galaxy.”

Then he fell silent, lost in memories he was unable to escape and unwilling to share.

“So you see,” Luke relieved Dar Noaa for the rest of the story, “it was my fault. In my rush to include Dar Na, I forgot the history that Dar Noaa and I share. It was always Jedi against Sith and my weapon in Dar Na’s hands - a weapon that I used *against* the Sith – was an unintended injury to Dar Noaa.”

“I was...” Dar Noaa admitted quietly, looking directly at Luke as he spoke, “… unreasonable.”

“And I was *stupid*.” Luke replied. Then he looked at Finn with an expression of authority. “And now it’s over.”

“Except,” Finn pointed out bluntly, “that we’re *here* now.”

“If what the Kourin told us is true,” Luke replied, “that would have happened anyway.”

“I believe them.” Dar Noaa added. “So far, they’ve acted with cautious kindness, which one would expect, considering who they are and what we are.”

“To us, yes;” Finn argued, “what about everyone else?”

“You were with Ren and Rey and Leia; you’ve seen Laci,” the Sith replied, “you’re here with us now.”

“What about *Chewbacca*?”

Silence.

Finn’s question brought the conversation to a halt, and not just because nobody had an answer. Chewbacca had suddenly become a back hole in the room around which the implications of the question swirled inescapably toward, and nobody wanted to be first to suggest the probability that the Wookie was lying dead back in the meadow.

“The Wookie,” Dar Noaa said, “was *alive* when we last saw him. Most likely, the Kourin have him secured somewhere for the time being.”

“And we will ask,” Luke added, “the first chance we get.”

Finn accepted the comment in silence, using the time to glance back at Dar Na, who had been
listening from behind. The young Sith met his glance with a look that meant he shared Finn’s concern over Chewbacca’s whereabouts because, without the Wookie and the Millennium Falcon, they no longer had a way to get off the planet. Bringing up the subject of their plan to leave would be foolish and useless under the circumstances, though, so the exchange went no further. It also went unnoticed, because Luke and Dar Noaa had moved on to another subject.

“I am concerned about Leia.” Dar Noaa said. “I feel her, she needs me.”

“I feel her, too,” Luke replied, “and I promise you, she will be the *first* question.”

A twinge of guilt stabbed through Finn as he listened because he’d let the Kourin take the General away. During the worst of it, when they feared Ren was slipping away, Finn sensed Leia’s determination to hold on to him even though she was slipping away with him. The idea of losing her was *unbearable*. It felt like he was losing the mother he’d never known all over again and Finn simply refused to accept it.

Saving her meant saving Ren which, surprisingly, also mattered to him. Very much.

His hand was already resting on Ren’s shoulder; Finn had to try.

*No! You cannot go; I will not *let* you go!*

He didn’t know where the sudden surge of power came from, but he felt it pass through his body and into Ren’s.

The reaction in the room was instantaneous; every machine, every device; every monitor detected the sudden change in Ren’s status and the Kourin went wild. After the explosion of activity subsided, one of them approached Leia and tapped her gently on the shoulder.

“It’s good news,” the unidentified Kourin said, “your son is out of danger.”

The General, who had been waiting tensely for a verdict, gasped, sobbed loudly in relief, then leaned forward crying in giddy exhaustion, almost falling off the stool she was sitting on. The Kourin grabbed her shoulders, stopping the fall.

“You’re *tired*.” The Kourin told her loudly, making sure that Finn and Rey heard everything. “We have a place nearby where you can rest for awhile.”

“But my son...” Leia mumbled.

“It may be some time before he wakes.” The Kourin advised her soothingly. “Surely you wish to be rested and ready when he does.”

“And Finn and I,” Rey assured her from the other side of the bed, “will be right here with him.”

Leia looked at her, then at Finn, who nodded his agreement.

“All right,” Leia surrendered wearily and let the Kourin help her to her feet and lead her to the entry door and out.

Finn and Rey resumed their vigil without saying anything more.

And not five minutes later, the same Kourin returned and told Finn he had to go rest, too, because he was “the best match”.

He’d included that in his report to Luke and Dar Noaa.

Most of it, anyway…

“Finn? Are you *listening*?”

The tone of Dar Noaa’s voice jolted him out of his thoughts. The Sith and the Jedi were both staring at him with faces full of expectation, but he had no idea why.

“I’m sorry,” he flustered, “what was the question?”

“Did they explain,” Dar Noaa repeated his words impatiently, “what they meant when they said you were the best match?”

“No.”


“And Laci.” Dar Noaa added.


“Yes.” Dar Noaa teased. “Leia and I are pleased for you and your Laci. She’s a good match for you; she’s strong; she’s intelligent; she’s *beautiful*…”

“She’s *half* my age.”

“Meaning?”

“I’m… *old*; I’m broken down; I’m cranky…”

“I am quite sure she is *well* aware of that, Luke!” The Sith laughed. “If it does not bother *her*, why should it bother you?”

“I don’t know why, I guess I’m just…”

“Afraid?”


“So was I.” Dar Noaa confessed. “Your sister; the very first time I saw her face, I *knew* that I would love her - and it *terrified* me. I believed it was hopeless, but then she *came* to me.” His eyes flickered as he said it. “She came to *me*.” He went quiet for a moment, remembering with a contented sigh before going on. “Now that she is mine, I’m terrified of losing her.”

“But…”

“Do you love this female or not?”

Luke scowled.

The question felt offensive to him; the Sith was often annoyingly blunt, but certainly he was able to see the obvious. That thought was instantly followed by another, even more upsetting one: what if it *wasn’t* obvious? If he was sending mixed signals that gave Dar Noaa doubts, did the others have
them, too?

Did *Laci*?

He tried to recall every time he’d told her, every way she showed her, that he loved her, only to
realize that every time, he knew was holding something back from her: the truth about the ugly and
unnatural circumstances of his father’s…

Creation.

The word sliced through his mind like broken glass, shredding through all the carefully constructed
rationalizations and excuses he’d built to justify his celibacy in other ways. It wasn’t because of Jedi
tradition. It wasn’t because of his dangerous calling. It wasn’t even because he never found someone
that he wanted enough to take the risk... until he heard Laci’s cry for help and everything changed.

That was it - the moment when everything changed.

“I love her.” He announced it loud enough for all of them to hear. “from that first night, the first time
I looked into her eyes, I knew I would love her. I just *knew*.”

“It’s always that way for us.” Dar Noaa replied.

But Luke wasn’t listening; he was resolving himself to taking the risk. If he truly loved Laci, he had
to tell her the terrible truth and get it over with. She deserved nothing less than total honesty.

“I have to see her.”

He was saying it more to himself than to the others, but they heard him.

“Then *do* something about it.” Finn suggested eagerly.

“It would be unwise,” Dar Noaa warned, “to provoke them, young Finn. We’re being watched; I am
quite sure they are listening to us right now.”

“Then let’s tell them.” Finn replied. He searched the walls and ceiling for signs of surveillance, but
saw nothing. “Tell them that we demand *answers* — *right* now, or I...” He seized up one of the
small, inadequate stools they’d been given and raised it over his head menacingly. “... will tear this
place and *everyone* in it apart!”

“Finn,” Luke raised his hand, “please...”

“No.”

Finn’s tone was frighteningly calm and dark. Then everyone felt a powerful surge in the Force.

Setting the stool down because he no longer needed such trivial things, Finn looked at the room’s
entry, then started walking toward it.

Slowly. With intent.

He stopped an arm’s length from it, then waited. When nothing happened, he raised his arm, hand
outstretched, fingers ready to make contact...

The door slid open to reveal a group of Kourin standing there.

They looked absolutely terrified.
“Mercy, Lord Finn!” one of them pleaded. “Your 'request' has been obeyed – KT006F has been summoned. She is already on her way.”

Finn glared down at the terrified Kourin in front of him for a moment, then looked back at the stunned Force-sensitives behind him and grinned.

“See?” He asked jokingly. “All we had to do was *tell* them.”

Luke and Dar Noaa were not amused.

Finn appeared to be utterly unaware of what they'd just seen, but the Jedi and the Sith had witnessed this kind of thing before: Luke with Ben Solo and Dar Noaa with Ren. They looked at each other, silently agreeing on the probability that the term “the best match” suddenly seemed much more ominous than they already feared.

The Kourin, who were standing their ground in the entryway in nervous anticipation, suddenly stepped to both sides, clearing the way as KT006F appeared behind them. She walked briskly up to Finn, then stopped and stood there looking at him.

“Katy-six,” Dar Noaa came forward to greet her, “thank you for coming. I apologize for young Finn’s rude behavior.”

“That is unimportant.” the aged Kourin replied without taking her eyes off Finn. “We were coming here anyway…” she pointed at Finn. “… for him.”

“Why?” Dar Noaa asked. “Is it because he's the 'best match’?”

“Yes.”

“For Dar Ren?”

“Yes. Your ‘son’,” she said the word in a manner to stress her acknowledgement of the Sith lord’s claim to Ren, “is *very* ill; we have a way to fix him, but it will require this one’s help.”

“Know then, Katy-six, that this ‘one’ ”, Dar Noaa said, making it clear, “is under the *Skywalker’s* protection.”

His words had the desired effect; KT006F’s expression tightened. She looked past Finn and the Sith toward Luke, who played to her fear with a gaze of condescending interest.

“We mean no offence,” KT006F bowed slightly, then straightened up again to plead her case, “but we *need* this one to save Dar Ren. Trust me; this one will not be harmed by the procedure in any way.”


“I respect your doubt,” KT006F replied, “but we *must* have him. Without him, Dar Ren may not survive.”

“And what does Finn say about that?” Luke asked.

“I’m *ready*.”

Finn’s response commanded the room. He looked back at Luke, not to ask permission, but to show
his Master his resolve.

“I’m not afraid.”

A look of genuine relief and gratitude flowed over KT006F’s tired face. She patted Finn on the arm, then beckoned to the others.

“Then, go, Young Finn,” she said, mistaking the Sith’s habit of calling him that for his formal name. “My assistants will escort you and our Inno will explain everything when you get there. Tell them to proceed without me,” she addressed the Kourin who came forward to collect him, “I will be along as soon as I answer a few questions here.”

Finn looked at his mentors and his friend without saying a word, then let himself be escorted through the entry and out of their sight. The remaining Kourin followed, and the entry door slid closed, leaving KT006F alone with her unwilling and anxious guests.

"I have no time to spare, so I will be brief." She addressed them with the confidence of one who already knew all the questions. “Your Leia is resting comfortably not far from her son. We are preparing better quarters for you as quickly as we can, but I warn you our needs here are simple and what we can provide is not much better than what you have now – but it will be more spacious and private. She will rejoin you there."

Luke heard Dar Noaa’s sigh of relief echoing his own. The first answer was good news.

“Go on.” He said.

“The Wookie is alive. His fate is Dar Ren’s to decide, so we left him where we found him. We also left three functioning droids; we will retrieve them if you wish.”

Luke acknowledged her with a slight nod. The second answer was also good news. What he needed to hear next, to hear now, was where and how was Laci.

“Go on.”

“Ah, yes,” KT006F softened her tone, sounding more like a doting relative than the leader of her kind, “your Laci is keeping your Leia company. I am honored to tell you that both she and your child are well.”

*She and your child.*

It took a few seconds for the words to take hold, and when they did, Luke’s first thought was that he’d heard it wrong. He had to hear it again.

“What?”

“She and your child are well.”

*Your* child.

The realization paralyzed Luke with horror and shame. He who had vowed never to pass on the hideous heritage of his father had done exactly that – and Laci had *no* idea of how terrible that could be because he’d been too selfish, too afraid to *tell* her!

In the darkest pit of his mind, he heard the brutal sound of Palpatine’s laughter.
“What have I done?!?”

.........

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

... things happened, some good, some bad, that kept me tied to the real world. I thought about giving up, but this close to the end if there's even one of you left reading this story, I want you to have it *complete*.

So, damn the spoilers for Episode 9*, I will stagger onward!!!

*(Did you see the image that looks an awful lot like our Irno?)*
Her name was Shmi Skywalker.

That was her name, and the only thing she ever truly owned.

Born to slaves, she’d been sold while still young and given to a beloved but aging housekeeper as an apprentice who would one day take her place. The master was a gruff being, but that was mostly for show; within the walls of his household, he was content and quiet – and often very kind. As the years passed, Shmi grew into both the housekeeper’s place and her master’s affection, so much so that when the old one became sickly, the master allowed Shmi to be her personal attendant, and the night the old one died, the master went to his private rooms and sobbed for hours.

They never spoke of the old one again. Ever.

That should have been all there was to her life, and would have been, but for the Offworlders.

Why they came to Tatooine, nobody knew for sure. There was plenty of speculation and rumor about who and why they were, but all that was quickly silenced with a few payments to the right parties and they never spoke of it again. Until one day, the master came home from his business early, and told Shmi that she’d been leased to the Offworlders.

“They need housekeepers and maids,” he sounded almost apologetic, “and their offer for you was too good to refuse.”

“Yes, master.”

The surprise and hurt in her voice didn’t go unnoticed.

“It’s only for the season,” he assured her, “you’ll be back here before you know it! And if you do a good job...” He paused just long enough to weigh his next words, then reached out and took her hand, “… some of the credits will go into your release account. I promise.”

Shmi’s face brightened instantly; her release account balance was tiny, nowhere near what she needed to buy her freedom. Suddenly a small number of days working for strangers became a very good idea.

“Thank you, master,” she gushed, “When do I start?”

“Tonight.” He answered with surprising regret in his voice, but offered no explanation. Shmi was flattered that he was going to miss her. He dropped her hand. “Go pack your things,” he commanded with forced enthusiasm, “they’ll be coming for you very soon.”

Shmi nodded, then hurried back to her room and to gather up the few things she depended on. She’d never left the household before, but her fear was quickly replaced with anticipation, even excitement,
as her imagination ran wild about what it would be like to actually be someplace else. When she had it all packed into her personal sack, she left her room without looking back and headed to the household gate to wait. And as she passed the hall that led to the master’s private quarters, she heard him there.

He was sobbing.

………

Kourin Site One, the mountains, the Edge

“What have I done?!?”

The three witnesses to Luke’s outburst were staring in stunned silence, watching as he buried his face in hands, then bent over as if being crushed by some horrific, invisible weight. Of all the possible reactions Luke might have to the news that he was going to be a father, none of them expected this one.

Confused and terrified, KT06F started to back away, moving toward the entry and possible escape.

Dar Na didn’t have the option to leave, so he fixed his eyes on Dar Noaa, waiting for a sign.

The Sith Lord raised his hand slightly, reaching out, trying to sense something, anything, that might make sense of the situation – and he found it. His expression went from confused to shocked and angry.

Then it softened.


“Go away.”


“If you are my friend, then leave me *alone*.”

“I cannot.” Dar Noaa replied. “I sense your burden.”

Luke raised his head and looked at the Sith.

“You sense *my* burden?” He snarled savagely. His words were accompanied by a brutal wave of the Force and Dar Noaa stiffened under the assault. “You think you know who I – what - I am?”

“I only know that I am your friend.”

It took a few seconds for the words to sink in, but then the rage on Luke’s face softened and he flushed red with self-consciousness.

“And I am yours.” He said it in a soft, sad tone, then took a deep breath, collecting himself, resolving himself to say the words now that he should have said to Laci. The words that would have repulsed her and prevented this moment from happening. “I have no right to be a father.”

“An unrealistic Jedi vow,” Dar Noaa replied, “earnestly given and more often than not, earnestly
broken.”

“No, not because of the Jedi.” Luke struggled to find the words. “It’s because...” He wanted a non-
repulsive way to say it, but in the end, there was only only one way. “... I’m a monster.”

Dar Noaa’s mouth opened, but nothing came out.

Luke knew that he could stop right now, and he desperately wanted to do just that – but the decades of secret shame that had held him back so many times before were slipping away like a waning tide, and he had nowhere left to hide. Resigning himself to the inevitable, he pushed himself up and off the bed and stood face to face with the Sith.

“Give me your word,” he challenged, “that this stays between *us*.”

Dar Noaa’s expression told him the request was not being taken lightly. They’d shared many confidences during their evening walks, none of which ever required any vows of secrecy. It was evident that the Sith was both offended that Luke would demand one now and alarmed by the implications such a request carried.

“You have my word.” Dar Noaa said. “And Dar Na’s, as well.”

The young Sith nodded his head, signaling both obedience to his Lord’s command and his vow to the Jedi. Taken together, their word and gesture were enough for Luke.

“When I told you about Palpatine,” he began slowly, “I left something out. When I told you that he was obsessed with creating life...”

“I remember.”

“... I didn’t tell you that he *succeeded*."

“Succeeded?” Dar Noaa asked. The question dripped with skepticism. “No. There is no evidence that he, or anyone, *ever* succeeded.”

“He succeeded, Noah,” Luke’s voice dropped to a whisper as he spoke, "on an unimportant planet chosen at random, far from the bright center center of the galaxy...”

“What planet?”

“Tatooine.”

Dar Noaa’s face tightened, but he said nothing, and Luke could tell that he had guessed what was coming next.

“I found it in the records there; slave-owners had to register newborn property for tax purposes. Anakin Skywalker, born to a woman called Shmi, who swore that there was no father.”

“Luke...”

“Let me *finish*.” Luke raised his hands, pleading to get it over with. “Other records confirm that a slave named Shmi was among a group of females leased out to an unspecified party. The rumor was that it was an Empire-sourced project, but what they were doing on a nowhere planet like Tatooine didn’t matter because they paid ‘generously’ and on time for everything.”

“That doesn’t mean..."
“It *does*. Shmi Skywalker was returned to her master *pregnant* - and she was not the only one. There were others, too, but none of them lived long enough to give birth. Only Shmi and her child survived.”

“Luke...”

“Palpatine *created* Anakin Skywalker.” Luke’s eyes were burning as he said the words. “He must have been watching my father all along, waiting for his ‘child’ to grow up for a purpose I can’t think about without being filled with disgust.” He swallowed hard. “Palpatine created a *monster*. This monster’s *son* vowed that the nightmare would end with me.”

“What about Leia?”

“I learned the truth too late to save her.”

“Save her?”

“From Ben. I feared what he would become, so I set out to find a cure; but there was nothing...”

“Luke...”

“...and Leia; she doesn’t know. I never found the courage to tell her.” Luke’s words were running together now, like blood from an open wound. “Then one day Han came to see me; he asked me to take the boy for Leia’s sake. I said yes; I told myself that if I kept Ben with me, I could be there to help him. You know how that turned out.”

“*Luke*.”

“What?”

“How long have you carried this burden?”

“Almost thirty years.”

Silence.

Luke stood there, lost in shame, sorrow and regret.

Dar Noaa stared into space, thinking for a few moments, just long enough to put it all together.

“Only Darth Sidius,” he concluded, “could have the genius and pure malice to create a lie so perfectly terrible that not even his death would end your suffering.”

“What?”

“You are no monster, Luke; neither is Leia – or Ben. And neither was Anakin Skywalker.”


“And I believe I can can prove that to you.”

......
Shmi was homesick.

The contract owners had taken up residence in an old fuel processing complex, a desolate location far from home that had been abandoned for years. A self-contained maze of buildings, corridors and tunnels that once housed and fed hundreds before the ore ran out, its rusting structures stuck out of the barren landscape like broken bones. It was the saddest place Shmi had ever seen, and now that she was living inside the sadness, Shmi spent the hours performing the household chores she’d been rented for.


Meal delivery was always the same; she would knock, enter, place the tray on the table, then pick up the tray from the previous meal and carry it back to the kitchens. No one ever spoke to her and she was forbidden to speak without being spoken to, so the task was silent and lonely. A few would look her direction as she placed the trays, but the interest was in what was on the tray, never in her. It quickly became mindless routine: tap on door, open door, enter, place, take, leave. Repeat.

Then everything changed.

There was one room that was isolated from the rest, and Shmi always delivered there last. Its occupant was always hidden inside a dark cloak and hood, and never, not once, even turned from his work to look at her or the food. And as often as not, the previous meal, uneaten and cold, would be waiting for her to take it away. She reported the wasted food as required, but was told it was not her concern, and although she tried to forget about it, every untouched tray she carried out of that room made her uneasy. If she walked in and discovered someone dead on the floor, she might be blamed for it in some way...

Slavery was like that.

Wishing she could just go home, she opened the door without tapping first.

What happened next was a terrifying blur. She saw the occupant stiffen as if startled, then turn around so fast that the hood fell back from his head.

She felt something grab her by the throat. The tray left her hands as if slapped away and dropped to the floor. Then the invisible hand dragged her across the floor toward him, stopping only when she was so close she could clearly see his face.

He looked human, like her.

His face was pale; he had curiously high dimples on both cheeks and a small tattoo close to one ear that was peeking through long, unruly waves of sandy hair. He stared at her – no, *into* her – in a way that paralyzed her with dread.

And those eyes...

The lightest color she’d ever seen, and there was a fire in them, almost a glow.

They stayed that way for what seemed like forever. Afraid to move, to even breather, she watched as he inspected her from top to bottom, then up again. When his eyes locked onto hers again, they seemed different, less threatening.

“You,” he said, “are supposed to knock before entering.”
“Yes, master,” her voice cracked as she croaked out her reply. “I forgot.”

Her words had a strange effect; his expression softened and suddenly she could breathe again.

“I,” he said firmly, “am no one’s master.”

“Forgive me,” she lowered her head in submission, unsure and afraid of what punishment awaited her once they found out in the kitchen. “I am a poor and clumsy servant. Let me…”

He stretched his arm and put his hand under her chin, lifting her face to meet his eyes again.

“I was told you would be invisible.”

“Yes, mas…” She caught herself before finishing the word, “… I am sorry.”

The corners of his mouth turned up slightly and the menace on his face vanished.

“If they wanted you to be invisible,” he replied, “they should not have made you so beautiful.”

Stunned by the unexpected compliment, Shmi just stood there trembling like a trapped animal too terrified to think. Then she ran out of breath and gasped for air. It sounded like she’d swallowed a tiny bird and the poor creature was chirping desperately from inside her. He reacted with surprise, then interest, as if she was a puzzle to be solved. She felt a surge of resentment rising, but quickly suppressed it lest she make things worse for herself, then straightened herself, took a good breath and waited.

“You are strong, too.” He took back his hand, giving her the space she hadn’t asked for. “What will they do to you over a dropped tray?”

“I do not know. I only know I will be punished.”

“No.” He replied. “Not for this. Not for me.”

He stepped past her, walked to a small panel on the wall, then tapped it twice. The little device sprang to life with flashing blue lights.

“Report to the kitchen,” he spoke to it loudly, “that I have accidentally dropped my meal tray and will require another to be sent.”

The little device beeped twice and went dark.

“There,” he turned to face her again, “no harm done; no punishment.”

“But they *watch*,” she insisted, “they’ll *know*.”

“I can assure you,” he replied dryly, “your kitchen does not not watch *me*. My privacy is both respected and protected in here.”

It took a second for the enormity of what he’d just said to sink in; she’d been warned that everything she did was being watched all the time. Who was he, that he would merit such privilege? And why would someone like him care about a slave’s punishment? He was just standing there, looking at her as if he expected something…

“Oh,” she gushed as she bowed her head again, “thank you.”

“It would be best if you were not here when the next tray arrives.” His voice was so kind and gentle
that she risked raising her head to look at him again. That seemed to please him. “Who knows,” he grinned slightly, “Perhaps this time I might even eat it.”

It was a tiny jest, and a private one at that. She was the only one who knew what a picky eater he was; it was her task to scrape off his plates. She smiled, then self-consciously covered her mouth with her hand. That pleased him even more.

“Go now,” he said, “quick, before they come.”

She bowed, then turned to go and saw the door opening for her. She didn’t think about it, she just made her escape through it.

……..

KT06F was trapped.

She’d managed to back away from the confrontation between the Jedi and the Sith, but when she tapped the entry control panel, it failed to open the door for her. She’d been advised about Force discretion, but only vaguely because there was almost nothing recorded about it in the First Order records from which the information was extracted. It had been described as a ‘wall of privacy’, and suddenly she realized that she was caught inside one. She didn’t know what to do, so she did nothing at all; she just stood there with her face at the entry door, trying not to be noticed.

So far, it seemed to be working...

The Sith had taken command of the room; both the Jedi and the young Sith were listening intently to what sounded like a lurid tale of a sexual encounter. KT06F tried not to listen, but it was impossible to escape the lure of this particular story.

“… I saw no reason not to let them go,” the Sith was saying, “but once they were out in the open and alone, they did what any young pair in love would do. But because their lack of experience combined with their, um, *enthusiasm*, they made no effort at all to use Force discretion. Leia and I were both totally preoccupied with work, so when it hit us; it simply took us over.”

“I’m not sure,” Luke grumbled, “I want to know where this is going.”

“Oh, yes, you do,” Dar Noaa countered, “because this is the part that is truly important, Luke. Your sister…”

“Please, no.”

“Your sister,” Dar Noaa insisted on continuing, “and I, had the most fulfilling union we’ve ever had.”

“There’d better be a payoff,” Luke growled, “for making me hear this.”

“There *is*!” Dar Noaa replied, “When we were together, she *knew* things, Luke, things she couldn't have learned anywhere, because they *aren’t* recorded anywhere. Things never taught and never written down; beautiful, sensual things….”

“That’s *enough* Noah.”
“Wait, hear me out.” Dar Noaa pleaded. “Leia knew what she knew by *instinct*; it’s how we are. It’s how you are, too, Luke,” Dar Noaa pointed at Luke with both bands. “because your father was *Sith*.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“I didn’t say your father was *a* Sith, I said he *was* Sith. Oldblood Sith, like me.”

Luke stared at him in confusion, only managing to reply weakly with...

“… what?”

“Listen to me,” Dar Noaa pressed his advantage, “Palpatine, Darth Sidious, no matter what he called himself, didn’t have a single cell of *living* Sith in him. He had nothing but contempt for us as a species, so there is no way he would deliberately infuse his *creation* with Sith characteristics.”

“No… that’s impossible… there was no father.”

“That’s what *she* said, Luke; but she *lied*.” Dar Noaa was relentless. “Who knows why? Protecting him? Herself? Her *child*? Then one day the Jedi show up and she sees a way to free her child from slavery, so she gave him over to them. Your Shmi was a brave, noble creature to do that.”

“But Anakin Skywalker became a Jedi; they’d *never* accept a Sith.”

“And yet they did. Think about it, Luke, the boy was brought to them on Coruscant, to the Jedi Temple itself. There was even talk of him being the "Chosen One". The Jedi Council would have quickly sensed the truth, but what could they do? They weren’t willing to kill the boy, and they couldn’t simply expel him because many, many hands would be out there eager to use him for their own purposes...”

“So they kept him, so they could *contain* him,” Luke added. His mind was starting to work again, racing through his memory, putting the pieces together. “Just like I did with Ben. But they failed, just like I did.”

“Sidius saw to that.”

“Palpatine… he knew...”

“All Sidius had to do was sit back and watch while the Jedi trained Anakin Skywalker, advanced him and then *denied* him his place on the Council. After that, the only thing required was feeding his passions - his anger, his fear - until the Sith inside him broke out.”

“No… it can’t be that simple.”

“Yes, it *can*!” Dar Noaa argued. "You of all beings know the history of Darth Vader. So much of it is chaotic; it makes no sense – until you add this *one* fact: Anakin Skywalker was born *Sith*.”

“No...”

“And I believe,” Dar Noaa said, “the proof is here with us now, in this room.”

Turning his back to Luke, he directed his attention to the Kourin standing at the door.

“Isn’t that true, Katy-six?”
KT06F stiffened and took a deep breath before turning to face him.

“What are you asking?” She replied.

“Finn told us,” Dar Noaa explained, “that you said he was the "best match". You would only say that if you’d checked us all. When you did that, what did you discover?”

“Does the Skywalker,” KT06F looked past the Sith, addressing herself to the Jedi, “wish me to answer?”


“We discovered that Jedi and Sith are the *same* in many ways.”

“Who?”

“All of you, except Dar Ren, Dar Rey and Young Finn. They are a breed apart.”

Suddenly, Luke’s head felt fuzzy. He went back to the bed and sat there until it cleared enough for him to process what he’d just been told.

It would take longer for him to accept it.

......

Shmi was deliriously happy.

The days and weeks passed, and every day, she visited his room last. As soon as the door closed behind her, he would take the tray from her hands and put it on the table himself. Then they would talk, not about anything in particular, just small superficial things like the weather or the menu. Cautious conversation grew more relaxed, and every visit became more pleasant than the last.

One evening, they were laughing much too hard and accidentally touched each other.

At first, neither of them knew how to act, what to do, but then he slid his arms around her and pulled her close and for the first time in her life, Shmi *wanted* to make love. She was no stranger to sex; her master had a generous spirit and several times sent her to service acquaintances that expressed an interest in her.

It was good for business. And he always let her keep whatever token she received.

But she never wanted any of them. Not like she wanted *him*.

It was decided without a single word...

She was late to return to the kitchen, and when she did finally walk through the door, she was surprised to see strangers there.

They were waiting for her.

They told her she was needed for a special test. It would be a simple event, totally harmless and painless, too, because she would sleep through it all. When she questioned why, they replied that it
was in the contract and she must comply.

So she did.

She had no way of knowing that while she slept, she would be the subject of an unnatural experiment that was destined for failure. And the being performing the unnatural experiment had no way of knowing that he wasn’t *creating* life, he was only enhancing a life *already* created.

She woke the next morning in her own room.

Eager to get through her chores as fast as she could so she could go back to him; she hurried to dress and raced to the kitchen. When she arrived, she saw all the other maids standing there, which was very odd, so she walked to them and asked what was going on.

“We’re *out*. *Done*.” One of them replied. “They’re sending all of us back today.”

“When?”

“They said to stay here; nothing more.”

Only moments later, she was herded along with the others to a waiting transport and put inside. None of them were allowed to collect their things or say any goodbyes.

They were just loaded and shipped out.

During the long ride back to her master’s house, Shmi felt empty. Numb. When they opened the door and told her to get out, she stepped down and walked back to to her old life like a robot. The Master greeted her with a teary hug, then put a small bag of credits in her hand and sent her to her room for the rest of the night.

She sat on her bed and spread the credits out to count them. Then she cried.

It was sometime later when she realized she was pregnant.

The Master took the news surprisingly well. He didn’t even ask who and how; he simply told her there was nothing to worry about because “they” were paying for everything. When she heard that the other maids were pregnant, too, and claiming innocence, she decided to do the same. It was for the best; she’d never see him again anyway – and she didn’t even know his name.

When her son was born, she went to the Tax Office with her master and swore to it.

And she never told anyone, not even Anakin.

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To be continued...

Chapter End Notes
I have absolutely no idea if this chapter is any good or not. I never imagined scenes that would take only minutes of screen time would be so difficult to write, and I have greater respect for screenwriters tonight.

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