landscape with a blur of conquerors

by diasterisms

Summary

"While I share your contempt for this situation in which we find ourselves, do not mistake it as apathy," he hissed through gritted teeth, dark eyes burning. "I hardly expect your disposition to sweeten, but I will be damned if I allow my future Empress to behave in a manner that reflects poorly on me and on the First Order!"

"If you allow?" She wrenched her arm out of his viselike grasp, batting his hand away for good measure. "I don't belong to you. I don't belong to anyone."

"That might have been the case back when you were a scavenger on that pitiful scrap heap of a planet, but now?" His sardonic gaze flickered over her silk robes and the jewels woven through her elaborate braids. "Now you are the Chume'da, and the Chume'da belongs to her people. Their fate is entirely in your hands. Should you cross the line, it is they who will suffer for it. Am I making myself clear?"

"I hate you," she said bitterly.

He sneered at her. "See? Already you are acclimatizing so well to married life."
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

I've been sitting on this idea for more than a year but I didn't have the chance to flesh it out until now. It was only a matter of time before I, the living, breathing garbage can, wrote an arranged marriage fic for my beloved trash ship. This takes place in the canon universe, with elements copiously borrowed from the EU. The title is from a poem by Richard Siken.

I'm very excited to be starting a new novel-length story. Strap in for the ride, folks! It's going to be tropey, smutty, action-packed, and political. Comments and suggestions would be greatly appreciated. You can also find me on Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

35 ABY

One standard year after the assault on Starkiller Base

When the war finally came to Hapes, it came first in the form of wake rotation, the starfield rippling and distorting counterclockwise around the Millennium Falcon as it eased into realspace above the blue-and-green-speckled orb of Stalsinek IV. It had been a long and difficult journey through the ionized veils of the Transitory Mists, where a single erroneously calculated maneuver would have torn the ship apart, and then out the jumble of hyperlanes known as the Knot Holes, where one wrong turn would have led to Maker knew where— certainly not the Resistance base, where Rey longed to be playing sabacc with Finn or running flight simulations with Poe or chatting with Jessika. Anything was preferable to traveling alone, searching for what no one was sure even existed in the first place.

“No endeavor is fruitless if you learn something about yourself along the way,” Luke had told her before she left. "Take this time to reflect. Clear your mind and commune with the universe. Let the Force help you find inner peace."

"Can't it help me find the mission objective instead?” Rey had quipped, prompting a fondly exasperated yet somehow oddly wistful half-smile from her master. She'd known then that he was remembering another student who had been just as impatient, just as sharp-tongued. And thinking of that person, even if it was only in passing, had quite ruined her day—as it always did—and her mood had been far from improved by the hours spent in hyperspace with only the Falcon's droid brain trinity for company and the sheer nightmare of navigating the Mists. The beginnings of a tension headache lurked in the back of her skull.
"This better be worth it," Rey muttered under her breath as she grabbed the controls, coaxing the ship into the slow dive of planetfall.

Stalsinek IV was a rainforest world, dark green and oppressively humid. Rey was used to the arid, scorching heat of the desert, not this damp variety that lay heavy on the skin and filled the lungs even in the dense, overgrown places where sunlight was a distant dream. After an hour of trekking beneath the canopy of blackneedles, coilwoods, and whisperpines, she was drenched in sweat, her breath coming out in harsh bursts, the migraine sharp behind her eyes. But there was something here — she could feel veins of energy crackling through the gaps in the tree trunks. All she had to do was hone in on the source.

Rey stopped walking and pressed her fingers to her aching temples. She wasn't very good at Force healing yet, but she could at least take the edge off, make it easier for her to hear herself think...

Power surged through her fingertips, the migraine vanishing like a dandelion puff before a strong breeze.

_Huh,_ she thought, surprised and completely free of pain. _That settles it, then._ There _had_ to be a Force nexus nearby, amplifying her own abilities. Without the headache to distract her, she noticed for the first time just how tangible the energy currents were, thin sections of air shimmering faintly like a massive spiderweb wound through the branches, radiating outwards from somewhere deep in the woodland.

_For countless millennia the Hapans have told tales of a magic fountain in the Corsair Outback,_" Luke had said. "Its waters supposedly cure disease, restore limbs, and bestow youth on those who drink from it. Of course, such stories have been largely dismissed as tall tales, but, if there's one thing I've learned over the years, Rey, it's that most legends contain a kernel of truth. If there is a place of power in the Hapes Cluster, then it is a place where the Force exists as a concentrated wellspring, waiting to be harnessed by one who is sensitive to it."

The ruins of the first Jedi Temple on Ahch-To were a nexus, as was the cave in the swamps of Dagobah. Rey had trained at both, but she wasn't progressing as well as Luke would have liked— hence this little field trip. While Leia had initially been hesitant to send her off without reinforcements, there were no troops to spare and, like it or not, they needed her at her best in order to defeat Snoke and the Knights of Ren.

The war was going badly. The Resistance was getting desperate. Desperate enough to allow their
sole Jedi-in-training to chase after fairy tales in the Inner Rim.

Rey would never admit this to anyone but, over the past several months, there had been a tiny, treacherous voice whispering in her ear that she could have been so much stronger by now, if only she'd found the right teacher. One whose philosophies didn't clash with her own outlook as Luke's—for all his patience and kindness—tended to do.

"I can show you the ways of the Force!" Kylo had shouted, dark-eyed and impassioned as he leaned into her while she stood at the edge of the snow-covered cliff.

She shoved the memory aside with a scowl, wishing she could banish it entirely. She would never join him. He'd have to kill her first, and she wasn't about to let that happen.

The energy streams grew more intense the further into the labyrinth of trees she went. A strange taste blossomed on her tongue, weighty and metallic like ozone, or perhaps blood. Raven-thorns scratched at her bare arms as she quickened the pace; without breaking stride, she ran her palm over the shallow cuts and they disappeared, leaving nary a mark. Yes, there was power here, old and vast, overwhelming her senses until she felt drunk, her skin prickled with goosebumps and her heart thundering against the bones of her ribcage.

The temple was the first thing Rey saw after wriggling through a wall of fragrant blueleaf shrubs. Slabs of milky white stone rose from the undergrowth, their opalescent edges catching what few rays of light filtered in through the canopy of trees. Although the facade had grown scattered patches of grayish moss, the complex of squat rectangular buildings wasn't in ruins, just abandoned—for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, judging from the weeds that sprouted between the walkways and the enormous strangler figs that were attempting to reclaim the wide, open courtyard.

The second thing she noticed was the fountain.

Rey stepped through the Misura vine-entangled entrance arch, ignoring the rows of pillars etched with intricate reliefs that she would otherwise have paused to examine. She was focused on the jet of silvery water that issued from a small oval pool in the middle of the courtyard, into which flowed the energy currents that had guided her through the forest. Its pull on her soul was magnetic. It called to her the way the Skywalker lightsaber had in the basement of Maz Kanata's castle. Unlike then, however, she was no longer afraid of the Force. Sometimes it was a friend, sometimes it was a frustrating enigma, but it was always her constant companion.

She reached out to touch the water—and nearly screamed from how cold it was. Kriff, it was freezing, like she'd plunged her hand into a bucket of ice. She pulled her arm back. Her fingers were
dry.

Huh, she thought for the second time that day. That was... not the way water worked.

Upon closer inspection, the liquid in the fountain didn't look much like water, either. For one, it really was silver, not colorless and reflecting the stone surroundings, as Rey had assumed. She dropped down on one knee and studied the pool, and her face was very conspicuously not reflected back at her—it was all just silver, oozing and burbling and lapping at the stone edges.

She closed her eyes, couching her breathing into the slow, deep, cleansing pattern of the meditative trance. The darkness blinked with the constellation of lights that formed the rainforest, the life energy connecting the trees to the creatures that lurked and slithered and roosted and hunted amidst them. And there, at the center of all things, was the fountain, blazing in her mind like the beating heart, the anchor, the nexus point.

"Show me," Rey said.

And something—some ancient, endless, primal thing—answered, "Yes."

The monotonous, well-oiled routine of the Finalizer's bridge was disrupted by several officers snapping to attention when Kylo Ren stormed inside, the blood and soot of field combat still clinging to the armor that shrouded him from head to toe. They then quickly returned to their business, not a single one of them foolish enough to gawk or eavesdrop as he confronted Hux on the observation deck.

"I see you're still with us," said the redheaded general, turning away from the viewport beyond which the agriworld Taanab was obscured by the floating wreckage of several Resistance ships. "That went rather well, don't you think?"

"Perhaps I'd have a higher opinion if you hadn't sent in the air force after I commed you specifically to say that I had it under control." Kylo's voice was a low, metallic growl through the voice modulator, his gloved fists clenched at his sides.

Hux shrugged. "You were taking too long, Ren. The battle up here was already over, so I deemed it more efficient to direct our TIEs to the capital instead of giving Taanab's ground troops a chance to
"What you did," Kylo spat, "was make them desperate enough to raze their own fields. Billions of acres of prime farmland are currently going up in smoke beneath our feet. I look forward to seeing you try to explain that to the Supreme Leader."

"Our priority is to secure the Perlemian Trade Route as soon as possible," Hux retorted. "I am confident that Leader Snoke will laud my strategy—"

"Your strategy? More like your desire to hog all the glory for yourself, thus costing the First Order valuable resources—" Kylo fell into an abrupt silence, head cocked to the side. It was as if he'd heard something, even though the only noises on the bridge were the tick of chronometers and the beep of radars.

"What is it?" Hux demanded. "Why did you— Ren, where are you going?"

The other man was already halfway across the room. "I have business elsewhere," he said without looking back.

"We debrief in T minus fifteen minutes. You can't just leave."

"Actually, General," Kylo drawled as he stepped over the threshold, "I think you'll find that I rather can."

And then he was gone, the doors hissing shut behind him.

When Rey opened her eyes, the world was pitch black. Not the dark of night, but of shadow. It was deathly quiet, the birdsong and the chirp of insects and the rustle of leaves replaced by a silence so thick that it was a knot in her throat. There was a woman kneeling where the fountain had been—or perhaps the fountain had been a woman all along, the spout a slender torso, the pool a graceful draping of voluminous golden robes. Her skin was as white as ivory, her eyes were as green as the forest, and her snowy wings seemed to fill the void of nothingness that the planet had become.
"Child," she murmured.

Looking back, Rey would be very embarrassed about what she said next. "Mother?" It was an
instinctual question that betrayed the wound in her heart, the hope that she still nurtured even after all
this time.

"It will be hundreds of thousands of years yet before the Mother wakes. I am the Daughter." The
woman spoke in a slow voice bearing traces of confusion, as if she, too, had just emerged from the
depths of sleep. "Or I was. Or another aspect of me was. In this form I am the Goddess."

"I've known other deities." Rey thought of cruel R'ia, whose breath brought the weather storms of
Jakku. "What makes you so special?"

"I should ask the same of you." Pale wings stirred in the darkness as the being leaned forward. "Only
my adherents may perceive me thus, and you, while strong in the Force, are not of the blood." A
cool hand touched Rey's face. A pause, and then, "Ah. I see." The Goddess sounded startled,
puzzled, and intrigued all at once. "That changes things."

"What does?" Rey demanded. She was being rude but previous experience had taught her that it was
sometimes more effective to bully the Force into giving up its secrets. This was yet another source of
friction between her and Luke.

The Goddess ignored her question. "You seek wisdom. You wish to know the reason for your lack
of prowess. There is an ocean in your mind but you can't find it, even if you hear it in the space
between heartbeats. Even if you feel echoes of it surge within you."

"You imagine an ocean," Kylo had murmured, head bowed and eyes hooded in the bluish light of
the interrogation room.

A frown marred the Goddess' pristine visage as she, too, saw the memory in Rey's head. "That one
is... interesting as well. Oh, the ruin you will bring upon each other."

"No surprises there," Rey groused. She didn't need divination to know that her future relationship
with Kylo would consist mostly of attempts to inflict grievous bodily harm. "We're getting a bit off
topic, though, aren't we?" It was always the same problem with these ghosts or manifestations or
whatever she was supposed to call them— when they weren't being unhelpfully vague, they were
talking about something else entirely. She needed to be the one to focus. She needed to speak their
language. "How do I find the ocean?"

"By finding where your power comes from. Where you come from."

"It would really save a lot of time if you just told me," Rey helpfully suggested.

"Not as much time as you might think," replied the Goddess. "The threads of destiny are coming together. You will learn very soon." She sat back on her knees, hands folded in her lap. "And now he is near. In the mood he's in, I'd advise you to run, but, somehow, I don't think you're going to do that."

* 

It happened so fast. With Rey's next breath, she was in the courtyard of the abandoned temple once more, the surrounding forest soft and purple in the twilight. *Stars, how long was I out?* she wondered as she got to her feet on joints stiff from staying locked in one position for what must have been hours. In front of her, the fountain sparkled and rippled like nothing had ever happened, like it had never turned into a winged woman in a soundless vacuum of space and time.

As the lingering grogginess from the trance lifted, Rey became all too aware that she was not alone. There was someone behind her, his Force signature jagged and raw and furious. At the exact moment that she registered his presence, the unmistakable shriek of a broken kyber crystal flaring to life shattered the air.

Rey didn't waste a single second. Igniting her own lightsaber, she spun on her heel and was off in a flash, leaping straight at the masked figure standing a few paces away. Their beams collided and held, sapphire to scarlet, the resulting amethyst haze glinting off of his blank obsidian helm. She'd met him a year ago, in another forest, and he'd been a tight coil of menace and determination while she'd been scared out of her wits.

This time was different. This time, they were both angry.

She pushed off from the blade-lock and set upon Kylo in a barrage of short, quick strikes that drove him backwards even as he deflected with masterful swiftness. Her plan to corner him against one of the pillars failed when he managed to sidestep around her and bring the lethal, serrated edge of his weapon down over her shoulder. She slanted her blade at a defensive angle, and her teeth *rang* from the force of his blow.
"You appear to have marginally improved since we saw each other last." The words emerged in a rumble of static and smoke that sent that same old shiver down her spine. She had dreams about him sometimes, dreams that she could barely remember upon waking, but the mask always came off in the end.

"Yeah, well, your uncle is a good teacher." She emphasized that last word, let it sink in like a barb, before kneeling him in the stomach and taking advantage of his momentary falter to put some distance between them, couching her limbs into a balanced two-handed guard with the lightsaber held on the right side of her body.

"Had you joined me, I would have started you off with the Ataru form of combat as well," Kylo remarked, "before we unlocked your full potential with Juyo, which I am certain Skywalker hasn't told you about because he is a weak and foolish man afraid of the dark." He assumed an opening stance of his own, scarlet crossguard angled to the ground, feet closely spaced. "But the time for that has long since passed. I know now that it was my compassion for you that proved to be my undoing. Consider my offer formally rescinded."

"What a tragedy," Rey mocked. "And you and I have very different definitions of compassion."

"And of tragedy, too."

When they crashed into each other again, it was vicious and relentless, the energy from the nexus augmenting both their powers until the temple's ancient stone foundations were shaking and the starlit forest was ablaze with sound and fury. He'd had a year to stew, to lick his wounds, and to let the resentment fester, and it showed in the way he bypassed disarming maneuvers in favor of going straight for the kill. It was much the same for her, too, all of Luke's platitudes about self-restraint vanishing in the face of this man who'd murdered his own father and almost mortally injured Finn. When they skidded apart after another exchange of blows, Kylo's hand stretched out and Rey felt the Force constrict around her, lifting her off her feet and hauling her towards the screeching edges of those intersected beams of red light. Summoning all her strength, she threw off his telekinetic grip and twisted her body in midair so that she slammed into him instead. His lightsaber flew out of his grasp and he landed hard on the floor of the courtyard, flat on his back with her straddling his hips and her blade humming at his throat.

"How did you find me?" she growled.

"The Force betrayed you." She could hear the sneer in his voice, arrogant and exultant as if he wasn't about to get his head cut off. "Did you think you could commune with a nexus point without me knowing, when I was only a few systems away?" His fingers twitched and, with a mighty groan, the
nearest stone pillar cracked at the base and came toppling down over their heads. She automatically raised a hand to keep it still—the act of doing so was effortless, like breathing, here in this place where energy swept through her in mighty currents—but, the moment her lightsaber lifted from his neck, he surged upwards, rolling her over and to the side, the ground vibrating as the dislodged pillar smashed into the spot where they had been a scant half-second ago.

Now the one on her back, Rey glared up at the expressionless black helm looming above her. "You could have killed us both!"

"Wouldn't that have been poetic," he mused, "for you and I to die together?"

"You're crazy." Her fingers scrabbled at the tiles, feeling around for the lightsaber she had dropped, but he was having none of it, pinning her wrist to the floor with one heavy, leather-clad hand.

And then the Force... left. That was the only way to describe it, the sudden absence akin to the immediate ringing stillness after a door had been slammed shut. "Perhaps next time you will think twice before destroying my temple," the Goddess hissed in Rey's ear, followed by—nothing. Absolutely nothing.

"What was that?" Kylo demanded, his body tense and strained on top of hers. As if he'd heard it, too. "Who was that?"

Rey opened her mouth to issue some form of snappy retort. To rail at him for always, always ruining everything, for being a continued blight on her existence and on the galaxy at large. But, at that precise moment, a smattering of footsteps reverberated throughout the courtyard, mingled with the unmistakable clicking sound of safeties being deactivated.

"On your feet!" a stern, masculine voice commanded. "Slowly. Hands up where we can see them."

Chapter End Notes

Fans of The New Jedi Order books will probably be able to guess where this is going :D

The Hapes Cluster.

Stalsinek IV.
The deity in this chapter is not exactly the Daughter from the Clone Wars series. Instead, she is a different aspect worshiped by the *bzzt tffffff krrgsst SPOILERS*. But, again, if you're an NJO fan, you probably already know.
There was no true night in the Hapes Cluster. The region's high density of stars, nebulae, and moons — as well as the glow coming off the Mists — saturated the evening sky with bright light that shifted from purple to silver to blue depending on the dance of the satellites. Despite this, the twenty armored figures surrounding Kylo and Rey were wearing what appeared to be night vision goggles as they took careful aim with bulky, long-barreled pistols.

"Hapans are beautiful, but they can't see in the dark" was a common proverb among the spacers that passed through Niima Outpost. Rey had always assumed that it was a metaphor but there seemed to be some truth to it, after all, and this part of the forest was relatively dim due to the thick tree canopy. She and Kylo extricated themselves from each other and stood up— she would have shoved him away from her in a fit of sheer pettiness if instinct hadn't warned that any sudden movements would be ill-received.

Her lightsaber was three feet away. She made a halfhearted attempt to summon it into her palm, already knowing that it wouldn't work. There was a gaping hole in her soul where the Force used to be, where it had been severed by a vengeful Goddess thanks to Kylo shattering that pillar. "If we manage to get out of this alive, I'm going to wring your neck," she promised him in a savage undertone.

Before he could respond, however, the Hapan who'd ordered them to put their hands up stepped forward. While the goggles made it difficult to gauge his line of sight, the skin on Rey's nape prickled like he was staring directly at her.
"No, of course not," he muttered to himself after a while, shaking his head as if to clear it. "That's impossible."

"Captain Elerron." One of the men who'd been conducting a sweep of the premises hurried over to his superior, Kylo's and Rey's weapons clutched in his hands. "Lightsabers, sir."

All traces of bewilderment vanished from the captain's demeanor as he reacted to the perceivably dangerous situation with a swift decisiveness befitting his rank. "Stun them!" he barked. "Now!"

Rey ducked beneath the initial onslaught of blaster bolts. Even though it had been a while since she'd last fought without the benefit of her Force abilities, it was muscle memory all the same. She broke through the circle of soldiers, swept one man's legs out from under him, and yanked his pistol from his hands. At the corner of her eye, Kylo had charged as well, was now exchanging blows with two of the soldiers while the others tried to fire at him without hitting their compatriots. Hearing the telltale click of blaster settings being calibrated behind her, Rey turned around and—

Drop the gun, whispered a voice in her mind. Her own voice? Her own thoughts? The command grew more insistent as she stared down the barrel of her new opponent's pistol in the moonlight. Yes, she should obey...

The blaster that she'd procured clattered to the ground. The soldier she was facing adjusted his weapon's settings once more and squeezed the trigger, and at first there was a burst of green light, followed by—

— darkness—

Rey woke up in a cell, somewhere. She had been deposited onto a small cot only marginally softened by a thin mattress and a threadbare pillow, the battered metal creaking as she sat up. There was a window high on one wall, outfitted with durasteel bars that were too closely spaced to squeeze through but let in generous amounts of muggy tropical air and illumination from the radiant night sky — enough for her to see, without any problems, the hulking figure sitting on the cot opposite hers, his gloved fingers digging into the edge of the mattress and his booted feet planted firmly on the floor.
She swallowed nervously as she realized she was looking at Kylo Ren's unmasked face for the first time in a year. Waves of disheveled black hair framed his pale, angular features, now bisected by a scar that ran from his brow all the way down to the corner of one cheek. *I did that,* she thought with a surge of pride. Everything else was more or less the same, save for his expression. He had studied her with calm, academic curiosity in the interrogation room and gazed upon her in guarded surprise and reluctant awe during their fight in the snows of Starkiller Base, but now he was outright *scowling* at her, dark eyes narrowed and lower lip jutting out with a petulance that she would have considered childish if she hadn't known this man and what he was capable of.

"How long was I out?" Rey demanded, matching his glare as best as she could.

"I came to shortly before you did. However, our gracious hosts have not seen fit to grant us the luxury of a chrono." Kylo's natural voice was as soft and deep as she remembered, if about ten times more sarcastic and sharpened by an intense dislike. "In any case, telling time is the least of our problems."

"Our problems? You mean this *mess* you've gotten us into?" she snapped.

"By all means, please expound," he said icily. "I wait on tenterhooks for a breakdown of the mental gymnastics that led you to believe any of this is my fault."

"You heard the Goddess! If you hadn't destroyed that pillar, we could've neutralized those men with the Force. Or, at least—" she sniffed in disdain—"I could have."

She'd hoped to rile him into giving her the screaming match she sorely needed but, instead, Kylo fell silent, a hint of contemplation breaking through the ire on his face. The visual effect was unsettling, like the silhouette of some fanged predator gliding just beneath the surface of the tides on Ahch-To.

"So that's what it was," he said at last.

Rey's brow creased. "You *asked* me—"

"I *felt* something, yes. A presence, right before the Force was—taken away. But I had no idea as to the nature of the culprit, or even that they said anything." Kylo smirked at her while she seethed at having inadvertently divulged sensitive information to the enemy. "A goddess, was it? Goddess of what?"
"None of your business," she retorted. "Anyway, it's still your fault for coming after me. I've no doubt it was the ruckus that drew the Hapans to our location."

He looked his rather considerable nose down at her. "I was merely attempting to recover my grandfather's lightsaber—my birthright, which you stole—"

"Is it really stealing if it comes when called?" she asked him with an air of goading, venomous sweetness.

He sprang to his feet and she followed out of an instinct to keep his movements in check. They met in the middle of the distance between the cots, so close that she could smell him, the sweat and smoke of battle mingling with the cold metal of starships and the lingering woody spice of aftershave to produce an unexpectedly heady combination. Coupled with the wrath in his star-cut eyes, she felt like she was drowning, would drown in him—"You imagine an ocean, I see it, I see the island"—but she held her ground, lifting her chin, baring her teeth.

"The next time we test our respective skills in the Force, little scavenger," he warned, "I will not be bleeding out from a bowcaster wound to the stomach and you will regret your arrogance."

"If there is a next time," she shot back, "because right now we are in a cell and we can't use the Force and these Hapans don't seem the type to let us go with a light slap on the wrist!"

They were jolted from their impasse by the sound of doors opening and closing, footsteps, and conversation, muffled through a layer of metal that was apparently thin enough to facilitate eavesdropping. Rey hurriedly stepped away from Kylo, keeping a wary eye on him as she pressed her ear to the wall. Unfortunately, the people on the other side were speaking in a lyrical, staccato-laden tongue that she couldn't parse. It occurred to her that the captain—Elerron, was it?—and the soldier who'd found the lightsabers hadn't had accents. Perhaps they'd been using the same type of electronic translators that the Resistance wore in the field on worlds where Basic wasn't the common language.

She stalked back to her cot and sat down with a frustrated huff. Across the room, Kylo mirrored her actions, albeit more quietly.

"What do you know about the inhabitants of this cluster?" he asked. It was obvious that his animosity, like hers, had been lessened somewhat by the signs of life beyond the cell reminding them of their mutual predicament.
Not much, Rey inwardly conceded. The few Hapans that found their way to Jakku were pirates, outcasts, keeping to themselves and never staying long. "They’re classified as near-Human," she said slowly, "but they're pretty much isolated from the rest of the galaxy because most outsiders can't navigate the Transitory Mists. They're all eerily beautiful, and they're ruled by a queen—"

"The Queen Mother," Kylo corrected. "Their government is a constitutional monarchy called the Hapes Consortium. And, unless I miss my guess, they have found a way to repel the Force. Not like at the temple," he was quick to clarify. "What happened there was on account of a different entity altogether. If she truly is a goddess, then that kind of nullification effect would be confined to her place of worship. The fact that our captors reacted with such alarm upon discovery of our lightsabers suggests that they are ignorant of the temple's properties, and the fact that they know we are Force users but have not bothered to restrain us suggests that they possess alternative methods of containing our kind."

"I'm nothing like you," Rey countered grumpily. "And how can you be so sure that she's not the goddess of the Hapans?"

"Because the Hapans," Kylo explained with an impatient sigh, "consider the Queen Mother their goddess. Now, unless you are telling me that Ta’a Chume is suddenly capable of turning incorporeal —"

Rey interrupted him, stung by his condescending tone. "So, did you learn all of this from your mother?" It was probably safe to say that he had. Leia was a living, breathing compendium of galactic politics.

The color drained from his face. "That is not a subject for discussion."

"Oh, I don't know, I kind of like talking about it, Ben."

He lunged too fast for her to react. Before she knew it, she was sprawled on the mattress with him on top of her, the cot groaning under their combined weight, one hand clasped loosely around her neck. "If you ever—" he was all of a sudden shaking so hard he could barely get the words out— "call me by that name again—" He stopped, seemingly at a loss for a suitable threat even though he could have strangled her right then and there, and Rey was once again confronting the unhinged, haunted-looking man she had bested last year as a planet collapsed all around them, a hollow-eyed specter exuding fury and despair in equal measure.

"You'll what?" she goaded him as the worn leather of his glove pressed into her throat. "Kill me like you killed Han?"
"Everything I have ever done was not without purpose," Kylo muttered, sounding almost feverish. "To gain strength, I had to first gain victory over the self—"

"You took the life of someone who loved you," she bit out, because that was one of the things that lay at the heart of her resentment, wasn’t it? That was one of the reasons her anger had grown roots as time passed. She’d yearned for her family for as long as she could remember and he’d thrown the gift of his away. "Your father walked onto that bridge wanting to bring you back to the light, but you—"

The door to the cell slid open with a hiss of hydraulics. The Hapan captain peered at the star-dusted scene of Kylo frozen above Rey on the cot.

"It would seem that this is a habit for the two of you," Elerron wryly commented.

The prisoners were to be interrogated separately, and Rey had the dubious honor of going first. Her wrists handcuffed behind her back, she was escorted by no less than five masked soldiers, two of them gripping each of her arms and one nudging a blaster at her spine as the captain led the way down a narrow corridor that looked every inch as sterile and utilitarian as the halls of Starkiller Base. Now that she had the opportunity, she studied her captors; their armor was crafted from a heavier material than the plastoid composite of stormtroopers’ but more tapered to their bodies and polished black, with a silver trim. The other two soldiers were sticking close to her, each one carrying a large cylindrical container with the glass opaqued to hide its contents from view—the same sort of device that Rey had noticed fastened to the wall just outside her and Kylo’s cell.

There was a distinct absence of interrogation racks in the austere, halo-lit chamber she was ushered into. Instead, she was made to sit at a metal table while the cylinders were arranged on opposite ends of the room. The soldiers filed out, leaving Rey alone with the captain, who took the chair across from hers, removed his helmet, and placed it on the table. He was in his late forties or early fifties, startlingly handsome, with a salt-and-pepper undercut and piercing gray eyes. There was indeed an electronic translator clipped to his ear, the mouthpiece grazing along his chiseled jaw.

"I am Captain Antares Elerron of the Mist Patrol, charged by Her Imperial Majesty Ta’a Chume, She Who Has No Equal, to keep our borders safe," he announced in a formal tone of voice. "Many decades have passed since lightsabers were last seen in Hapes. We had, as a matter of fact, been given to believe that the Jedi were no longer extant."
"And yet here I am." Rey was actually just an apprentice, but he didn't need to know that. "Where's here, exactly?"

"The Royal Hapan Armed Forces’ garrison on Stalsinek IV."

That was a relief, at least. Once she got out of here, it would be easy to lose any pursuers in the rainforest while she made for the clearing where she'd stashed the Falcon. But perhaps there was no need to escape; perhaps this man could be reasoned with. "Look," Rey said, "I'm sorry for trespassing. I meant no harm—"

She broke off abruptly. Elerron had drawn his pistol and was now aiming it right between her eyes. "How did you find your way through the Transitory Mists?" he inquired, calm yet firm.

*Tell the truth.*

"Instinctive astrogation." The words fell from Rey's lips as effortlessly as the gun had fallen from her hand back at the white temple. "The Force allows me to determine the safest path through hyperspace no matter where I am."

"Why did you come here?"

*Tell the truth.*

"To meditate at what your people call the Fountain of Youth, which in reality is a convergence of the Living Force."

"What is your name?"

*Tell the truth.*

"Rey."
Elerron fired off question after question and she answered every single one. Before long, she had told him what she had seen at the fountain and who Kylo was and why they had been fighting, and even though there was a small part of her that was aware she was being compelled by some intangible mechanism, it was eclipsed by her willingness. Her obedience to... herself?

It was the gun. Rey grew more certain as the minutes passed. It was releasing an electromagnetic wave field that interfered with her thought processes, prompting her to acquiesce to Elerron's unspoken commands as if it were her own brain issuing them. She might have been able to circumvent the effect with the Force, but...

Her gaze flickered to one of the cylinders in the corner. Following her line of sight, Elerron flashed a tight smile. "One invention we can thank the Chiss for," he remarked. "The Ascendancy and the Consortium don't agree on a lot of things, but we are united in recognizing the threat posed by this phenomenon that your lot hold in such high regard. However, the parameters of this interrogation ensure that it is impossible for you to fabricate, so I believe that you have no ill designs. There remains just one more question to be asked." He took a breath, as if steeling himself for whatever was to come, looking for a moment much older than his years. "What is your relation to Teneniel Djo?"

"I have no idea who that is."

Elerron frowned. He glanced down at the pistol in his hand, confirming Rey's suspicions that the weapon was bending her will to his. "Who are your parents?"

Rey's heart skipped a beat. "I don't know. My family abandoned me on Jakku, in the Western Reaches, when I was very young." No, that wasn't right, they hadn't abandoned her. They were going to come back, she just had to get this war over and done with so that she, too, could return—

"Dear child, I see it in your eyes," Maz had said. "You already know the truth."

Elerron's composure had slipped. A slight but visible tremor ran through his lean frame as he stared at her, seemingly at a loss for words. Before Rey could ponder this strange turn of events, the door opened and one of the soldiers standing guard outside poked his head into the room.

"Captain," he said, "the prince is here."
The Stalsinek IV garrison was a rudimentary military installation on a sparsely populated backwater world; thus, the unit stationed there simply did not know how to deal with the arrival of the Queen Mother's son and several members of the elite Royal Guard. The whole base was thrown into an uproar, and Lance Corporal Obran Jantsk was in a distracted mood as he hurried to find an astromech droid who could repair the hull of the prince's consular vessel that had been scraped up while docking on the too-small landing pad.

Already severely rattled from when one of the fearsome Chume'doro had nearly hurled him into the wall for forgetting to holster his gun in His Highness' presence, Jantsk failed to immediately alert a superior when he noticed that the prisoners' cell had been left unguarded. He was just about to pass by the door when the sharp knock of a weighty fist thudded from the other side.

Clicking his tongue in impatience, the young lance corporal activated the intercom. "Yes, what is it?"

"Fresher's broken," grunted the male prisoner, his words a touch garbled through the static of the audio feed.

In conditions of high stress, the brain sometimes tends to oversimplify. A 'fresher needed fixing; otherwise, the task of cleaning up the resultant mess might fall to the lowly soldier who hadn't rectified the problem as soon as possible. Jantsk had not been part of the team that brought the trespassers in, but the other men had boasted that they went down without a fight, and, while they'd been in possession of lightsabers, the mysterious power that he'd only heard about from old folk tales was apparently disabled by the ysalamiri cage hung outside the cell. Not to mention that every second he'd stand there waiting for a maintenance droid was another second that an astromech droid wouldn't be fixing the prince's ship.

"All right, stand back," Jantsk instructed. "I'm coming in."

The tall, fair-skinned man who entered the interrogation chamber at a brisk pace cut an intimidating figure in his chain-mail cuirass and flowing scarlet cape. His graying blond hair was pushed back from his high forehead by a golden circlet crafted in a laurel wreath's likeness, and the face beneath the intricate arrangement of precious metal was so immaculately proportioned and fine-boned despite the lines of age that Rey could at first do nothing but look at him. She'd only ever viewed the Hapans on Jakku from a distance but, judging from Elerron and this newcomer, the rumors of their unearthly beauty hadn't been exaggerated.

That wasn't the only reason she was gawking, however. He was also familiar, in a way that she couldn't place but nagged at her like a dull toothache. Had she seen him before?
The prince's silvery blue eyes had been trained on the captain from the moment he swept into the room. "Antares, you'd better have a good reason," he said in Basic, "for summoning me from the capital in the midst of the succession debate—" His gaze darted to Rey. And stayed there.

Rey was no stranger to haunted expressions. She'd seen it on Kylo, and on Luke and Leia from time to time. This was different, though— more potent on a soul-searing level. The Hapan prince was literally looking at her as if she were a ghost.

"Teneniel," he whispered.

That name again. Before Rey could open her mouth to demand who that was and what the hell was going on, Elerron spoke up. "My men and I were out on a routine patrol when we found her and another intruder at the temple, Prince Isolder. She says she was abandoned in the Western Reaches when she was a child. She has no memory of her parents. However, she has a lightsaber and she saw the Lady Teneniel's winged goddess in a vision."

"So she is Force-sensitive," Isolder said without taking his eyes off Rey, "just like her mo—"

"We don't know that for sure," Elerron hastened to tell him. "I recommend a DNA test first."

"Have you gone blind?" Isolder snapped. "Do you not see what is in front of you, that she is the spitting image of my late wife? And who else may perceive the winged goddess if not the descendants of Allya? There is no doubt about it, Captain." And then he said the words that turned Rey's world upside down. "She is my daughter."

Not for the first time, Lieutenant Varik Nalto bemoaned the dearth of competent men in the border regiments as he searched the garrison for Jantsk. The kid was eager to please but not particularly quick-witted, and he was supposed to have returned to the landing dock with an astromech droid almost thirty minutes ago.

Upon rounding the corner, Nalto stopped short, the blood freezing in his veins. The door to the conspicuously empty cell was open, and the ysalamiri cage had been ripped from the wall and was now lying on the floor in shattered pieces. The lizard-like creature it had contained was dead, had been shot with a blaster from the looks of it, its tawny-furred body still clinging pitifully to the nutrient frame that had made it possible for the ysalamir to survive away from the olbio trees of its
Nalto could not dwell on either the brutal loss of life or the waste of valuable technology—there were more pressing matters to attend to. He unclipped the comlink from his belt, his heart pounding as he barked into the mouthpiece, "Attention, all troops! Prisoner on the loose. I repeat, prisoner on the loose."

Chapter End Notes

Hapan.
Durasteel.
Chrono.
Ta'a Chume, Queen Mother of the Hapes Consortium.
Hapan battle armor.
Electronic translator.
Mist Patrol.

The name "Royal Hapan Armed Forces" does not appear in the novels but I took it from this RPG site which I might also be basing other world-building elements on in the future.

Gun of Command.
The Chiss Ascendancy.
Chume'doro.

‘Fresher.

The nutrient frame for the ysalamir is Chiss technology but the term "ysalamiri cage" per se is from a different EU faction.

Basic.
Isolder.
Teneniel Djo. (Doesn't this picture remind y'all of Daisy Ridley? I'm shook.)
Allya.
Olbio tree.

Comlink.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the bookmarks, comments, hits, and kudos! I should have mentioned this much sooner, but now is also a good time to disclaim that the storylines of the EU characters (and consequently their interactions with the canon characters) have been modified to suit the purposes of this fic. An additional note on grammar: "in Hapes" as used in dialogue means within the borders of the Hapes Consortium, while "on Hapes" refers to occurrences on the planet itself.

My schedule's looking relatively free this week and I would love to be inspired enough to update again in a few days, so please let me know what you think of this installment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rey had dreamed about this moment for fifteen long, parched years. As she'd prowled through the bellies of defunct starships and hauled nets over the sands and scrubbed parts free of grime, as she'd curled up in her scrap metal bolt-hole at night and mixed flour with precious water and closed her eyes while the X'us'R'iia screamed through the land, her imagination had been her refuge, conjuring a different set of circumstances every time. She'd often wondered what her family would say when they found her, if they would hold her in their arms, if the only tears shed would be happy ones at last.

In none of even the most dramatic, far-fetched scenarios had she been in handcuffs, and she'd definitely never imagined that her first words to the man who was purportedly her father would be, "I'm your what?"

"My daughter," Isolder repeated, his aristocratic features softening as he took a step towards her. "Kira—"

She sprang to her feet, some latent sense of panic spurring her to retreat further into the room, shaking her head. "My name is Rey."

For a moment Isolder looked like he was about to argue, but the pallor on her face and the trepidation in her eyes must have made him decide that a more delicate touch was required. "Yes, you are Rey," he said slowly, "Rey of the Western Reaches, who walks with the Force. But you are also Kira Ka Djo, only child of Isolder of Hapes and Teneniel of Dathomir, granddaughter of the Most Revered Ta'a Chume, and rightful heir to the Hapan throne."

"Your Highness, I must counsel against such premature declarations," Elerron said, looking
aggrieved. "In spite of the striking resemblance, Her Majesty would never accept—"

Isolder waved a dismissive hand. "Of course there will be a DNA test for formality's sake. However, it will only confirm what I already know to be true." His full attention swung back to Rey, who noticed much to her discomfort that his blue eyes were wet with tears. "I know you, you see. You were such a mischievous, tiny thing, always trying to yank this—" he motioned to the circlet he wore — "off my head every time I carried you. But I could never stay mad for long because you'd blink up at me with your mother's eyes and smile her smile... I would know you anywhere. Another fifteen years could have passed before we found each other again and my heart would still tell me that you are mine. Do you not remember your papa at all, even if only a little bit?"

No, Rey thought. I don't. Luke had speculated that her past was mostly a nebulous haze of disjointed images because of flashburn, a phenomenon wherein a Force-sensitive mind deleted painful memories in order to cope with emotional trauma. Still, it had never occurred to her that she wouldn't feel an instant connection to her family once she was reunited with them. The Hapan prince was familiar, yes, but she was bewildered by the odd situation, helpless with her hands bound and the Force blocked off. This was such a far cry from the joyous meeting of her childhood fantasies that she felt cheated— and furious.

"You can't be my family," she snarled at Isolder as a horrible, aching sensation burned in her chest. "Because that means— look, people dump their children because they can't provide for them or keep them safe. You're a— you're royalty." She practically spat the word out. "You're flush. And that means you either left me behind on Jakku or sent me there because— because you didn't want me."

It was a possibility she'd secretly feared but couldn't bring herself to acknowledge. She'd had to live on hope as she fought over scrap in the dirt with the other scavengers, as hunger gnawed at her stomach, as R'ia blotted out the sun. My family loves me, they love me, surely there is someone out there who loves me. "So, no, you can't be my family," she repeated. "I won't believe it."

"Ki— Rey," Isolder corrected himself when her hackles rose as he started to call her by the name that was not hers, "please allow me to explain. Let's sit down— Elerron, take those blasted restraints off of her. It is exceedingly bad form to treat the Chume'da like a criminal."

Wondering if she had just been insulted in the Hapan tongue, Rey glared at Isolder as Elerron cautiously approached, sidling around her to input a numerical combination that activated the handcuffs' release. She shook feeling back into her wrists and stretched arms that had been locked in one position for too long, but she stayed where she was, on her feet. She might need to make a break for it should things go downhill.

If he was bothered by her refusal of his invitation to sit down, Isolder didn't show it. Instead, he remained standing as well, casting an imperious look at Elerron and inclining his head in the direction of the door. The beleaguered captain opened his mouth as if to argue, but then appeared to think better of it, shooting one last searching glance over his shoulder as he left the room.
"Antares is a good man," Isolder remarked once he and Rey were alone. "A fine soldier, if a bit still smarting from his demotion fifteen years ago." He sighed. "I want to tell you everything, Rey, and I hope that someday you will let me. However, given your current mood and the circumstances, I think it would be best to skip ahead and address the issue of why you were sent away. Believe me, if there had been any other option—" He paused, staring for a moment at some harrowing event in the past that only he could see. "When you were five years old, a civil war broke out in the Hapes Cluster. My brother Kalen led a rebellion composed of those who were dissatisfied with the Queen Mother's reign. There were a great many of them, mostly from the Rifle Worlds and the Lorelli Reach, and they believed in their cause strongly enough to kill anyone who got in the way. They attacked the capital and routed our forces, and you and Ta'a Chume were evacuated in separate ships. I would have given anything for us to stay together but my place was with my people."

Memory was a tricky thing. Rey had strained to recall as much as she could over the years, coming up with nothing but a slew of blurred faces and an atmosphere of overwhelming panic. However, the longer Isolder spoke, the more the vagueness solidified, until she could see flames all around her and a hand touching her cheek in both farewell and benediction, and then air and sky.

"You were in so much danger," Isolder continued in a low, tense voice. "You were the Chume'da, the heir. Kalen would never have spared your life, no matter how young you were. His ideology had twisted him, rotted him from the inside. I killed him myself a month later, on the bluffs of the Fountain Palace. With his death, the tide changed and what was left of the Armed Forces managed to retake Hapes and crush the rebellion. Ta'a Chume returned and all was right again, except for one thing. We couldn't find you. Your ship's signal had gone dark."

"Who else was on board?" Rey asked in little more than a whisper. Faint silhouettes tugged at some long-buried part of her mind—women in armor, the lower halves of their faces covered by masks.

"A nursemaid and two members of the Royal Guard. They were supposed to bring you to Orinda, where the New Republic had just transferred its capital and where I had influential friends who could give you their protection, but you never made it to the rendezvous point."

"And the woman I look like... Teneniel Djo..." Rey trailed off. She already knew, didn't she? She'd heard Isolder talk to Elerron about his late wife. That was one of the reasons she hadn't wanted to believe him in the first place. If he truly was her father, that meant her mother was dead.

"Teneniel passed away not long after you were born," Isolder replied, his sorrow shining through the span of years in such a manner that one could clearly imagine how it must have blazed when the wound was still fresh.
And before Rey could even react to that, before she could pick apart the tangled threads of her mixed emotions and attempt to understand whether she felt grief or nothing for a woman she didn't know, the door burst open, and all hell broke loose.

She absorbed every detail of the scene. She must have— because, when she looked back on it in the months to come, she would recall with the piercing clarity of rising adrenaline the spiked heavy armor of the Chume'doro, statuesque and half-masked women with cannons mounted on their broad shoulders, and the way Elerron's mouth had tightened into an urgent line. She would remember someone saying in Basic, "Your Highness, the other prisoner has escaped, he has recovered his weapon, you must leave."

But in the present moment, in the here and now, she registered only the concept of escaped prisoner and recovered weapon before she shot out of the interrogation room like a rocket, shoving past the guards, ignoring the cries that trailed in her wake, running as fast as her feet could carry her down the metal corridors where the air rang with sirens, running along with soldiers carrying guns that she already knew wouldn't do any good, not if Kylo Ren had recovered the Force.

It returned to her, too, at about five meters away from those strange cylindrical containers. It crashed through her in waves, bringing with it the magnetic pull of her quarry, the jagged flare of his energy signature. Some of the soldiers pouring out from the barracks and the mess hall tried to stop her— hell, they probably thought she was the subject of the alert— but she swept them aside with raw telekinetic blasts, their bodies slamming against the walls, their weapons clattering to the floor. Eventually she outpaced them all, darting from the garrison's main building and into the warm summer night, where the landing pad was littered with corpses, where a scarlet crossguard shrieked beneath a net of constellations as it was plunged through the chest of the last soldier standing.

Rey advanced on Kylo with a renewed burst of speed, but he was too far away, already climbing into the cockpit of a Miy'il starfighter, the hilt of the Skywalker blade glinting conspicuously from his utility belt. He'd donned his helm and yet, somehow, she just knew he was smirking in triumph as he gave her one last look before the transparisteel canopy closed over him.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Rey shouted even though he couldn't hear her over the roar of 6X4 fusial thrust engines. She scrambled to commandeer a fighter of her own while, behind her, Isolder reeled off commands in Hapan— possibly stand down or something similar, because no lasers were fired in her direction.

Rey barely spared a thought for them; the universe had narrowed to encompass only the snowy beams of Kylo's starfighter as he coasted over the treetops. It wasn't long before she followed, her knuckles clenched to white around the yoke, the ground falling away, the dashboard blaring with unheeded warnings to reduce speed, the forest opening up into—
While she dearly treasured the idea of shooting Kylo down and retrieving the lightsaber from the twisted wreckage, she abstained from firing right away, instead cutting him off with a groan of thrusters pushed to their limit and forcing his ship lower, to an altitude that would at the very least make a crash survivable. She loathed him with every fiber of her being but, at the end of the day, she had no wish to be the one who killed Leia's son.

To her surprise, the transceiver crackled to life as she glided over the woods, hot on his tail. "This hardly seems like the time and place to have it out," he observed in a crisp, static-tinged voice that contained a sliver of amusement. The ass was gloating.

"Should've thought about that before you made off with my lightsaber." Setting the cannons to stutter-fire, Rey clipped at his wings—or tried to. He dodged her lasers with ease, the white starfighter zigzagging through the silver night like some ephemeral wraith, bolts of emerald green plasma missing its hull by centimeters. He was a good pilot, much to her annoyance, and she would have to up her game—

No sooner had the thought occurred to her when he pulled into a sharp ascent, spiraling in the air and then dropping behind her. Suddenly she was the one being pursued. Growling under her breath, Rey jerked hard on the yoke, bringing her ship into an abrupt about-face that nearly snapped her neck. The two Miy'til starfighters hurtled towards each other, lasers colliding in violent explosions that trailed fiery sparks down onto the rainforest canopy.

Kylo and Rey swerved at the same time, mere seconds before what would have been a devastating impact. She was still regrouping from the dizzying move when he told her over the shortwave, "For the record, it's my lightsaber," and darted up into the stratosphere.

Rey didn't give chase. There was no point—she couldn't bring herself to make a kill-shot, and she couldn't follow him through hyperspace. She landed on a riverbank and thumped the dashboard once the starfighter had powered down. That failed to take the edge off of her frustration, so she screamed as well, the wordless sound ear-splitting in the dark and silent cockpit.
She navigated the moonlit forest on foot, searching for the *Falcon*. Occasionally she would hear the drone of ion engines overhead and duck beneath the tree cover to avoid being spotted by what were most certainly search patrols. Part of her desperately wanted to return to the garrison and demand more answers from the Hapan prince, but another part was...

Afraid. It took a few more minutes of stumbling through the undergrowth for her to figure out that she was afraid. What if the DNA test revealed that she wasn’t of Isolder’s blood and that her resemblance to his dead wife was pure coincidence? After all, the whole thing seemed too outlandish to believe. She was a scavenger, she was no one, she was definitely *not* a long-lost princess.

Was *princess* even the right term? Isolder had called her something else. He had called her the *Chume’da*.

The heir to the throne.

She shivered in the humid breeze. If she *was* Kira Ka Djo, that seemed even more ominous, like when Maz had told her to take the Skywalker blade and to wield the Force. Back then, she’d up and bolted— into a forest, right into Kylo.

The irony was not lost on Rey.

She found *his* ship first, the sleek black *Upsilon*- class shuttle he’d used to get to Stalsinek IV. Aside from giving it a kick as she passed by, she left well enough alone. Let there be proof that the First Order had trespassed on Consortium territory. Another hour of walking led her to the pale gray silhouette of the *Falcon*, playing host to a gaggle of beek-monkeys that skittered away at her approach.

Once inside the freighter, Rey checked her messages. Her heart stopped cold at a communique from Leia that, after being patched through the usual decryption sequence, informed her of the Resistance’s defeat at Taanab and ended with a directive to return to base as soon as possible. This was bad— Taanab had been one of the last Republic strongholds along the Perlemian Trade Route. This meant that only the Anaxes fortress, the Ringali Shell, and Orus stood between the First Order and Coruscant.

"I have to go," Rey said out loud, testing the words on her tongue. She balked at the prospect of leaving without a resolution to the mystery of her past, but the Resistance needed her. There was the family she’d wanted to find and there was the family she’d found along the way, and there was no question where she had to be right now.
As the *Falcon* shot out from the woodland and into the stars, Rey glanced at a corner of the viewport. Lights burned from distant windows down on the ground, and she wondered if at this very moment Isolder was watching her go the same way her five-year-old self had watched a ship take to the skies. *I'll come back*, she thought. Someday, when the war was over and she owed nothing more to the bonds it had forged. *I promise.*

Coruscant was in the middle of its day cycle when Rey arrived at the military headquarters that the Resistance now shared with the vestiges of the Republic fleet—those that had been stationed elsewhere at the time of the Hosnian system's destruction. The atmosphere in this sprawling complex of stately buildings had been growing increasingly dour as the First Order advanced deeper into the known galaxy with each passing month, and, today, Rey could almost taste the despair that emanated from the people milling about in the hangar bay when she disembarked. And yet they still looked at her with such a stubborn, hungry gleam in their eyes that she felt like a fraud. Hope was the legacy of the Jedi, as Luke had said with perhaps just the slightest trace of bitterness, but some Jedi *she* was, almost causing a diplomatic incident and losing her lightsaber on her first solo mission.

Finn was waiting for her at the entrance to the hangars, his smile welcoming and genuine, if lacking its usual brightness. While Rey was certain she would have felt it if something bad had happened to him on Taanab, she still couldn't help scanning for injuries before rushing into his open arms. "You're all right!" he exclaimed into the crook of her neck. "You were gone for so long, I thought —"

"I'm fine," she hastened to assure him, squeezing his broad frame one last time before pulling away. "I'm glad you're okay, too."

"Phasma almost had me," Finn said as they began the long walk to Leia's office. "But I somehow—I mean, her blaster rifle jammed on its own, or maybe not. I *wanted* it to, and it *did.*"

Rey smirked. "Yeah, I love it when that happens. You know, if you let Master Luke train—"

Finn interrupted her, not because he was annoyed but because this was an old argument between them. "Right now, the Resistance needs my skill in armed combat and my familiarity with First Order tactics. I can help more people this way."

She made a show of rolling her eyes, belying the small, fond smile on her lips. "Carry on, then, Lieutenant."
Finn retaliated with a good-natured bump of his shoulder against hers. "Enough about me— how was your trip? Did you find the nexus?" His brow creased as he noticed what was missing from her utility belt. "Rey, where's your lightsaber?"

She told him the whole story as quickly as she could, barely pausing for breath between sentences, not particularly caring that she would have to repeat herself to Leia in a few minutes. Finn deserved to know everything first; he'd earned that. At first he listened with the stone-faced expression that came so naturally to military men and women, nodding in all the right places, but, the more she recounted, the more his jaw dropped, until he was outright gaping at her by the time they reached the hallway of offices belonging to High Command.

"You're a princess!" His awed whisper rang through the quiet corridor, eliciting curious glances from passersby.

"Not so loud," she admonished, tapping a security code into the keypad of the door at which they'd stopped. "Besides, that's not confirmed yet—"

The door slid open and Finn charged inside. "Rey's a princess," he announced to Leia, who was sitting at her desk, and to Luke, who was standing by the window.

"Finn!" Rey hissed, scurrying over the threshold as two pairs of Skywalker eyes blinked at her. "I told you, we're not sure—"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Your Majesty—"

"Don't call me that!"

Leia cleared her throat. "Only kings and queens are 'Your Majesty.' Princes and princesses are 'Your Highness.' But I think," she said, gesturing for them to be seated, "you had better start from the beginning."
Finn had shown. She was, however, dead wrong. Mention of Kylo was met with the stoicism borne of old pain, but hearing Isolder's name for the first time caused Luke to glance at his twin with a flicker of mild amusement.

"Oh, don't you dare start," Leia muttered, suddenly very interested in the polished grain of her quasiwood desk.

"I didn't even say anything," Luke protested.

"Rey, ignore my brother, he's being an ass," Leia instructed in a brisk tone of voice. "Please continue."

Even though she'd just been issued a direct order by a woman she highly respected, Rey found herself hesitating. Pink had crept onto Leia's elegant cheeks, faint but there. General Organa was blushing, and that, somehow, was the strangest thing to have happened over the past twenty-four hours.

"The two of you know the Hapan prince?" Finn asked, leaning forward eagerly. He could stand on ceremony along with the best of them but, behind closed doors, he treated Luke and Leia with a heartwarming informality that Rey could never hope to master.

"Know is relative," Luke replied. "I've met him. Leia, on the other hand, knows him better than I ever could."

"So much for you not saying anything," Leia snapped, and Luke chuckled, and not even the healthiest dose of internal confusion could have stopped Rey from grinning at this glimpse of the fiery young rebels that the Jedi Master and the General had once been.

"Luke and I met Isolder during the war— the first one," Leia grumpily explained. "The Rebel Alliance set up a meeting with Ta’a Chume to discuss the possibility of the Hapes Cluster joining our cause. The negotiations lasted for a week and nothing ever came of them— the Consortium didn't want to draw the Empire's attention to their little corner of the Inner Rim— but, during that time, Isolder and I struck up a... camaraderie."

"He was sweet on her," Luke clarified, a twinkle in his storm-blue eyes revealing that he was enjoying this perhaps a little too much.
Leia scowled at him but didn't deny it. "Our paths crossed again after the war and we'd message from time to time—"


"— Luke!— but we eventually lost touch. As I understand it, there was an uprising in Hapes, and I was busy butting heads with the Senate," concluded Leia. "Returning to the matter at hand— it puzzles me, Rey, that this Captain Elerron would summon the prince to deal with a trespasser in the Corsair Outback, of all places. What did you and Isolder talk about?"

*

After Rey had finished speaking, the silence that hung in the room was so thick it could have been cut with a knife. Desert silence, she thought a bit frantically. The tense, oppressive stillness of high noon, when everything went dormant in the stifling heat. Only this time she was in a military base on Coruscant, a gentler sort of sunlight filtering in through the windows, falling on furniture and star maps and two age-lined faces that were staring at her in shock as she fidgeted uncomfortably in her chair.

"Fifteen years ago, on Orinda," Leia said as if in a daze, "I received an encrypted communique from Isolder telling me that he was entrusting something of great importance to my care. He contacted me again once the rebellion against his mother had been quelled, and he was most distraught when I informed him that no ship from Hapes had arrived. He wouldn't tell me what had been on board. I had no idea that it was—" She rose to her feet and came out from behind her desk, stooping to cradle Rey's face in her hands. In that moment the General looked so much like her son, staring at Rey after the lightsaber flew into her palm instead of his, the wind knocked out of him. "It was the Chume'da," Leia whispered. "It was you."

*

A droid was called in to extract a blood sample. Without Isolder's DNA, there was no way to either confirm or disprove Rey's exact parentage at the moment, but they could scan for Hapan genes. Leia and Finn accompanied the droid to the medbay after Luke politely requested some time alone with his student, who kept her gaze trained on the floor once it was just the two of them in the office.

"Master Luke," she began, swallowing the lump in her throat, "I'm so sorry about your lightsaber—"
He shook his head. "It wasn't your fault at all, Rey. My nephew is welcome to it— he might even learn something. What matters to me is that you have returned safe and sound. Besides—" his cybernetic fingers tapped the hilt clipped to his belt— "I am much more attached to the blade I crafted myself. As I suspect you will be, too."

Rey looked up. "You mean it? You'll teach me how to make my own...?"

"Yes. But first we must talk about your vision at the nexus point. Coupled with this recent news about your parentage— let's assume for now that you are Isolder and Teneniel's child— I believe we've uncovered the reason you have been having trouble with the Force. The entity said you weren't *of the blood*, and then she seemed to change her mind once she had studied you a little more. I wonder if perhaps she was just unable to detect it right away, diluted as it was by your father's non-human genes. I never met this Teneniel Djo, but Isolder mentioned she was from Dathomir, correct?" Luke waited for Rey to nod before continuing. "That is a planet in the Outer Rim, and I do know a few things about the witch clans who hold dominion there. They are Force-sensitive but they understand the Force in a way that differs vastly from conventional Jedi or even Sith praxis. They treat it as a kind of magic. And they worship the Winged Goddess."

"Her goddess," Rey said, mind racing. "That's what Elerron told Isolder— that I saw Teneniel's goddess at the fountain."

"That proves it, then. Teneniel Djo left Dathomir, married a Hapan, and somehow stumbled upon a Force nexus in her new territory. There, in the forests of Stalsinek IV, her faith grew roots."

"She didn't build the temple, though," Rey pointed out. "The place looked ancient, Master."

"The original builders probably erected that temple to a deity of their own," Luke mused. "It's a mystery, to be sure. Who better to solve it than the Royal Highness of that place?"

Rey groaned. "You're as bad as Finn. Do me a favor— don't tell Poe yet. He'll never let me hear the end of it. Chewie, too."

Their gazes swung towards the door at the familiar scrape of metal. Finn was bouncing on his heels, practically giddy with excitement, but it was Leia who spoke first.

"Congratulations, you're royalty," she said to Rey without preamble. "Don't let it get to your head— it's not all it's cracked up to be, I promise. And I have something for you, too." She went back to her
desk and rooted around for a while before producing a datastick, which she then pressed into Rey's suddenly ice-cold hand. "This contains the transceiver frequency to the Song of War, Isolder's personal ship. I have no idea if it's still in commission, but it's worth a shot." Her brown eyes softened. "You and your father have a lot of catching up to do."

Chapter End Notes

X'us'R'iia.

Dathomir.

Flashburn.

Chume'da.

Kalen.

Rifle Worlds.

Lorelli Reach.

The Fountain Palace.

Orinda.

Miy'til starfighter.

Beek-monkey.

Anaxes.

The Ringali Shell.

The Orus Sector.

Quasiwood.

Datastick.

Song of War.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

My deepest gratitude to all for the comments on the last chapter, and for your patience in waiting for this one! Please mind the timestamp, as we've skipped ahead in the chronology. Reviews would be much appreciated <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

36 ABY

One standard year later

This isn't happening.

Moments, they pulsed like heartbeats, glinting in the arterial red light that flooded the world as Coruscant's Orbital Defense Headquarters fell from the sky in a rain of metal shards the size of small buildings, having been sucked into the planet's gravitational pull and burning upon atmospheric entry to wreak flame and havoc on the city below.

This isn't happening.

The stray thought flitted across the surface of Rey's mind every now and then, as if the \textit{nth} time would be the charm and she'd wake up to a reality where the First Order had not converged upon Coruscant and quickly overwhelmed the combined Resistance and Republic fleets. Her brain was resorting to its old tricks, attempting to shut out the truth with childish fantasies. This \textit{was} happening. \textit{This} was real.

"How's she holding up?" Rey asked, glancing over her shoulder where Leia was being supported between Finn and Poe as they hobbled through the ruins of the Senate District. The air was thick with smoke and dust, stained crimson from the myriad fires, but Rey was close enough to notice that the general was having difficulty breathing, her face deathly pale. Blood soaked through the cloak that had been wrapped around her torso as a makeshift bandage, seeping out in copious amounts from the wound inflicted by Malacath Ren's \textit{beskar} greatsword.

"Fading fast," Poe replied tersely. "We have to get her to Luke as soon as possible."
Rey trawled the Force, confirming her master's presence at the rendezvous point. "Falcon's just up the street." Or what was left of the street, anyway. The one saving grace was that this district had already been obliterated and, thus, the enemy had focused their attentions elsewhere. It was deserted, heaps of debris walling it off from the ground skirmishes scattered throughout the rest of the city, although the air carried the sounds of battle, the bombs and the lasers and the screams.

A tower had collapsed onto their intended path; there was an opening between the twisted metal wide enough for their party to squeeze through one at a time. Detecting no signs of life on the other side of the barrier, Rey motioned for Poe to go first. She then gently nudged Leia forward, murmuring words of encouragement to the injured, disoriented woman, whose bones felt impossibly brittle beneath Rey's hands. No sooner had Leia disappeared through the gap when Rey suddenly became aware of the energy signatures behind her, sharp and malevolent and crackling with the dark side of the Force.

Kriff.

She turned around. Finn, ever on the alert, had raised his blaster, pointing it towards the swirling mists where three armored figures had materialized. "Go," she told him, nodding in the direction of the gap. "I'll hold them off."

"Rey, I'm not going to leave you—" Finn started to protest, but she cut him off.

"Poe needs your help getting General Organa to the ship, and someone has to buy time. Go. I'll catch up."

"You'd better," Finn muttered as he scrambled to wedge himself through the rudimentary tunnel. They'd learned early on to trust in each other's capabilities—they'd had to, or else nothing would ever get done.

Once Finn was safely on the other side of the barrier, Rey slipped into—not opening stance, not yet. Instead, she stood stock-still in an almost meditative posture, assessing the situation as the three silhouettes fanned out, the better to launch a simultaneous offensive from different directions, she supposed. She'd engage them for five minutes before retreating, she decided, and hopefully Finn, Poe, and Leia would have reached the Falcon by then.

The figure standing directly in front of her spoke in a lilt that was unmistakably feminine even through the helmet's voice modulator. "Hello, little Jedi," purred Boethiah Ren, whom Rey privately considered the most dangerous of Kylo's knights, garbed in a mix of heavy plate and cortosis weave. "Your last bastion has fallen. The remains of your fleet are scattered. It's not too late to come on over
to the winning side, you know."

"How can you still want her to join us after she killed Malacath?" growled Clavicus Ren, his barbed mace already slanted into an attack position in his gauntleted fists.

"The fact that she was able to kill that behemoth is precisely why I want her as an ally," countered Boethiah. "You're just miffed because she broke your arm on Kuat three months ago."

"Spare me the recruitment speech," Rey snapped. "I'm perfectly fine where I am." She was trying not to appear too surprised—she'd telekinetically shoved Malacath off a second-floor balcony before he could land another strike on Leia, but that seemed far from enough to kill him. Perhaps Resistance soldiers had finished the job.

"It's over, Jedi," sneered Hircine Ren, his black cloak rustling as he brandished his electrostaff at her. "The Resistance will never be able to recover from this defeat. The Republic is no more."

Rey drew her own weapon. "Then I guess there's nothing left to do but take you all down with me." Luke had always warned that she'd one day cut herself on the sharpness of her own tongue—she just hoped that it wouldn't be today.

The darksiders charged and Rey sprang into action, her ignited saberstaff slicing through the air, the blades imbued with a silver sheen by the durindfire crystals she had pried from the bedrock of Tatooine. Precious gems polished by centuries of wind and sand, appropriate for someone like her who had known nothing but drought for fourteen years. The twin metallic beams clashed with Hircine's electrostaff, Clavicus' mace, and Boethiah's wickedly curved, poison-tipped daggers in a lethal dance amidst the smoke and ruins. Rey made liberal use of crumbled pillars and toppled ledges, springing off from them and spinning and slashing at her foes as she counted down the minutes in her head. She was at a clear disadvantage—the knights' armor and weapons were resistant to lightsaber plasma and she was outnumbered—but she had a chance if she could move faster, if she could strike harder—

She felt him before she saw him. Even through the cloying miasma of his subordinates' shadowy energies, his Force signature engulfed her senses, as fierce and distinctive as a lightning bolt. And there was lightning, flaring forth from gloved fingers, wrenching Clavicus' wrist backwards before his mace could find its mark on Rey's skull.

At first Rey could only stare, dumbfounded, as Kylo placed himself between her and his knights. Clavicus was holding his injured wrist at an awkward angle, low, animalistic noises of pain emerging from his helmet's mouthpiece, while Boethiah had stepped out of range, head cocked to the side like
she was shrewdly observing the scene. It was Hircine who dared speak, saying, "Lord Ren?" in a
confused tone.

"Find your own plaything," Kylo instructed through the deep rasp of his voice modulator. "I have a
score to settle with this one."

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He attacked her as soon as the others had vanished. But it was nothing more than an opening move
designed to start the duel, his crossguard colliding against her saberstaff without the usual brute
strength. Almost as if his heart wasn't in it, which was ridiculous— wasn't it? They put each other
through their paces, red and silver illuminating their gloomy surroundings as the sky continued to fall
over Coruscant, debris from aerial battles pockmarking the ground. It was when Rey had to skirt
around the S-foil that had crashed into their field of combat that Kylo lunged at her in an overhead
strike that had her spine nearly bending in half as she blocked, the intersected beams of their sabers
shrieking at her throat.

"Where is she?" he demanded. He sounded strange— panicked and desperate, his words garbled by
static.

There was no one he could have meant but Leia, and Rey's sense of protectiveness kicked into
overdrive. "I won't let you hurt her. You've done enough." She thumbed the release located in the
middle of her weapon's hilt, and their blade-lock was effectively broken when her staff divided into
two separate lightsabers and she took up the offensive, driving Kylo backwards with the relentless
wave-front assault of the Jar'Kai form. She had rarely employed this technique against him over the
past year but now was as good a time as any, considering that she wasn't planning on a lengthy duel.
Sure enough, the imaginary timer in her head went off after only a few more seconds. Gritting her
teeth, she swung both blades towards him in a deadly arc that forced him to weave awkwardly to the
side in order to dodge, and then she was off, lightsabers extinguished, scampering in the direction of
the gap and squeezing through it without a backwards glance.

He didn't try to stop her.

Crawling through realspace, the Millennium Falcon approached the prickly emerald glow of the
Transitory Mists, its Carbanti countermeasures package ticking away to scramble any identifying
electronic signatures and mask the communiques that were being sent back and forth across
encrypted HoloNet channels as what was left of the Resistance tried to keep track of their comrades.
Every once in a while, a signal would go dark, and Rey would steadfastly suppress thoughts of what
might have happened to the ship on the other end. That way lay madness. She had to focus on the present moment, on keeping her crew alive.

Leia was convalescing in the quarters that had been Han's, her wound sewn up by Luke's deft Force Assist, while Chewbacca stayed at her bedside. Luke himself was standing in the cockpit with Finn and Artoo, watching Rey and Poe navigate this sector that appeared empty to those unaware that the Hapes Cluster lay just beyond the ion veils that pulsed and trembled and shifted in the black. It was hypnotic, how the Mists curled like smoke, but for Rey the pretty visual effect was soured by the fact that the war was all but lost. Her mind was still refusing to process the ramifications of that, and so it strayed to the next best distraction— Kylo. Now that the heat of the moment had worn off and they were well away from each other, she could take the opportunity to dwell on this latest fight, their eleventh one since Stalsinek IV. She battled his knights more often than she did him, but it hadn't escaped her notice that he was stronger and more focused each time compared to the last; Luke had surmised that he must be meditating with the Skywalker blade even though he had yet to wield it in combat, and, indeed, Rey's master had once scrutinized a vid feed of the First Order storming a Resistance barracks and observed that Kylo's technique now possessed a decidedly Djem So bent. "It wasn't always like that," Luke had murmured. "When he was my apprentice, he favored Niman."

However, it struck Rey that something had been off about Kylo an hour ago on Coruscant. His moves had been scattered and inefficient in a way that reminded her of Starkiller Base. And he'd asked about Leia— could he have known that she'd gotten injured? Had he been... concerned?

"No," Rey told herself firmly. His mother and his uncle might still nurture the hope that he could be redeemed, but she wasn't about to fall into that trap. Han Solo had paid for that mistake with his life, and she was nothing if not a survivor.

"What now?" Poe's soft drawl from the co-pilot seat broke into the mire of Rey's thoughts. He was more relaxed now that Jessika had confirmed that she was with BB-8 and that they had found temporary refuge in the Fakir sector, shielded by the Sarnikken Asteroid Belt. "We need a place to hide, somewhere to take stock of the situation and regroup with the others."

"The First Order's occupied all major systems," Finn said gravely. "We can hole up in the Outer Rim but they'll be expecting that, and anything more Corewards will be riddled with blockades."

"Wild Space?" Poe ventured, and then shook his head to nix his own suggestion. "No, they have eyes there, as well as in the Unknown Regions. We'd be sitting ducks with no idea where the next attack will be coming from."

Rey was staring out the transparisteel viewport, at the swirling green Mists. She could feel Luke's contemplative gaze trained on her back and, finally, he spoke up. "I think there's a reason Rey chose this particular route," he said. "I think she already knows where we're going."
She nodded, taking a deep breath in an effort to calm her inner turmoil, and then her shaking hand reached for the communications panel on the dashboard. To make contact with Isolder.

By the time the *Falcon* was beamed clearance to enter the Mists—along with a navigational chart containing the grid coordinates where they were instructed to proceed—Leia was feeling marginally better. She clung to Chewbacca's arm as they joined the others in the cockpit, watching the ion clouds fade into the starlines of lightspeed and then—after a jump that lasted mere seconds—realspace once more.

"That hyperlane we just shot out of, the inhabitants of this cluster call it the Spine," said Leia. "Now we're in the Throat, the only section of the Transitory Mists that allows for sublight travel to... there." She pointed to a blue-and-green sphere in the distance. "Shedu Maad. That's the same planet we orbited during those failed negotiations decades ago."

Rey barely spared Shedu Maad a glance; all her focus was immediately drawn to the massive structure hovering above it, a silvery assemblage of spired towers and ornate battlements set beneath a transparent crystal dome and mounted on black, wind-sculpted basalt, with five enormous pylons thrust outwards to give a star-shaped appearance. It took Rey's brain a while to come to terms with the fact that she was looking at a spaceship, the diameter of the centrally-oriented hull falling only a few hundred meters short of the *Finalizer*'s length, cradled by an impressive array of shield generators, turbolaser batteries, anti-starfighter cannons, and tractor beam projectors, glittering like a crown in the light of icy nebulae.

"And that," Leia continued, "is the *Star Home*, the flagship of the Hapan Queen Mothers. It's several thousands of years old."

"It's a castle," Finn blurted out, eyes wide. "A castle in space."

"These people do well for themselves, don't they?" Chewbacca grunted in Shyriiwook, and then slanted a furtive glance in Rey's direction. "No offense, Your Worship."

"Oh, stop calling me that," Rey admonished even as part of her guessed, with a pang of sorrow, that Chewbacca's distaste stemmed from his loyalty to Han, who had been jealous of Isolder vying for Leia's affections.
"Hey, Your Princessness, I've always wondered," said Poe, "Isolder calls you the heir, doesn't he? But shouldn't he be the heir, seeing as he's the child of the current monarch?"

It was Leia who answered, shaking her head. "No man may rule Hapes. The title of Chume'da always passes on to the eldest daughter. If the Queen Mother only has sons, the firstborn's wife is expected to take the throne."

"But Isolder's wife refused," Rey added. She still couldn't bring herself to refer to the deceased woman or to the prince as her parents, even though she had been communicating with the latter on and off throughout the past year and he had told her bits and pieces of her own history in transmissions that were always cut short whenever Rey got too paranoid that the First Order might have sliced the feed. "Teneniel Djo had no interest in ruling, so, the moment I was born, I was proclaimed the heir." Kriff, but it felt odd to say all of this out loud, like she was assuming someone else's life. "She died when I was seven months old."

Finn reached out to lace their fingers together, giving her hand a sympathetic squeeze. She flashed him a wan smile, suddenly burningly grateful that they had both made it out of Coruscant. Whatever happened in the time to come, at least they still had each other.

* *

A cool, clipped voice from the Star Home's bridge guided the Falcon through the docking procedure at one of the hangar bays located in the base of the main hull, between the roots of the encircling pylons. As they veered closer to the Hapan ship, Rey couldn't help but notice that most of its armaments had swiveled to face them, and she didn't breathe easy until they were safely beneath the hull, and then inside.

* *

Isolder was waiting on the docking pad, flanked by his retinue of Royal Guards. Prodded forward by Finn and Poe, Rey approached him nervously, having no idea what the standard procedure was for greeting one's estranged father on their second meeting. Should she hug him? Stars, she hoped not. Maybe she was expected to curtsy since he was a prince— but she was the heir to the throne, wasn't she? Did she rank above him? Maybe he was the one supposed to curtsy— no, that was wrong, men didn't—

Isolder solved her dilemma by clapping her hands in his. "Rey," he said warmly, the gentleness in his
blue-gray eyes somewhat at odds with his regal demeanor, "I have treasured our communiques over the months, but everything pales to the joy of seeing you in person once more. I regret that it has to be under such grievous circumstances."

"M— me, too," Rey stammered, inwardly cringing at how very undignified she sounded compared to him. "This is Finn— and Poe— I've mentioned them before, I think, and— well, you already know the others..." She trailed off, ill at ease. *This isn't happening,* her treacherous mind insisted again.

Isolder greeted her friends politely, and then his smile broadened as he shook Luke's and Chewbacca's hands in turn, seemingly oblivious to the way the Wookie gave every impression that he'd rather be anywhere else. Finally, he came face to face with Leia, who was bringing up the rear with Artoo.

*Ageless glory,* was all Rey could think as the two older people shared a look that contained three decades' worth of words unspoken. *Echoes of a different time.*

Isolder bowed, one leg drawn back across the floor, right hand pressed to his abdomen while the left swept out in an elegant flourish. "Princess Leia."

Instead of correcting him on her title, Leia sank into a deep curtsy that was every bit as graceful as if she were wearing finest silk in lieu of the soot-stained Resistance uniform over which Luke's cloak had been thrown to hide the smears of dried blood. "Prince Isolder."

"The last time you were here, you brought with you the last Jedi," said Isolder. "Now you bring two, one of whom happens to be my daughter. Thank you for taking her in and for treating her kindly."

"Better late than never, I suppose," Leia quipped. "I won't take you to task for never divulging the contents of that long-lost ship. I understand the need for secrecy, but if only I had known, dear friend, I would have done everything in my power to send out search parties—"

Isolder raised a brow. "It sounds like you are indeed taking me to task, Your Highness."

Leia inclined her head, a hint of a smile softening the line of her mouth. "Perhaps I am a little, at that."
He glanced at Artoo, acknowledging the droid's beep of recognition. "But where is your protocol unit? Quite a character, as I recall."

"Threepio is with Admiral Ackbar's fleet," Leia replied. "We were separated during the Battle of Coruscant, but the surviving Mon Calamari ships have sent word that they're lying low along the Old Trade Federation Route. They're safe there. For now."

"But not for long," said Isolder cannily. "Isn't that right?"

Leia met his gaze, unflinching. "I must speak with Ta'a Chume."

"Of course. Please follow me." And whatever Isolder saw on her face made him add, "General."

--

The winding hallways of the Star Home were every inch as opulent as the exterior suggested. The durasteel spaceframe was lined with handsome Wayland marble so that Rey and her party walked amidst walls of translucent, gold-flecked white, the viewports paneled with Chammian ivory and offering magnificent views of the celestial wastes. She would have been hard-pressed to believe she was on a ship if she hadn't felt the hum of six Kerts-Bhrg generators beneath her feet. With her natural affinity for tech, she surmised that there were at least twenty-four sublight engines, each one capable of powering a Victory-class Star Destroyer on its own.

Rey could still remember the first time she had commed Isolder from Coruscant, after quite a bit of nagging from Finn. "I know you're scared, I know it's not turning out the way you hoped," he'd said, "but you want this, Rey. For so long you've wanted to know where you come from and who your family is— and, okay, maybe neither of us were expecting him to be some snooty prince— but if you don't reach out to him, you're always going to be plagued by all these questions. You really want to live your life like that?"

Isolder had been surprised when Rey finally transmitted to the Song of War, and she'd made a mess of it at first by stumbling through an apology for commandeering the Miy'til starfighter and then hightailing it out of Hapes. As the months passed, however, their conversations flowed more easily, and, while she hadn't been at liberty to disclose her movements, he'd been all too eager to answer her questions. He'd never pressured her to return to the cluster— even though it was clear that she would always be welcome— and for that Rey was grateful. Now, as he spoke quietly with the Skywalker twins on the way to the throne room, he glanced back at her from time to time as if he couldn't believe that she was really here, and she found her heart warming a little towards this stranger who was her father, who was, to her endless relief, a good man.
"I have not yet offered my condolences," Rey heard Isolder murmur to Luke and Leia. "General Solo and I did not always get along but I was saddened by the news that..." He trailed off. He didn't need to say it out loud— the thought hung heavy in the air.

"I don't envy that captain of yours who used a Gun of Command on the trespasser who turned out to be the Chume'da," Leia sighed. "Anyway, yes, thank you, old friend. I also commiserate with you on the passing of your wife. She must have been a remarkable woman."

"She was," Isolder said softly. They both fell into a brief, respectful silence, and then he continued, "Prior to the events of last year, we already had some intelligence on the First Order's dark side warriors, but, on Stalsinek IV, it grieved me to learn about your son. I cannot even begin to imagine how you must feel."

Rey couldn't see Leia's face from where she was walking behind her, but she recognized that same old sorrow, how it stooped the line of the general's shoulders, how it quavered through the Force. "His name is Ben," was all Leia said.

At this point, Luke fell back to speak with the others. "If I may offer some counsel for our upcoming audience with Ta'a Chume," he said in a low voice so as not to attract the attention of the silently marching Royal Guards, "it would be best if Leia were to do the talking. That means—" he cast a meaningful look at Poe— "no passionate speeches about doing the right thing, and—" he leveled the same at Finn— "no show of impertinence or impatience."

"Why?" Rey asked quickly, over the sounds of Finn and Poe starting to protest.

"Because it takes a certain kind of woman to hold on to power in the cutthroat nest of political intrigue that is Hapan society," Luke replied, an uncharacteristic flicker of aversion disrupting the solemn placidity of his tone. "Your grandmother, Rey, is very much that kind of woman. We must proceed with care."

The group came to a halt outside a set of ornately carved doors. Isolder tipped his face up to the security camera fastened to the wall. The device whirred as it scanned his features, beeping once to indicate a positive ID, and then the doors slid open, to usher them into the presence of the Queen Mother of the Hapes Consortium.

Chapter End Notes
Orbital Defense Headquarters.
The Senate District.

I took a page from LueurdeLaube's book and named the Knights of Ren after the Daedric Princes in Elder Scrolls lore.

Beskar.

Cortosis-weave armor.

Electrostaff.

Durindfire.

S-foils.

Jar'Kai. (The arc move that Rey uses on Kylo is known as "Twin Strike.")

The Falcon's countermeasures package.

Djem So is a variant of Form V, Anakin's preferred style of lightsaber combat.

Niman. (Those who've read my Sword of the Jedi series already know this, but you can pry the headcanon of Ben Solo being a Niman adherent from my cold, dead hands.)

The Sarnikken Asteroid Belt in the Fakir sector.

Wild Space.

The Hapan Spine.

The Throat.

Shedu Maad.

Star Home.

Shyriiwook.

Old Trade Federation Route.

Durasteel.

Wayland marble.

Chammian ivory.

Kerts-Bhrg generator.

Victory-class Star Destroyer.
Goodness, I'm having so much fun reading everyone's speculations and meta! Thank you all for brightening up my otherwise very dreary nine-to-five routine.

Aside from this fic's update tag on my blog, I've also started an aesthetic tag where you can find fashion, scenery, architecture, and design that fits my vision of the Hapes Cluster and its people.

This is a short chapter but it sets the stage for things to come. I hope you'll let me know what you think!

The throne room of the Star Home was suffused with the kind of artificial lighting that Rey had noticed the Hapans seemed to favor— pale and radiant, with a tinge of silver blue. This light cast an ethereal gloss over the marble pillars and the lush silk tapestries, over the unmoving silhouettes of Royal Guards stationed at various ingress points, and over the dais at the end of the hall upon which perched a stately white throne. The woman sitting on it was too far away for Rey to hone in on her features, but something about her posture called to mind the shadevale venomstings of Kashyyyk, how they watched from atop scaled coils when another lifeform encroached on their territory and took their time deciding whether the intruder was worth the effort needed to strike.

"This place is normally bustling with courtiers," Isolder told the group as he led them forward, "but, given the sensitive nature of this meeting, my mother and I thought it best to be discreet."

"Seems to me they could've taken a smaller ship, then," Rey mumbled to Leia.

"It's right out of the Hapan playbook," Leia said, also keeping her voice low. "Starting with a show of strength and grandeur— after all, an intimidated opponent is much easier to negotiate with."

Rey wondered at the general's use of the word opponent, but she couldn't help agreeing that it was difficult not to feel cowed as they approached the dais and she got a closer look at the Queen Mother. Ta'a Chume was old in the way mountains were old— imposing and awe-inspiring, having transcended the ravages of time while other lesser entities had been destroyed. Her snow-white hair tumbled past her shoulders in an artfully riotous mass of loose, flowing curls, streaming from a crown that looked as if it had been carved from ice, twisting gracefully up towards the ceiling like many-pronged antlers. Silver chains of Bosph starcrystals were draped over her forehead, and the tips of her long lashes were spiked with tiny fragments of ur-diamonds that glittered over eyes the color of dark jade. Her upper lip was painted a shade of midnight blue that was almost black, while the
bottom one was powdered as white as the rest of her smooth face. She wore an opulent cloak spun from shimmering charcoal-gray veda cloth, falling open slightly to afford glimpses of the high-collared ivory gown beneath. The fingernails of one hand, adorned with jewel-encrusted stiletto cones as sharp as daggers, tapped idly on the elbow-rest of the throne as she waited for the group to break their silence.

Isolder cleared his throat. "Most Revered Ereneda—"

"Let us dispense with the formalities. My sycophants are not around to appreciate them." Ta'a Chume spoke in flawless Basic, her voice as cold as her crown. "I see that you have once more brought war to my borders, Princess Leia—although it is General Organa now, I hear."

"The Rebel Alliance won the first war, Your Majesty," Leia reminded her. "With your help, the Resistance can win this one."

Ta'a Chume arched an elegantly sculpted brow. "You are asking me to send my fleet into battle against the First Order on your behalf?"

"No," said Leia. "I am asking you for sanctuary. I am asking you to open the hyperlanes to my fleet and allow us to hide behind your Veil while we marshal our forces once more."

"Then I would be harboring the First Order's most despised enemies. Snoke has not yet turned his eye to Hapes, but I highly doubt he would be willing to let this lie."

"He doesn't have to find out—and, even if he does, what can he do, Ereneda?" Leia argued. "The Transitory Mists cannot be breached by warships en masse, not with your battle cruisers guarding the entrances."

"The Mists," hissed Ta'a Chume, a trace of anger finally leaching into her frigid tone, "were already breached last year, General. By your son."

"And by me," Rey blurted out.

The room fell silent. Everyone turned to look at her but she only had eyes for Ta'a Chume, who stared down from the dais with a carefully blank expression. Rey's common sense was screaming at her to switch off and let Leia handle things, as Luke had advised, but she was tense and anxious.
from recent events, desperate to help her comrades who were scattered throughout the galaxy trying to evade the First Order's wide nets. She had to do something.

"I was there, too," she continued, willing her voice not to crack. "I also trespassed on your borders. That's how your son found me." Was she talking too loud? She couldn't accurately gauge her volume over the adrenaline pounding in her ears. "And if Prince Isolder is right, that means I'm your granddaughter." She paused as she sought to recall the exact term that Isolder sometimes used to denote their familial relationship. "That means I, as blood of your blood, can ask you to at least hear us out first."

Ta'a Chume studied her for several long moments. There was something in the Queen Mother's green eyes that Rey didn't like—a certain shrewdness, a certain glint of triumph that made her feel as if she'd walked into a trap. Leia reached out and gripped her arm, a gesture that elicited a lump in Rey's throat from how protective it was even though she didn't understand the reason behind it.

"You're right, she does look like your dead wife," Ta'a Chume said to Isolder after a while. "More than that, I recognize the backbone. Perhaps it is Teneniel's, perhaps it is even mine. We'll have to conduct a DNA test anyway, to satisfy my court, but I personally believe that she is Kira Ka Djo." To the others, she announced, "I've made my decision. My borders will be open to the Resistance for a fortnight, during which you may evacuate your troops into the Corsair Outback. My navy will be instructed to look the other way, but I do not guarantee my protection should you stir up trouble. Any ship that attempts to enter the Mists after the allotted time will be shot down on sight."

Rey could not feel relief. Not yet. The frenetic current of the Force—as well as Leia's tightening grasp on her arm—told her that there was a catch, and, indeed, it wasn't long before the Queen Mother added, "Kira will, of course, stay in the capital. And assume her role as Chume'da of the Hapes Consortium."

Admiral Natasi Daala, who had been the first female to acquire such a rank in the Imperial Navy and was now part of Snoke's High Command, flashed a shark's grin at Hux as he stalked into the boardroom of the Heresiarch, the Sovereign-class Super Star Destroyer currently hovering in orbit above Coruscant. "The Lusankya got away from you, did she? I keep telling you young bucks not to underestimate us old dogs, but you never listen."

"I hardly think age has anything to do with it," Hux spat as he took his place at the conference table across from her.

"No?" queried Daala. "Only a naive green officer would think that Wedge Antilles couldn't punch
through an Interdictor screen. Those weren't normal X-wing pilots you were dealing with— that was Rogue Squadron."

"It is irrelevant," Hux tersely declared. "The Lusankya may have made the jump, but she was badly damaged. We've taken all the major shipyards and we have the Core. There's nowhere for the Resistance to go, nowhere for them to repair their vessels and reorganize. It will only take a few months— six, at most— to hunt down and eradicate every last one of them." He nodded at the thin, gray-haired man seated to Daala's right. "General Quillan, if you could be so kind as to give us a status report on the ground cleanup?"

Quillan cleared his throat. "The invasion of Galactic City was a success and we are in the process of terminating the rebel elements that survived the battle." He hadn't misused the term; anyone who defied the First Order was a rebel now. "Sien Sovv went down with his ship, as did most of the Resistance leaders. Gial Ackbar's on the run but, regrettably, we are unable to confirm either the death or capture of Leia Organa."

"Once a bitch, always a bitch," growled Commodore Vilim Disra, another veteran of the first civil war. "We have to find her as soon as possible. Forget the Jedi— our empire is not secure as long as Organa draws breath."

"There will be time enough for editorializing," Hux admonished. "Right now, I would prefer for General Quillan to finish his report. Is there anything else of note?"

"We did recover the body of Malacath Ren," Quillan replied. "It was badly scorched but we were able to distinguish a lightsaber wound along the torso. Skywalker's doing, or his apprentice's."

"Which goes to show," said Daala, narrowing her eyes at Vilim, "that the Jedi are still a force to be reckoned with, and must be as much of a priority as Organa herself."

Vilim opened his mouth to argue but Hux spoke over him, having no desire for the strategy session to devolve into petty bickering. "So one of the knights is dead. I imagine Ren must be throwing another fit right about now."

"Where is he, anyway?" asked Admiral Siralt.

"I have no idea." Hux's tone was cool. "I am not his commanding officer, as he is so fond of reminding me. Probably off destroying a control panel or something similar."
In the privacy of his suite on the Finalizer, Kylo retrieved the Skywalker blade from the padded inner compartment of a spacer's chest outfitted with a security lock. Unlike the charred, twisted helm, this particular heirloom of his grandfather's was not kept on proud display. Head bowed, he gazed down, through his own mask's visor, at the hilt in his gloved palm.

"Through victory, my chains are broken," he rasped in an almost experimental fashion, as if testing the old Sith words on his tongue. Several heartbeats passed, and then— "We are victorious. Am I free?"

There was nothing to answer him but a dark, hollow silence.

"We can't agree to this!" Finn's harsh whisper rang throughout the small anteroom where Ta'a Chume had agreed to let them have a few minutes alone to discuss her proposal. "We have to stay together." He looked beseechingly at Leia, but she was locking eyes with Luke, a disgruntled frown marring her features.

"Did you see how quickly she came up with those terms?" Leia demanded. "She planned this from the very beginning, before we even set foot on board this ship."

"It certainly seems that way," Luke agreed with his trademark caution.

"This means her reign is in jeopardy," Leia muttered, now more to herself than to her brother or to anyone else. "She needs to secure the line of succession, to put a stop to other noble houses vying to replace a monarch with no heir. She's willing to do whatever it takes to keep her throne."

Something drifted to the surface of Rey's memories. "You had better have a good reason for summoning me from the capital in the midst of the succession debate," Isolder had warned Elerron in the military base on Stalsinek IV. Had the Queen Mother been besieged even then? Perhaps even since Kalen's rebellion was vanquished and the ship bearing Kira Ka Djo never returned...

"Do you think she'll let us leave?" Poe asked. "Now that we know how important Rey is to her—"
"We'll fight our way out if we have to," snarled Chewbacca. "Go somewhere else—"

"There's nowhere else to go," Rey whispered, once again drawing everyone's attention. The more she spoke, the more it was as if she were heralding her own doom. "We'll never find a place as safe as the Hapes Cluster. We have to do this." She swallowed. "I have to do this."

It was a daunting prospect. It sent chills down her spine. She might conceivably be able to contact her friends from time to time, but they were going to be in deep undercover in the Corsair Outback. She would never get to see them, for who knew how long.

Finn grabbed her by the shoulders, determination written all over his kind, handsome face. "Rey, you don't have to do anything you don't want—"

"It's a war, isn't it?" Tears were starting to form at the mere thought of being separated from the Resistance— from Finn— and thrust into a bizarre new world. "What we want doesn't matter anymore."

"What about what we need?" Poe countered. "We need our Jedi. We need our friend."

"As your Jedi and as your friend, this is the best thing I can do for you. For all of us." Rey turned to Luke, Finn's hands falling away from her body at the motion. "Isn't that right, Master?"

Luke solemnly held her gaze for interminable ages. At last, he nodded, every inch the boy from Tatooine who was no stranger to the sacrifice of the self.

When Isolder strode into the room, Leia rounded on him with startling alacrity. "You!" she hissed, fists clenched at her sides like she was suppressing the urge to throw something at his head. "Did you know about this? Did you know what Ta'a Chume had in store for us?"

Isolder held up his palms in pleading, in promise. "I swear to you, I did not."

"Liar—"

But the general's outrage could not be quelled. "From the moment I learned about your daughter's true parentage, all I ever wanted was for her to be able to interact with it on her own terms," Leia told Isolder bitterly, accusingly. "We came here in good faith, not so that Rey could be coerced into the viper pit!"

"No one is coercing her," said Isolder, paler than usual and looking as miserable as a prince could look. "You have the Queen Mother's word that you will be free to go should you decide not to take the deal."

"And then what, Your Highness?" Leia shot back, the title hurled like a curse. "Let our enemy weed us out like rats, nest by nest, as the months pass? Let Rey be burdened with the knowledge that she could have prevented it? This is coercion, whether or not you dress it up with pretty words."

Rey wanted nothing more than to give free reign to the wetness in her eyes, to sob at the unfairness of it all, at the uncertainty of the time to come, at the fierceness with which Leia was fighting for her. But she'd decided back in the throne room that she needed to do something to help her comrades, and, well, this was something. This was the only thing. She had to be strong.

And so she blinked away her tears, never letting them fall. "I've made my choice," she announced to the room. She stared only at her father, because the sight of anyone else's faces might shatter her resolve. "I'll do it. I will be the Chume'da."

The buzz of an incoming transmission broke the stillness of Kylo's suite. He hurriedly stowed the Skywalker lightsaber before it could be seen by the only person who had access to this frequency, and then he walked over to the communications bay.

Snoke's visage flickered to life, his pale skin and frosty eyes imbued with a bluish tint by the HoloNet waves. At first, he simply regarded Kylo with the searching gaze that had always called to mind scales and measures, and the feeling of being found wanting, but, finally, he smiled. It was not a smile of happiness or triumph— merely satisfaction in a job well done.

"And now the real work begins," Snoke intoned. "Are you ready, Emperor Ren?"
Kylo nodded. "Yes."

Chapter End Notes

Shadevale venomsting.

Bosph starcrystal.

Ur-diamond.

Veda cloth.

Ereneda.

Natasi Daala.

Sovereign-class Super Star Destroyer.

The dialogue re: the Lusankya and Rogue Squadron is based on the events of the Battle of Orinda in the EU.

Quillan.

Galactic City.

Sien Sovv.

Vilim Disra.

Siralt.

Spacer's chest.

"Through victory, my chains are broken" is from the Code of the Sith.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I'm crossing my fingers that this installment makes up for the long wait, dear readers! Given my workload, I would never have been able to post at all this week if the amazing response to the last chapter hadn't motivated me to write whenever possible. So, you know, just in case you need incentive to leave feedback and/or kudos... ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

37 ABY

*Year One of First Order galactic rule*

The fibercord twanged tight as Rey scaled the Fountain Palace's tallest tower, the grappling hook's durasteel barbs straining against the sides of the crenel a dozen meters above her head. It was late morning on the planet of Hapes; she squinted in the brilliant sunlight, wishing she still had her old stormtrooper-lens goggles, and the breeze blew cool on her sweat-dotted brow. Higher and higher she went, heart pumping and adrenaline rising as the city grew smaller and smaller, until the rooftops were nothing more than a carpet of multicolored jewels on a field of green. Smiling to herself, she pushed up on her knees and straightened her spine so that she was practically *walking* along the side of the building's facade, her body slanted against horizon and blue sky.

Over months of making the climb a daily ritual, she'd grown to treasure these moments when it was just her and the tower and gravity; it was a form of moving meditation that kept her Force abilities sharp, kept the Starship Graveyard alive in her heart. It was good to remember where she'd come from— it ensured that the upgrade in her living situation didn't turn her head.

Finally, she hauled herself up over the battlement, her feet on flat, solid ground once more. The Fountain Palace was perched on a black basalt crag that loomed over the small, neat city of Ta'a Chume'Dan, and from here Rey had an excellent view of lush gardens, panoramic waterways, and elegant streets orbited by movable landing pads where constant streams of light freighters, massive cargo ships, pleasure yachts, and diplomatic barges alike came to dock. The administrative capital served as the cluster's hub of governmental, commercial, and legal activity, due to laws requiring all major business to be conducted on Hapes itself, but it would not be called Ta'a Chume'Dan forever. When Rey ascended, she would take the title of Kira Ka Chume and the city would be renamed in her honor.

"Kira Ka Chume'Dan," she said out loud, and then frowned. "Doesn't exactly roll off the tongue."
There was a deep, rich laugh from somewhere behind her. "People will get used to it, Your Grace, as they once got used to the city no longer being called Ni'Korish Chume'Dan after the last Queen Mother."

Rey turned around. Major Moreem Espara, who commanded the nine other Royal Guards charged with protecting the heir to the throne, was leaning one broad shoulder against the doorway leading out to the balcony, arms folded over her breastplate and one ankle crossed in front of the other. It was a jaunty pose that would have drawn Ta'a Chume's ire— Rey, however, welcomed it. She was still ill at ease with most aspects of court ceremony, and she actually liked Moreem. It felt wrong to have her bow and scrape.

"You don't have to watch me *all* the time, you know," Rey told Moreem in fluent Hapan. "Per'Agthra is a fortress. I hardly think random kidnappers or assassins would be able to get in so easily."

"Most dangers come from inside the palace walls, Chume'da," Moreem replied. "But, as it is, Her Majesty has sent for you."

Rey struggled not to groan. She had quickly learned that even the tiniest sign of disrespect for Ta'a Chume made most people uncomfortable— if not alienate them completely. "Lead the way, then, Major."

"Actually..." Moreem tucked a windblown strand of curly black hair behind her ear, topaz eyes flickering over Rey's sweat-stained tunic and ratty leggings. "You might want to freshen up first, Your Grace. It's a tea."

* The Queen Mother's salon was an airy complex in the eastern wing, furnished with red qashmel carpets and paintings flecked with gold and silver leaf. Like the Star Home, this and most other rooms in the Fountain Palace boasted white marble walls and accents of intricately-carved ivory, gleaming in the sunlight that filtered in through colored-glass windows.

The gauzy Tarisian roses adorning the pale champagne skirt of Rey's long-sleeved chiffon gown rustled as she crossed her legs— or tried to, anyway. If she shifted her thigh up any further, she'd rip a seam. Annoyed, she placed her satin-slippered foot back on the floor as Ta'a Chume observed her from across a laroon wood table laden with delicate pastries and porcelain cups. The older woman had yet to apply the elaborate makeup she donned for public appearances, but her bare face was every bit as intimidating with its chiseled features and hawk-like stare.
"I want to ascertain that there is no bad blood between us after my last command," she said in a tone that implied Rey didn't have much choice in the matter. "By now you must have come to your senses."

"I have, Ereneda," Rey assured her. They'd had a screaming match a few days ago because Ta'a Chume had declared it unseemly— and dangerous— for Rey to continue traveling to the Corsair Outback every week. Rey had decided that no one was going to tell her where she could and could not go, but her grandmother didn't need to know that. It would be all too easy to liberate a shuttle from one of the many hangars in the dead of night and be back on Hapes by dawn; for that plan to work, however, Ta'a Chume needed to believe that Rey was compliant.

"I understand that you would like to learn more about Teneniel, which is why you keep visiting those moldering old ruins she used to frequent," said the Queen Mother, very emphatically not mentioning the other reason Rey went to Stalsinek IV— as far as the Consortium was concerned, no deal had been brokered and the Resistance did not exist in any capacity within the Mists. "But, as my heir, it is high time that you focused on your royal duties and on learning how to rule. I am not long for this world, and I wish to head to the next one secure in the knowledge that I have left my realm in capable hands."

"Yes, Ereneda," Rey murmured, her demeanor softened by no small measure of surprise. This was the first instance of Ta'a Chume mentioning her own mortality in her granddaughter's presence and, although eight months was scarcely enough time to establish familial love on the latter's end, her stomach flipped uneasily at the thought of this powerful, seemingly unassailable woman dying.

"Already my courtiers scramble to sink their claws into you," Ta'a Chume warned. "You must become adept at discerning who is trustworthy and who is not. Most of them fall into the second category, but play your cards right and none will dare question your reign. For the Queen Mother is She Who Has No Equal, as good as a goddess."

From there the audience progressed in a brisk, purposeful manner, with Ta'a Chume lecturing Rey on various topics pertaining to the Consortium as they nibbled on the pastries and sipped their tea. Every once in a while Ta'a Chume would ask a question and Rey would answer as best as she could, building on previous lessons and her own personal observations. It was all routine, and yet these discussions had become more and more technical in nature as the months passed. By the time a servant entered the room to announce the arrival of Prince Isolder, Rey was mentally exhausted and grateful for the reprieve.

She stood up to greet her father. She didn't have to, but he was the closest thing to a true ally that she had at court. Aside from the Royal Guards who shadowed her every step, Isolder was the one she spent the most time with, day in, day out, except for when he was off-world. And, oh, how she
couldn't stop herself from beaming when he kissed her cheek, exactly the sort of thing she had imagined her parents doing every morning or as they bade her good night...

"Had I known you were joining us, I would have had the servants prepare the naris-bud instead of the Manellan Jasper," Ta'a Chume chided her son once he and Rey were seated.

"Naris-bud was the only tea I didn't passionately abhor as a child," Isolder explained to Rey. "I never cared for the beverage in general."

"The two of you have that in common," Ta'a Chume remarked.

Damn, Rey swore to herself. She thought she'd mastered the art of maintaining a neutral expression while choking down what was essentially bitter leaf water, but she needed more practice, apparently.

Isolder turned to address Ta'a Chume. "I apologize for unexpectedly dropping in like this, Erelena, but I have urgent news." He paused, glancing hesitantly at Rey; the Queen Mother gestured for him to continue, making good on her resolve that it was time for the Consortium's heir to learn more about ruling and, consequently, to have access to the kind of confidential information that came along with it. "First Order warships are amassing just beyond our borders. More arrive every day. Admiral Noroos believes that they are positioning themselves for an all-out invasion, using Lorell and Taanab as staging points."

"How would that even be possible?" Rey demanded, setting her teacup down with a clatter. "They can't pass through the Mists! Even if Ren found a hyperlane two years ago using the same Force ability I did, his fleet won't be able to squeeze through all at once, from different directions— which is the only way they'd be able to overwhelm the Dragons guarding the Reach and the Rim Worlds."

Isolder nodded. "That is correct, Rey. This could be mere grandstanding on their end. I wonder, too, if they've learned the whereabouts of the Resistance and are seeking to threaten us."

"They'd have sent a message by now if that was the case," said Ta'a Chume. "They're nothing if not efficient." She rose to her feet, an abrupt dismissal. "I shall speak with Noroos and the other admirals to figure out the best way to handle this development. In the meantime, I expect utmost discretion from the two of you regarding this matter."
"Your grandmother is rattled," Isolder commented as he led Rey to another wing of the palace.

Rey blinked at him. "I find that difficult to believe, to be honest."

"You learn how to tell after a while." Although it was just the two of them in the hallway, he lowered his voice. "The situation is grave, to say the least. If the First Order manages to enter Consortium territory and catch wind of Resistance presence, their wrath will know no bounds. You have not revealed the bargain to anyone else at court, have you?"

"No, of course not." Since there had been too many witnesses on Stalsinek IV, Ta'a Chume had had to disclose that Rey was a Force-sensitive who'd run afoul of Kylo Ren; however, no one else save for the loyal Captain Elerron knew she was affiliated with the Resistance, and no one else save for the Chume'doro present at the Star Home meeting— who were bound by sacred oaths to keep the secrets of the Hapan Royal House— knew that she hadn't returned to claim her title of her own free will. Isolder called her Rey in private but, to the rest of Hapes, she was Kira Ka Djo, She Who Would Come After.

"Well, I suppose there is no use worrying about it until Ren makes his intentions clear," Isolder mused. "For now, let us speak of happier things."

Rey was actually very worried about it, but her father was right— and his tone intrigued her. "Such as?"

He looked proud of himself. "I found some more old holos."

In the prince's study, with its white walls and emerald green fabrics, a beautiful woman cajoled the wailing infant in her arms to look at the camera, a moment immortalized in the grainy blue static of obsolete recording technology.

No matter how many times Rey saw her mother's likeness, the eerie resemblance always caught her off-guard. It was as if she were peering at the future, at an older version of herself. Teneniel wore her hair down, though, and her smile was more brittle at the edges. She had not been very happy at court, preferring instead the rainforests of Stalsinek IV that reminded her of Dathomir's savage jungles and contained the Force nexus that she'd imbued with an aspect of her Winged Goddess.
Rey stared at the holo, transfixed. It was so close to being familiar, like a word on the tip of her tongue. If she strained harder, dug deeper, surely she could discover this minute-and-a-half in the depths of her memories. Surely she would be able to recall what it had felt like to be held in her mother's arms.

There was a woman, somewhere in Rey's subconscious. Someone who promised her she'd come back, someone who had touched her face for the last time with the same hands that styled her hair into the three buns she refused to change even here in her new life. That woman was not Teneniel Djo, but Aletra Creel, the nursemaid who had vanished along with the two Royal Guards after presumably leaving Rey on Jakku.

Stars, if only she could remember.

"Tell me again how you and Teneniel met." Rey was speaking to Isolder but her eyes were glued to the recording.

Even though he had repeated this story quite a few times over the months, he was glad to indulge her once more. "I traveled often in my younger days, exploring the galaxy and learning about other cultures. I was still the second son then, with no major responsibilities to my name." A shadow fell over Isolder's face the way it always did when he thought of Kalen, the brother he had killed in battle, but it passed quickly, with the acceptance that time had taught. "On one such sojourn through the Outer Rim, I stumbled upon a planet where the light was as red as blood."

"Dathomir," Rey breathed.

"I ran into your mother beneath the trees of that world. She had been temporarily exiled from her clan for using magic on two Initiates in a fit of rage— she caught them trying to learn the dark spells, and got perhaps a little carried away stopping them with a spell of her own—"

"She had a temper," Rey interrupted with a grin.

"A formidable one," Isolder confirmed, chuckling softly. "Her grandmother, who was also the matriarch of their clan, had sent her off into the wilderness for a period of reflection and atonement, charging her to return only once she had mastered her emotions. The witches of Dathomir are, as a whole, very rigid in their views of how magic should be utilized."

"Bet they and the old Jedi Order got along splendidly," Rey quipped. "Do you think that was why
Teneniel decided to go with you? Because she was fed up with her clan's teachings?

"I wouldn't say fed up," Isolder clarified. "It was more like her experience had taught her that there were a great many things she needed to learn about herself and her connection to magic, and she doubted she could learn those things while stuck on her homeworld. So I took her with me and we traveled together for a while, and somewhere along the way we fell in love."

"So it wasn't love at first sight."

"No. Not like it was with Leia." Isolder smiled in remembrance. "I met the princess when I was in my early twenties, possessed of all sorts of youthful romantic notions. With Teneniel, it was different. Slower. We started from a place of friendship and mutual respect, which eventually blossomed into something more. And then we got married, and we had you."

In the holo playing on loop, a four-month-old Rey yanked at the ends of her mother's hair, bawling her heart out. Teneniel burst into uncontrollable giggles even as she tried to extricate the reddish-brown strands from the chubby little fingers, and, this time, the twenty-two-year-old Rey who was watching the scene registered the vague scent of wild berries and knew, without a doubt, that this was what her mother had smelled like.

It was a start. It was enough for now.

"I want that for you, too, you know." At Isolder's cryptic statement, Rey turned to him, at first not understanding what he meant, and he cupped her face between both hands. "Whether it be the lightning bolt or the slow fall, I want you to someday have what your mother and I had in the end."

"I don't think there's time for that," Rey said dismissively, blushing despite herself. Romance was a foreign concept for her, having dwelt in isolation most of her life. Her two years with the Resistance had exposed her to the sort of dalliances that went on between her comrades, most of whom were hot-blooded young people who didn't know what the next hour would bring, but she remained in the dark as to what love actually was. The Hapan lords and ladies didn't seem to set much store by it, either, focused as they were on power plays and financial gain. And even though she was technically no longer a Jedi apprentice, Luke's ruminations on how attachment complicated one's own journey with the Force had been drilled into her brain.

That didn't mean she wasn't curious about it. Hence the blushing.
"Someday, dearest one," Isolder repeated. "Of course, whoever it is will have to go through me first, and I shall have no qualms about telling them they aren't good enough for you."

Rey laughed.

The Citadel was the name given to the sprawling First Order complex that had been built over the ruins of Coruscant's Senate District. In one of its many enclosed hangar bays, the doors to the Emperor's personal shuttle— which had dropped down from the orbiting Heresiarch—hissed open, and Kylo Ren stalked down the ramp flanked by his knights, all of them in full masked regalia.

From the silent ranks of stormtroopers and uniformed officers standing at attention, Hux stepped forward, keeping pace with Kylo as he strode out of the hangar. "Emperor Ren." Hux had never quite gotten the hang of not uttering Kylo's new title through clenched teeth. "My men have successfully obliterated the Resistance cells scattered throughout the Slice. Organa, Ackbar, Kre'fey, Antilles, and the Jedi, however, remain at large."

"I was given to believe that you originally estimated it would take six months to hunt them all down, General," Kylo remarked in a deceptively conversational tone of voice. "It has been rather more than six months, I'm afraid."

Mephala Ren snickered. "Perhaps his talents are better suited elsewhere, my lord."

"Such as guard duty," added Meridia Ren, "on some Outer Rim dirtball."

Hux ignored the cattiness of the twin sisters, addressing Kylo alone. "Our nets are closing in, Your Majesty. There aren't many more sectors they could be hiding in—"

"Forget them for now," Kylo ordered. "I need your fleet to join Daala, Quillan, and Siralt outside the Hapes Cluster. It's the last unconquered territory left in the Inner Rim, and we're about to change that."

"Has Regent Snoke approved this course of action? I was under the impression that Hapes would be brought to heel only once we finished cleaning up all the former Republic sectors—"
Kylo stopped in his tracks, one hand lashing out. Hux's sentence cut off in a squeak as he was telekinetically lifted into the air and hurled against the wall, the Force clamping around his throat.

"I am the Emperor," Kylo growled. "It is my word that is law. Understood?"

Hux managed a slight nod. Kylo's arm dropped back to his side and the general sagged to the floor, gasping for breath. He watched Kylo and the knights walk away, his watery blue eyes narrowed in sheer hatred.

The message arrived five day cycles later, transmitted from one of seven massive Baleen-class heavy freighters that simultaneously materialized right in front of the warships guarding the Hapes Cluster's end of the Spine. Admiral Vela Noroos nearly choked on her caf at the impossible sight just beyond the bridge's viewport, but, before she could give the order to fire, the message overrode all nearby Hapan frequencies, and the face of a gray-haired, green-eyed woman in First Order uniform appeared on the command center's holodisplay.

"Greetings. I am Natasi Daala, admiral of one of four fleets that have the Hapes Cluster surrounded. More will come. You may do with these freighters as you wish, for they are unmanned and have served their purpose—which is to show you that the Empire of the First Order possesses technology capable of bypassing Ta'a Chume's Veil." The prerecorded transmission flickered once, twice, and then Daala spoke again. "You have twenty-four standard hours to send an envoy to His Imperial Majesty's flagship to discuss the terms of the Consortium's surrender. Or we invade."

On the other side of the Transitory Mists, Major Tschel waited for the Hapan response. He was on board the Despot, another Sovereign-class dreadnought like the Heresiarch that served as Daala's capital ship, and the admiral herself was leaning back in her seat with a predatory stillness.

"I bet Hux is seeing red right now," Tschel said to Daala with the affability of one who had known her for decades, ever since he was a lieutenant in Sheev Palpatine's navy. "He'd have given anything to be the face of that speech, the power-hungry little bastard."

"It was a tactical maneuver on Emperor Ren's part," said Daala. "He wants this takeover to proceed as smoothly as possible, and the Hapans would have chafed to receive an ultimatum from a man. They recognize only female power."
Tschel scoffed. "Well, they soon won't have a choice. Our new sub-hyperspace drives have made sure of that."

"Don't underestimate the Consortium," Daala warned. "I've yet to exchange broadsides with one of their Battle Dragons, but, if the old stories are anything to go by, I'd prefer to avoid it altogether."

"I don't know much about them," Tschel admitted. "Very mysterious region that Palpatine left well enough alone."

Daala stared at the ionized green clouds swirling amidst the black. "I daresay he would've launched an invasion if he'd had the tech needed to penetrate the Mists. The Hapes Cluster is fantastically wealthy. A fine addition to any empire."

*

The response beamed to the Despot was a tersely-worded communique with the Hapan envoy's details. It arrived at the eight-hour mark, which made Tschel blink. "I thought it'd take them longer to come to a decision. It's almost as if they were... expecting this?"

"That's the Queen Mother for you," Daala grunted. "Always a step ahead of everyone else."

The thing about Hapan women was that any of them, at any given time and place, would unfailingly be the most beautiful woman one had ever seen. Kylo wished he'd kept his mask on as Lairelosse Yliri, the Ducha of Talcharaim, strode into the meeting room of the Heresiarch like she owned it, her fleureline weave robes swishing with every step, the gold fabric bringing out the burnished tones of her dark bronze skin. As it was, he did his best not to gawk, acknowledging her flawlessly executed curtsy with a nod before gesturing for her to take the seat across from him at the table. It was a private audience, with her guards as well as his waiting outside the closed doors.

"Lady Yliri," Kylo began, "I trust that your voyage over was a pleasant one."

"As pleasant as can be expected with the threat of war looming over my head." Lairelosse's voice was disarmingly bright and clear, like a glass bell. She seemed too young to be an envoy for such a
delicate matter. Kylo estimated her to be the same age as Rey—*would be by now, if she is still alive*—and then he steadfastly banished his treacherous thoughts about the scavenger girl from his mind.

"It doesn't have to be a war," he told Lairelosse. "Should Ta'a Chume deign to swear fealty to the First Order, not a single drop of Hapan blood need be shed."

"I would not be so certain, your grace. Let me tell you something about my people." She leaned forward, as if about to impart a great secret. "*We will not be ruled by outsiders.* If Ta'a Chume bows, the majority of our sixty-three inhabited systems *will* revolt."

"And what are sixty-three systems compared to an entire galaxy's worth of ordnance?" Kylo asked. "I have the advantage. I could decimate the Hapes Cluster in a fortnight using only half my fleet."

"You *could*, but then you would be king of ashes," Lairelosse shot back. "We would sooner salt our fields and poison our waters, burn our castles and bury our mines, and hit self-destruct on every last one of our Dragons before we let any of it fall into First Order hands."

"While that would certainly be tragic, it's still a more preferable outcome than an independent sector continuing to exist within the borders of my empire," Kylo retorted. "We are wasting time, Duch. I expected us to either discuss surrender or to declare hostilities, not to posture and play word games."

"I did not come here to surrender, Your Majesty. And only a fool would declare hostilities while behind enemy ranks." Lairelosse's ink-black eyes gleamed. "Ta'a Chume wishes to avoid bloodshed, same as you. Luckily enough for all of us, Hapes has a time-honored tradition of settling differences between rival factions via one very efficient method."

"Which is?" he snapped, his patience fraying.

"I bring you an offer from She Who Has No Equal," said the envoy. "An offer of marriage to the heir of her throne."

At first, Kylo was absolutely certain that he'd misheard. After several moments passed with Lairelosse looking at him expectantly, he found his voice, brows knitting together. "Over the years, the First Order has intercepted the odd Hapan pirate ship here and there. According to our information, you have no *Chume'da*. Isolder's daughter disappeared during a failed uprising and is presumed dead."
"Your information is outdated," Lairelosse declared with relish. "Kira Ka Djo was returned to us some time ago. A union between our two realms would be the best solution, don't you think? The Consortium retains some degree of autonomy, and the First Order gains access to the Hapes Cluster and the riches within." She stood up. "I'll take my leave before I outstay my welcome, Emperor Ren. We shall be waiting for your response to begin marriage negotiations or to exchange broadsides, and rest assured that we are prepared to do either. But do take your time— you have the advantage, after all."

She swept out of the room in a rustle of gold, leaving Kylo alone to wrestle with the enormity of the choice set before him.

Chapter End Notes

Fibercord.
Ta'a Chume'Dan.
Ni'Korish.
Moreem Espara.
Tarisian rose.
Naris-bud tea.
Manellan Jasper.
Lorell.
Hapan Battle Dragon.
Hapan Rim Worlds.
Initiate.
Augwynne Djo.
The Slice.
Traest Kre'fey.
Baleen-class heavy freighter.
Caf.
Holodisplay.
Tschel.
Sub-hyperspace.
Ducha.

Talcharaim.

Fleureline weave.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

All the marvelous feedback on the previous chapter inspired me to finish this one much sooner than expected. Thank you, darlings! I hope you'll like this new installment, and now I gotta go because I have a flight to catch. Reviews would be lovely company for me while I'm in transit <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Snoke's holo was deep in thought, head bowed, long fingers curled under his chin, unmoving. By contrast, Kylo was restless even as he stood respectfully still, his own fist clenching and opening at his side in slow, tentative spasms.

Finally, Snoke looked up, his frost-colored eyes holding Kylo prisoner in their celestial depths. "The Ducha Yliri is right. A conjugal union between the Emperor of the First Order and the Chume' da of the Hapes Consortium would be most pragmatic."

"Master." The protest ripped loose from Kylo's throat before he could stop it. "I cannot marry a woman I do not know." He couldn't marry, period. A wife had never figured into his plans, and he had no wish to be shackled by the same sort of arrangement that had wrung Leia Organa and Han Solo out to dry.

"You have made far greater sacrifices for our cause, Kylo Ren. It would not do to falter now, when we are so close to glorious dominion." Snoke's tone took on a sinuous cajolery, sinking its thorns into Kylo's soul. "Can you not taste how close we are? It is your destiny to rule, and with the wealth of Hapes at your disposal, with the Dragon Fleet at your back, you will build an empire on a grander scale than even I could have ever dreamed."

"It won't be my wealth, it won't be my fleet," Kylo muttered. "It will still belong to—"

"Your bride," crooned Snoke, "who will one day be the Queen Mother. Who will be all too eager to share her earthly possessions with her husband if she is properly wooed."

Kylo grimaced. Pride kept him from saying it out loud, but Snoke seemed entirely too confident in Kylo's abilities to woo anyone. "I don't know if it would be advisable to wager the future on a woman's heart."
"What about a woman's duty to her people? A woman's sense of self-preservation?" Snoke asked, changing tactics with the usual abrupt sharpness that always threatened to draw blood. "Once we have established a foothold in the Hapes Cluster, the Consortium will not dare test us. After your marriage, we shall be in a position to hold the sword over their head."

"Well, that sounds romantic," Kylo burst out in a fit of pique, only for his stomach to drop once he realized what he had just done. He immediately sank to the floor of the Heresiarch's communications bay, prostrating himself at the towering, icily silent hologram's feet. "I apologize, Master."

"It would appear that you have gotten quite drunk on the power I deigned bestow upon you, my little lordling," Snoke spat out. "While you are the face of this new empire, I am its regent. Your word is law but it is I who speaks through you. Have you forgotten?"

"No, Master." Kylo squeezed his eyes shut. "It won't happen again. I swear."

"I should hope so. For your sake," Snoke rumbled from his obsidian throne, hundreds of systems away yet vast and inescapable. "If you insist on acting like a petulant child, then I shall order you around as if you are one. You will marry this Kira Ka Djo and forge an alliance to herald the dawn of a new age, or you will suffer the consequences." His next words were softer, the line of his mouth twisting into a dark smile. "Do not fret overly much. You spoke of romance and I would be the first to tell you that romance has no place in this, but Hapan women are the most beautiful in all the galaxy. It might not be as bad as you fear."

"I won't."

The elegant crystal figurines on the mantelpiece in Ta'a Chume's salon rattled from the shockwaves that Rey's anger sent out into the Force. Rey herself was standing in the middle of the room, glaring virulently at the Queen Mother, who was regarding her with an impassive expression from her gilded scroll wing chair.

"I won't agree to this." There was a beast trying to claw its way out of Rey's chest, some vile, ugly thing birthed from fury and disbelief, but she might as well have been the sea, crashing desperately against the insurmountable rock that was her grandmother's iron will. She turned to Isolder, who had also gotten to his feet at Ta'a Chume's declaration but was otherwise not saying a word. "You can't make me do this," Rey pleaded with him. "All your talk about wanting me to be happy, to have what you and Teneniel had— I won't find it with that— that monster—" Her voice broke. "Please—"
"Rey is correct, Mother," Isolder told Ta'a Chume quietly. "She has already assumed her role at court under duress, and now you are proposing to offer her up like a sacrificial lamb to the Emperor."

"The alternative is to fight a war we cannot win," retorted Ta'a Chume. "This is what's best for our people."

"Then you marry him!" Rey snapped.

"I am not the one he chased to Stalsinek IV, the one with whom he has crossed blades and in whom he has met his match. Who better to keep a Sith husband in line than a Jedi wife?"

"I'm not a Jedi. I haven't trained with my master in months. Your terms made sure of that!"

"And you took those terms, did you not? To save your friends. Tell me, what do you think will happen to them when the First Order finds out they're here?" Ta'a Chume asked pointedly. "With Ren as your consort, you will have greater control over where his forces may go. We will retain sovereignty of the cluster and we will be able to keep the First Order away from General Organa's hideout. If you won't do this for Hapes, then do this for the Resistance."

"You have all the answers, don't you?" Rey narrowed her eyes at the woman she just couldn't bring herself to like, even as she'd come to grudgingly respect her power and political acumen. It was a sad thing to realize that the family she'd been searching for was a far cry from perfect— sadder still that one of them was actually capable of making her vision go dim with rage. "Did you know this would happen? Were you plotting to use me as a bargaining chip right from the start? Did you anticipate that the First Order would soon come calling?"

"I suspected that it would be a possibility," said the Queen Mother with maddening calm. "New empires are always so eager to make their mark, after all, and who could resist the siren song of Hapes? Strategically located, oozing with precious stones and fertile land and unique weapons... Yes, I suspected. And I planned accordingly, because that is what a leader does."

"Leaders fight for their people!" Rey yelled. "They don't unlock the gates and welcome the enemy with open arms!"

"You foolish child," Ta'a Chume hissed. "Don't you understand yet? This is how we fight. We give them the foothold they're after, but we control how they move."
"You're using *we* an awful lot, considering that I'm the only one who's going to be a murderer's wife!" In spite of her defiance, Rey knew that once again she had no choice. This time, it wasn't just the continued survival of the Resistance that was at stake, but that of an entire civilization as well. Even if by some miracle she and her comrades managed to escape from the cluster unscathed, she would be leaving an entire race at the mercy of the regime that had thought nothing of wiping the Hosnian system from the map. She was well and truly ensnared.

"Take heart, Kira." Ta'a Chume must have sensed Rey's belligerent acceptance, because she now sounded marginally more sympathetic. "Many empires have come and gone since the first Queen Mother took the throne. Hapes has watched them rise and she has watched them fall, and she will outlast this one, too. The First Order will not destroy us, and neither will they destroy you, for you are blood of our blood. Now save us all."

Little more than a standard day cycle had passed when the Heresiarch's angular shadow fell over Megos, largest of the seven moons that orbited the planet of Hapes. Carefully watched by six Battle Dragons, twice that amount of Nova-class cruisers, and countless Miy'til starfighter squadrons, the wedge-shaped dreadnought made its slow approach on the cloud-wreathed, blue-and-green sphere that lay at the heart of Consortium territory.

On the Heresiarch's bridge, the atmosphere was fraught with tension, every passenger's gaze drawn to the warships that surrounded the planet of Hapes and had their sights trained on the destroyer. The battle cruisers were formidable enough, bristling with weaponry, long-necked and split-winged like gigantic birds of prey, while the Miy'til starfighters gleamed in the black like a colony of pale wasps, but the Dragons were the backbone of the Hapan navy for a reason. Each one was five hundred meters long, a stout central core connecting two saucer-shaped hull plates that were lined from top to bottom with circular sections of ion cannons and turbolasers. The discs would rotate to bring fresh guns to the enemy while the previously used guns recharged their capacitors, ensuring a nonstop barrage supplemented by proton torpedo tubes, tractor beam projectors, mounted heavy triple ion cannon batteries, and pulse mass mine launchers, all wound up in the Dragon's metallic coils.

"This was a mistake," opined Jyggalag Ren, the new recruit who had taken Malacath's place. "We should've brought reinforcements. If they decide to open fire, we'll sustain a fair lick of damage before our sub-hyperspace drives can tunnel us out."

"They won't open fire," declared Boethiah. "The Emperor may be on board but they know that killing him won't stop the First Order."

*Not while Snoke is still around.* The unspoken words hung in the air.
"Do you think Lord Ren will go through with this?" asked Hircine. "An arranged marriage— whoever heard of such a thing?"

"Pretty commonplace in Hapes, from what I understand," said Boethiah. "In their culture, marriage is a way of forming alliances, brokering peace between rival houses, and sometimes even sealing trade partnerships."

Jyggalag chuckled. "What about stopping invasions?"

Boethiah smirked behind her mask. "I rather suspect this will be the first of its kind. They've never had to give their Chume'da away before. Bet you all those fancy lords and ladies down there aren't very happy right now."

"I hate politics," sighed Hircine. "I've lived to a ripe old age by avoiding politics. Give me a good rough-and-tumble brawl any day."

"And yet Lord Ren chose you to accompany him, along with me and Jyggalag, instead of Clavicus or the twins," Boethiah pointed out. "That suggests he has faith in your ability to help steer us through the marriage negotiations. Unlike Meridia and Mephala, you don't go around picking fights for shits and giggles. And unlike Clavicus, you're smart."

"Not smart enough to continue avoiding politics, apparently," Hircine grumbled.

Rey looked up as the door to her room opened, puzzled that it was Isolder who entered instead of the ladies-in-waiting who would prepare her for the initial meeting with Kylo that was scheduled to take place in a few hours at the throne hall.

"What are you doing here?" Her tone was a little too sharp but she couldn't bring herself to care.

"I wanted to apologize." There were bags under her father's eyes. "We have not spoken since the audience in the Queen Mother's salon yesterday, but I know you are resentful that I did not speak up as emphatically as I should have."
"Ta'a Chume's word is law," Rey muttered. "No one in the Consortium defies her."

"That's no excuse. You are my daughter and I should have fought for you," Isolder said gravely. "Since then, I have attempted to privately sway her from this course. I'm afraid that her mind is set, but I was able to persuade her to let you attend the marriage negotiations."

Rey cocked her head. "How did you manage that?"

Isolder flashed her a tired, solemn smile. "A good deal of appealing to her compassionate nature—"
At this, Rey snorted— "as well as reminding her that the First Order needs to be made aware that the Chume'da has power of her own. And, also, by promising her that I'll stop you from punching Leia's son the moment you see him. I'm not as young as I once was, though, so I might move a touch too slowly..."

She rolled her eyes at him, far from mollified but at least her anger was redirected to those more deserving. The negotiations were supposed to be conducted between the two heads of state and their trusted advisors; this concession that Isolder wrangled had been hard-won.

He left when the ladies-in-waiting arrived, one of them carefully holding a Hapan ceremonial crown with both hands. Rey stared at the object, feeling a bevy of apprehensive looks darting to her hair. She'd always been adamant about keeping these three buns even as so much else of herself was stripped away, but...

"An intimidated opponent is much easier to negotiate with," Leia had said eight months ago on board the Star Home. While Kylo was in possession of superior ordnance, it was Rey who had the element of surprise on her side. Isolder was right— the Chume'da had power of her own, and she could submit to this farce of a marriage on her terms.

But she needed to look the part.

Taking a deep breath, Rey undid the elastics from her hair, letting the whole chestnut-colored mass tumble past her shoulders. "All right, ladies," she said to the other women, "do your worst."
Kylo had half an hour to go before he needed to board the shuttle that would fly him to Ta'a Chume'Dan. He wondered if this was a trap, if he and his retinue would be slaughtered upon making planetfall while the Dragons tore the Heresiarch to shreds up here in the black. It was an unlikely prospect but he found himself almost wishing for it. A swift, fiery death seemed preferable to marrying a stranger, some coldly beautiful, viperous Hapan woman.

His gaze strayed to the spot under his bed where he'd stashed the spacer's chest, from where his grandfather's blade beckoned. He'd stopped meditating with the thing in this time of relative peace—it had certainly made him stronger in terms of combat and Force usage, but it also had the curious effect of prying open the cracks in his soul that Han Solo's death had caused. Vader still came to him in visions, but no longer as the forbidding figure clad in black armor, whispering Sith words in Kylo's ear. Instead, it was a young man, unmasked and with a scar at the corner of his right eye peeking out from beneath copper-colored curls, and he never said anything at all.

Kylo had been enraged when he saw his family heirloom in the traitor FN-2187's hands, exultant when he reclaimed it on Stalsinek IV. Nowadays, however, part of him regretted ever laying eyes on the damned thing. The sensations he got from communing with the blade were frightful, shifting, and uncertain, making him remember Han Solo and feel concern for Leia Organa. He'd stopped sensing her in the Force after Starkiller Base, as if she'd finally realized the grave threat he posed and taken the necessary steps to shield herself, but as time wore on with no sign of her to be found anywhere in the galaxy, the notion that she might be dead had started to creep up on him, bringing with it a stab of fear that grew sharper as the days passed. For the most part, he was able to clamp down on this fear and keep it buried deep inside him, far away from Snoke's prying gaze, but his hold was tenuous at best.

And then there was the matter of the girl. The scavenger. Rey.

After she left him in the snow with his face torn open amidst the collapse of the First Order's most powerful weapon, Snoke in his infinite wisdom had helped Kylo see how greatly he'd erred in letting his guard down. But in the year that followed Stalsinek IV, he'd met her again and again in battle, and in some twisted way had come to look forward to the next time they would cross paths, the next time he would see her teeth clenched in a snarl and the wiry muscles of her arms straining and her saberstaff brandishing the white heat of the desert. Wherever she was now, she was probably with Leia. Or maybe dead, or dead, too, which perturbed him more than he would have admitted to anyone.

He wondered, briefly, what Rey would think about his marriage, and when he left his suite to head for the Heresiarch's shuttle complement, it was with a strangely hollow ache that he did not understand.
A small congregation of nobles led by Prince Isolder himself received Kylo at the entrance of the Fountain Palace. The Chume’doro immediately swarmed around them with military precision, women whose broad frames, heavy armor, and stern silence reminded Kylo of Phasma. He wouldn't have objected to Phasma and her F-11D blaster rifle's presence right about now, but stormtroopers at what was ostensibly a diplomatic overture would have made the other side more defensive than they already were. Most of High Command had clamored for a display of strength before Kylo pointed out that the Consortium was well aware that the wolf at the door had fangs. He'd brought only three of his knights for protection, as well as Hux and Daala, his more politically adept officers— although he was loath to admit it in Hux's case. It was a show of good faith, the same reason he'd agreed to the negotiations being held on Hapan soil, the same reason he was not wearing his mask.

"Emperor Ren." Isolder stepped forward, regarding him with cold blue eyes. This seemed to be the signal for the other nobles to sink, as one, into the briefest of perfunctory curtsies and stiff bows.

Kylo fought the instinct to return the gesture, a lingering remnant from childhood lessons on etiquette. Emperors did not bow. Instead, he nodded at the older man standing in front of him. "Prince Isolder. Well met."

"It is good of you to think so," Isolder replied with icy sarcasm, and Kylo bit his tongue to avoid snapping, *I don't want to marry your daughter, either.* Fine diplomacy it would be if he and the Hapan prince came to blows before he'd even set foot inside the palace. "Please follow me, Your Grace."

Once they had passed through the marble doorway, Kylo heard Hircine curse under his breath, a sound in sync with the disquieting sensation of the Force abruptly being cut off. Ysalamiri cages lined the shimmering white walls at regular intervals, the bulky, opaque cylinders incongruous with the gilded paintings and jewel-toned glass windows.

"Kindly excuse us for taking such precautions, Emperor Ren," Isolder said in much the same tone with which he'd greeted Kylo. "Our people do not trust the Force, especially when it is wielded by an as-yet unknown quantity soon to be in the proximity of the Queen Mother."

"I don't mind at all, Your Highness," said Kylo, affecting nonchalance. "I am only sorry that these cages should clash with your lovely decor."

"In that case, I hope you won't attempt to rectify the situation by smashing any of them and killing the poor beast within."

"As long as your hospitality is not revoked, there will be no need for me or my knights to do so."
Daala shot Kylo one of her rare impressed glances from where she walked beside him. She was probably thinking of his grandfather—she'd mentioned on more than one occasion that Kylo possessed the same dry wit and sharp tongue as her lord Vader's own. Had this been two or three years ago, his chest would have puffed with pride at such a comparison. Now, however, he thought only of the young Jedi Knight in his visions, somber and unspeaking.

The throne hall was a long, wide chamber carved from snow-white alabas, the floor tiled with Kuati marble of the same color and inset with flecks of sapphire and gold. Unlike the rest of the palace that Kylo had seen, the windows here were not stained glass but rather transparisteel, resistant to aerial attacks. The high-vaulted ceiling was adorned with gilded sculptural ornamentation of lilies, swords, and serpentine dragons, as well as vivid frescoes depicting star maps of Hapes’ sixty-three systems and the various wars and treaties that comprised the history of the Consortium.

The people in the hall fell deathly silent when Kylo's group entered. He'd never before seen such a gathering of people in all his life, every single one of them lovely and ethereal and bedecked in feathers, silks, and glittering gemstones. Neither had he ever been the recipient of such a concentrated mass of caustic, wary gazes.

"We're not welcome here, Lord Ren," Boethiah murmured. "Despite the impending nuptials, they still see us as invaders. I would advise you to tread carefully."

"Don't I always?" Kylo shot back from the corner of his mouth, and Boethiah snorted before drawing her hood further over her masked face.

At the end of the hall was an enormous raised platform that loomed over the courtiers in the same manner that the bluffs of the Fountain Palace loomed over the capital city. There were three thrones perched atop the steps; the one on the left was empty, obviously Isolder's, while the one on the right was occupied by a slim figure that Kylo could barely make out through the translucent gossamer curtains streaming from the pale silver arch that had been placed overhead. In any case, he wasn't ready to scrutinize his future bride too closely just yet, so he focused all his attention on the woman seated in the middle of the platform.

This, without a doubt, was Ta'a Chume, the Queen Mother of the Hapes Consortium, with the twisted crown and the white-powdered face and the gaze like winter steel. Her throne eclipsed the two others in both opulence and breadth, made from strands of rose-tinted gold and star-dusted silver intricately woven together to form the seat, the armrests, the clawed feet, and the stylized wings that spread halfway up to the ceiling, unfurled like a dragon's in mid-flight. Sprinkled throughout the interlocked threads of precious metal were Corusca gems and fire emeralds, night pearls and sapphires, diamonds and blood-red Tumanian rubies, and shards of the ice moon, the luminescent jewel that could be mined only in the Gateworlds of the Hapes Cluster.
That chair alone could commission a fleet of destroyers," Kylo heard Jyggalag remark to Boethiah and Hircine as they approached the platform, which also had an ysalamiri cage mounted at each end. These two cages, however, weren't opaque, and the creatures lurking within were clearly visible, their tails flicking against the glass and their amber eyes training curious reptilian stares at the newcomers.

Isolder ascended the steps and took his place at his mother's side while the rest of the welcoming committee melted into the watchful crowd. Kylo straightened his spine, taking care not to let his shoulders drop into their instinctive slight hunch, as Hux and Daala clicked their heels and saluted the Queen Mother. The three Knights of Ren standing behind Kylo remained as motionless as the Royal Guards that had fanned out to both surround the First Order delegation and barricade the platform.

"Emperor Ren." Ta'a Chume's imperious tones rang throughout the gilded hall. "I bid you welcome to my court. Before we commence with the negotiations, allow me to state for the record that I would like us to listen to each other with open minds and strive to work together in ensuring a prosperous future for our two realms. It is my sincerest wish that your journey here will not be in vain."

The pretty speech ended on a firm note, as if it had been a warning all along. A warning that seemed to very pointedly encompass their audience, all the lords and ladies who looked as if they had been collectively forced to swallow a whole lemon. Kylo could only imagine the uproar that had taken place when Ta'a Chume announced the betrothal to her court.

A movement of red hair at the corner of his eye brought him back to the present moment— Hux had broken his rigid stance to dart him an urgent look. Right. It was his turn to say something.

"I thank you for your hospitality, Queen Mother, as well as for your wisdom in arranging a mutually beneficial solution to the current problem of territory," said Kylo. The Hapans needed to remember that this whole thing was their sovereign's idea. "My people are tired of war while yours would rather not start one. We are therefore united by a common purpose, and I have every faith that we will manage to broker an enduring, fruitful peace."

Ta'a Chume graciously inclined her head. "Then, if it pleases His Majesty, you may approach the throne and meet our Chume'da."

Kylo's legs felt like they were made of lead as he ascended the steps that seemed to go on forever, an entire hall fixated on his movements. When he reached the top of the platform, he noticed that there was a cunning gleam in the Queen Mother's dark jade eyes that he didn't like, a gleam that made foreboding curl in his gut. Before he could dwell on it, however, the woman on the rightmost throne
stood up and emerged from behind the gossamer curtains, and his train of thought screeched to a halt.

"Hapan women are the most beautiful in the galaxy," Snoke had said, but beautiful couldn't even begin to describe Kira Ka Djo. She wore a gown of Saava silk dyed a rich oceanic blue color, with long sleeves that ended in triangular points over her wrists and a low-cut, gold-flecked bodice that clung to her slender torso before flaring out into a diamond-studded overskirt, the hem artfully slashed and in places bunched up into swirling rosettes in order to reveal the yards of voluminous chiffon that lay beneath, every inch painstakingly embroidered with a motif of golden century flowers and the fractal star that was the insignia of the Hapan Royal House.

To complement the dress, her crown was made of gold and set with diamonds and sapphires, framing her face like a halo, the points cut into miniature globe crosses, her chestnut hair swept into a sophisticated chignon that emphasized the elegant slope of her bare neck. Her eyes were dramatically rimmed with kohl, a smattering of gold dust at the edges, and there was something familiar about their hazel depths that Kylo couldn't parse. In fact, there was something about her, in general, that tugged at him, but he was too flustered by the mass public scrutiny and his physical reaction to her splendor to immediately decipher what it was.

"Chume'da." He bowed his head, retreating into the autopilot of formalities the same way he fell into combat forms by rote. "May this signal the beginning of an amicable relationship between our realms and..."

He trailed off mid-sentence as he lifted his gaze back to her features. His brain was finally starting to catch up, finally starting to realize that—

— underneath the opulent silk and the lavish jewels—

— underneath the cosmetics that hid her freckles and sharpened her cheekbones and softened the strong line of her jaw—

— underneath all of that— she was—

"Amicable relationship?" Rey growled, with narrowed eyes and a feral flash of teeth as Kylo's heart all but stopped in his chest. "Not kriffing likely."

Chapter End Notes
The throne hall is loosely inspired by the Hall of Ceremonies at Schonbrunn Palace in Vienna (take me baaaack).

Megos.

Nova-class battle cruiser.

Kuati marble.

Alabas.

Corusca gem.

Fire emerald.

Naboo night pearl.

Tumanian pressure-ruby.

Ice moon.

Gateworlds.

Saava silk.
I cannot thank all of you enough for the overwhelming support this story has gotten so far! BTW, my aesthetic tag is coming along nicely and, if you have a Tumblr and come across any pretty Hapes-esque gowns, jewelry, and architecture, feel free to @ kylomenvevo. I’ve already mentioned this to Kbourne2012 in chat, but I’m also putting the call out for betrothal customs and wedding rites from around the world, as I’ve only ever attended the Catholic version of the ceremony. You’ll be credited if I end up using your idea.

I wrote a good portion of this chapter during the recess of a congressional hearing on the budget report, so pardon the Extraness (TM) of the political aspect. Enjoy, and please consider leaving a comment and/or hitting that kudos button!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey did not hold much truck with the finery of her father's people. That wasn't to say she detested looking at the Hapan lords and ladies in their resplendent formal attire; on the contrary, she could spend hours doing just so, appreciating the contrast of brocade on satin, the way a white topaz headpiece could bring out the silver hue in someone's eyes.

But actually wearing such things was a different story. Perhaps concluding that her granddaughter would be a more amiable hostage if provided some measure of freedom, Ta'a Chume usually allowed Rey to scurry around Hapes in simple tunics and leggings when her presence was not required at court. In the long run, this had led to the unfortunate side effect of Rey being little-used to the tightness of corsets, the scratch of embroidered silk, and the constraints of heavy skirts.

As such, while she was aware that she currently looked very glamorous indeed, she was also, to not put too fine a point on it, dying inside. Her ladies had laced the corset a bit too securely— perhaps in an effort to imbue curves where there were none on Rey's coltish frame— and the pins holding the crown in place dug into her scalp like sharp talons. Her face was pancaked with layers of foundation and bronze pigments, her lips sticky with the peach gloss that had been brushed over them to offset her bold eye makeup. She felt too stiff and too warm, and also rather like a fraud, but she gladly acquiesced to these discomforts because the look on Kylo Ren's face made it all worth it.

Her hackles had started rising practically from the moment he walked into the throne hall flanked by Armitage Hux and Natasi Daala, with Hircine, Boethiah, and a third Knight of Ren she didn't recognize marching close behind. Rey had been expecting Kylo to arrive in his usual armor or perhaps the grand robes of his new office, but instead he wore a belted tunic over black trousers, heavy leather boots, gloves, and a long cape that flowed with his every step like a raven's wing. She would never admit it even with a blaster to her head, but this less elaborate attire flattered his lean figure, emphasizing his broad shoulders and formidable height. With his mane of thick dark hair
framing his pale face as he'd purposefully stridden towards the platform, seemingly oblivious to the court's stares and whispers, he'd looked every inch a prince. And not a charming, gallant one like Isolder, but a sinister prince who brought blood and battle and ill omens.

Therefore, it was all the more satisfying when his jaw dropped once he realized she was Kira Ka Djo.

Rey was standing right in front of Kylo; she had the privilege of watching his mouth fall open and all trace of urbane courtesy vanish from his features, to be replaced by complete and utter shock. His brown eyes went wide and his complexion drained of what little color it had in the first place, so that he was now as white as a sheet. After her hostile declaration, which had been pitched low so as to go unheard by the courtiers, he remained silent for several more seconds, gaping at her like a fish plucked from water.

It was a petty sort of triumph that swelled in Rey's chest, but it quickly morphed into bewilderment when something like relief spasmed across Kylo's features. The expression lasted only for a second — just long enough for her to register its similarity to the look on many a Resistance foot soldier's face when the all clear was sounded, *we live to fight another day*— and then it was gone.

"Is this a trick?" Kylo's voice shook with anger, and Rey couldn't help feeling that some of it was directed at his own self. His hand instinctively dropped to the space where his lightsaber should have been, but, while his security detail had been allowed to keep their weapons, one of the conditions for the Emperor being allowed to approach the Queen Mother's throne had been to leave his lightsaber on his ship. There was a stir below the platform as the Knights of Ren tried to rush up the steps but were blocked by the *Chume'doro* closing ranks around them, the scrape of metal mingling with the click of safeties being deactivated.

"It is no trick, Your Grace," Ta'a Chume said calmly. "The captain on Stalsinek IV noticed Kira's resemblance to her late mother and summoned the prince. After the war, she returned to us to seek sanctuary and to claim her birthright."

"If the Mist Patrol hadn't apprehended us at the temple, I would never have been reunited with my family," Rey told Kylo with venomous sweetness. His gaze, which had been scanning the hall as if searching for hidden Resistance troops, snapped to her. "So, really, I have you to thank, Emperor Ren."

His eyes narrowed into slits. "And who else sought sanctuary with you, *Chume'da'?* He spat out her title like it tasted foul on his tongue. "Am I to find Dameron among your retinue? Is FN-2187 long-lost royalty as well?"
"I have no idea where the others are." It wasn't a total lie— the Resistance was scattered throughout the uninhabited moons and planets in the Corsair Outback, the various cells changing locations every few weeks. "I was separated from them during the Battle of Coruscant. If you still think this is a scam, you can check the DNA records for yourself."

But demanding to see the results of the DNA test would be tantamount to calling the Hapan head of state a liar, which would hardly endear the First Order to an already wary populace. Kylo was in a difficult position and he knew it, and he obviously knew that Rey knew it, judging from the way he was glowering at her.

Oh, she was enjoying this far too much.

"Are the two of you quite done making a scene?" The question dripped like icicles from Ta'a Chume's lips, shattering the world that was Rey and Kylo alone. Rey wanted to argue that it wasn't like they'd been shouting at each other but, on second thought, their tense standoff was already eliciting speculative murmurs from the crowd. Not to mention the minor chaos erupting below the platform, where Hux and the others had recognized her and were getting antsy.

*I'm always so shortsighted when it comes to you,* Rey seethed at the sullen, black-clad man in front of her. Kylo had the habit of eclipsing everything else, making her throw caution to the wind for the sake of crossing blades and wits with him on whatever battlefield presented itself. This magnificent hall, with its painted ceiling and gilded ornamentation, was a kind of battlefield as well. She had to start getting smarter, had to start using the same weapons that Ta'a Chume wielded with such skill.

Rey took a deep breath. "I think His Majesty and I are done getting reacquainted." She tried to say it with an air of sophisticated loftiness, but it only sounded bitingly sarcastic. Oh, well. Practice would make perfect— soon, she hoped. "Shall we proceed with the negotiations?"

"What the hell is going on?" Hux demanded as Kylo stormed down the platform. "Why is the Jedi girl dressed up as the Hapan Chume'da? Is the Resistance here? Is—"

"Shut up, Hux," Kylo grunted, and then he proceeded to explain the situation to his flabbergasted companions. "I will need all of you to be at your best during the discussion of terms," he concluded. "They've already managed to blindside us with this reveal. See that it does not happen again."
"So that’s Rey," Jyggalag murmured to Boethiah and Hircine as the Royal Guards herded them through a small side door that led to an airy, well-lit council room. "Pretty little thing."

"A pain in the ass," Hircine shot back. "I don't like this. It's too much of a coincidence, isn't it?"

"We don't have a choice," Boethiah said tersely, her gaze fixed on Kylo as he exchanged heated whispers with Hux and Daala. "I think the Emperor will speak with us later about what this could possibly mean but, for now, we have to play the Consortium's game."

*

Studying Rey as she sat across from him at the glossy kriin-wood conference table, Kylo had a hard time reconciling this vision draped in jewels and the blue and gold of Hapes with the ragged scavenger he’d come to know. In fact, despite the barbs traded in the throne hall, he could almost believe there'd been some mistake, that she was a different person entirely. But she was currently looking at him like he was a particularly stubborn speck of dirt on her shoe, and that was a very Rey look. One that Kylo had no problem returning in kind. He had been relieved to see her once the initial shock wore off— relieved to know that she was alive, after all— but this was the kind of weakness that needed to be examined in private. Right now, he would do well to govern his emotions by clinging to the more familiar territory of their mutual dislike for each other.

She was sitting between Isolder and a middle-aged brunette with violet eyes who had introduced herself as Daemora AlGray, the Duchu whose family controlled the Relephon Moons. To Isolder's left was Lairollosse Yliri, and further down the table was a thin, sandy-haired man named Beed Thane, the Archon of Vergill. Hux and Daala were flanking Kylo as usual, while the three Knights of Ren had elected to remain standing, positioning themselves between their master and the wide windows that occupied the entire length of one wall. Ta'a Chume was similarly protected by her Royal Guards as she presided at the head of the table, her icy crown glittering in the sunlight.

I need to find some political advisors, Kylo reflected. His High Command had done an admirable job of steering through the maze of surrenders and territorial reconfigurations that had characterized the First Order's sweep through the galaxy so far, but they were still military whose default setting was battle tactics. An intragalactic affairs expert or two on his council wouldn't go amiss.

The Duchu AlGray spoke up in pleasant tones that was at odds with the atmosphere in the room. "As chief negotiator for the Hapes Consortium and with the permission of Her Imperial Majesty Ta'a Chume, She Who Has No Equal, allow me to formally call this meeting to order. I have been instructed to proceed as if these were traditional marriage negotiations, and so—"
Hux cleared his throat. "With all due respect, they are not. This is a political union between two governments, with entire navies and economies at stake. It would be a disservice—and certainly the cause of many misunderstandings—if we were to treat this as an ordinary marriage."

"The esteemed general can surely be forgiven," said Daemora without missing a beat, her chipper smile intact, "for his ignorance of Hapan customs. Among the upper echelons of our society, marriage is a political union, joining together two houses and facilitating trade and military partnership between both. This is the mindset with which we are approaching these nuptials."

Kylo was too distracted to either relish in Hux's discomfiture or plot the blundering general's slow, painful death. The conversation had driven home one very important point that his mind had been refusing to process. But now it was finally starting to sink in.

Rey.

His would-be bride was Rey.

He was going to marry Rey.

It was surreal and it was ridiculous, and Kylo felt like throwing up from sheer stress alone. Across the table from him, Rey was beginning to look a lot less angry and a lot more panicked, as if it were also dawning on her that it was their shared future being discussed in this room.

"First we must be clear as to what both sides stand to offer each other," Daemora continued. "I believe that the Empire is well appraised of Hapes' wealth and ordnance. This does not yet include the dowry that Her Grace Kira Ka Djo will bring into her marriage, which will also be considerable. The question that remains is, what does the First Order have to offer her? What will she gain from this union?"

"Aside from the safety and survival of Hapes' sixty-three inhabited systems?" Daala asked archly.

Lairelosse struck like a viper lunging from the shadows. "I did not realize we were here to exchange threats. Nor did I think anyone would issue threats this deep in territory not her own."

"I was the first female admiral in Palpatine's Imperial Navy," Daala pointed out. "I've spent my life doing what I shouldn't in places that weren't meant for me."
Kylo decided that it was time to intervene. "The Chume'da will gain the title of Empress, and all the power and prestige that comes with it." That was tempting enough, wasn't it? He was speaking in terms of an entire galaxy, not just one little slice of the Inner Rim. "In return, we will of course expect Hapes' full cooperation in all endeavors to maintain prosperity and stability within our borders."

"Cooperation that we will be only too glad to provide," said Isolder, "as long as it does not infringe on our sovereignty. That is one of our two non-negotiables—that Hapan rule prevails in Hapan space."

"And what," said Kylo, "is your other non-negotiable?"

"That my daughter be treated with the utmost kindness and respect." Isolder's blue eyes were as hard as flint as he met Kylo's gaze. "That never will a hand be raised to her in anger, that never will she be made to feel lesser or betrayed."

Rey turned her head slightly to look at her father, the expression on her face a mix of surprise and gratitude and still that hint of disbelief, after all this time, that anybody would give a damn about her welfare. I know you, Kylo thought. I've been in your head. I saw your fear and your loneliness. I saw exactly how you yearned for someone to love you this much.

He wondered if he'd ever looked at his own parents in that way. It seemed unlikely. They had never taken his side in anything that he could recall; Han hadn't had much use for a quiet, awkward son who preferred reading to aiding and abetting in various schemes, and when the dark started manifesting in an eight-year-old Ben Solo's Force abilities, Leia had promptly shipped him off to Luke. They hadn't even been able to protect him from Snoke—

No, that was wrong. Snoke was a wise master who had trained Kylo to his full potential. These were a child's insecurities, the chips on a foolish boy's shoulders. They had no place in an emperor's head.

"Her Grace Kira Ka Djo will be treated in accordance with how she behaves herself," Kylo said curtly, brushing aside how odd it felt to refer to Rey by her birth name.

"Am I to be your obedient wife, then?" Rey spoke for the first time since taking her seat, hurling each word at him like a spear. "Shall I simper witlessly while millions suffer under your dictatorship?"
"As opposed to how happy and content they were amidst the anarchy and corruption of the
Republic?" Kylo retorted. "I assure you, these millions will be far better off once things have settled
down."

"You mean once you've finished executing all those who oppose you," Rey snapped, "and
destroying their homes and torturing their loved ones!"

He shrugged. "Some measures are harsher than others. All are necessary. In any event, no such
activity will be conducted in Hapes as long as the Consortium upholds their end of this bargain."

"I am their end of this bargain!" And, Force, while some traitorous part of him had always found the
scavenger magnificent in her defiance, gold and diamonds gave her a sharper edge, made her burn as
if she were a vengeful goddess. Her eyes flashed like a forest afire with the dawn. "You come here
all high and mighty to seek my hand in marriage, and you bring with you the general who obliterated
the Hosnian system, the admiral who razed D'Qar, and the Knights of Ren who participated in the
ground invasion of Coruscant! So forgive me if I have some reservations, you cruel, pompous ass!"

Kylo's gloved fist slammed down on the table. "Even if I were spineless enough to make apologies
for military actions undertaken during a time of war, I would hardly do so at the behest of a
temperamental child," he hissed. "We made the journey over in the hopes of coming to terms and
avoiding yet another blood-soaked conflict, but if the notion offends your sensibilities so much,
Chume'da, all you have to do is say the word and we'll be out of your hair. And I will see you again
on the battlefield."

In the stony silence that followed, the Queen Mother leaned forward in her seat, immediately
drawing everyone's attention. "I believe that tensions are too high to facilitate any sort of agreement
presently. May I suggest that we put this meeting on hold?" Judging from her tone, it was either more
of a command or the most forceful suggestion that Kylo had ever heard in his life. "We can resume
negotiations tomorrow, or when we have all gotten suitably used to one another. In line with this,
Emperor Ren and his party are more than welcome to stay at the Fountain Palace as honored guests."

Daemora's pleasant composure had faltered during Kylo and Rey's verbal duel— in fact, she'd
looked like she was having a heart attack when Rey called the Emperor of the First Order a pompous
ass— but, now that her sovereign had stepped in, she was swift to collect herself, her smile returning
to its holo-perfect brightness. "Yes, Ereneda, I believe that would be an ideal solution," the chief
negotiator said smoothly. "We shall adjourn for now."
Beed Thane had held his peace all throughout the meeting. In Rey's experience, the Archon was a shrewd and extremely calculating man who dispensed words as reluctantly as a miser parted with their credits; however, once the First Order delegation had been escorted from the room, he spoke up. "Begging Your Majesty's pardon," he said to Ta'a Chume, "but I am not so sure it would be prudent to let the First Order have the run of the Per'Agthra while a formal treaty has yet to be drafted. I don't like the looks of those masked figures."

"As I understand it, Ren was their master even before he ascended," said Ta'a Chume. "They will obey him no matter the circumstances, and he won't command them to slaughter us in our beds. The boy has his mother's flair for politics, if twice her temper."

"His mother?" Daemora queried.

"He is Leia Organa's son," Ta'a Chume replied.

"Ah." The Ducha AlGray glanced at Isolder, who shook his head in mock exasperation.

"Your predilection for gossip has not mellowed with age, my lady," he chided.

"I can't help it." Daemora flashed a genuine smile, the one she didn't use for diplomacy, the one that met her violet eyes. The difference was staggering. "Gossip keeps me young."

"Speaking of people inheriting their mother's temper..." Ta'a Chume shot a pointed look at Rey, who lifted her chin as she braced herself for a crushing reprimand. However, the elderly woman only nodded. "I normally wouldn't condone such an outburst, but I think more of that sort of thing will prove beneficial for our side."

"I don't really see how," Rey mumbled, embarrassed.

"You get under Ren's skin, Your Grace," Lairelosse piped up. "With the Queen Mother's permission, I can teach you how to use that to your advantage."

"Permission granted," Ta'a Chume said dryly. "Kira has much to learn."
"I don't care what the Jedi girl or that old hag said, this has to be a trick." Hux was pacing the length of the Upsilon-class shuttle's private compartment, obviously still smarting from his gaffe in the council room, while Kylo, Daala, and the knights watched with varying degrees of amusement. While their respective quarters inside the Fountain Palace were more than adequate, they had retreated into their ship in order to speak freely, out of range of any holobugs.

"First of all, Ta'a Chume is hardly a hag," said Boethiah, "and, secondly, that's Emperor Ren's grandmother-in-law you're talking about."

"Prospective grandmother-in-law," Kylo corrected. "A prospect that seems to be diminishing with each passing second."

"To your very great sorrow, I'm sure, my lord," said Jyggalag, with enough sarcasm to make it sound like a joke—but not quite enough to disguise the shred of curiosity that lay within the sentence. "The Chume'da is not at all what I expected, and neither is Rey. That they're the same person is—"

"A trick!" Hux repeated. "A ploy orchestrated by the Resistance!" He stopped pacing and stood in front of Kylo, his lanky shoulders squared. "Your Majesty, I cannot stress enough how important it is that a DNA test be conducted in our presence, on our machines."

Kylo opened his mouth to issue a scathing retort, but the logical part of him won out over his dislike for Hux. The general was right. "We can make that request after we've hammered out the terms of the marriage contract," he decided. "That way, no matter the results of the test, at least the negotiations will already be over and done with and it will be less critical to abstain from offending the Hapans."

"And if Rey is the heir, Your Majesty, do you mean to go through with it?" Daala hesitantly asked. "Will you marry a sworn foe?"

He would rather eat glass shards, but Snoke's words were at the forefront of his mind. Of course, there was every chance his master would take it all back upon learning the identity of the Chume'da. As of now, though...

"I will do what I must," was Kylo's stoic reply, "for the sake of the First Order."
The indulgently detailed description of the stunned look on Kylo’s face is dedicated to JediKnightress and everyone else who was waiting for it <3

Kriin-wood.

Holobug.

(I'm providing the following links for the sake of reference but, if you do end up clicking on them, bear in mind that I won't necessarily be adhering to the plot and characterizations of the EU):

The Duch of House AlGray.

The Relephon Moons.

Beed Thane, the Archon of Vergill.
Lairelosse looked more at home in the Chume'da's solar than Rey herself ever would. The room, while gorgeous, had been designed with the comfort of a traditionally feminine aristocrat in mind, and Rey definitely didn't fit the bill. Pale, lustrous, rose-colored body wood had been fashioned into delicate chairs and scroll-legged tables, and the white marble walls were decorated with the same sort of gilded paintings found in the Queen Mother's salon, as well as lush dreamsilk tapestries that echoed the motifs of the embroidered carpets artfully scattered across the polished flooring. A silver harp stood in the corner, gathering dust; they said that the young Ta'a Chume had played like a dream before assuming the mantle of leadership, but Rey had thought that the instrument was some kind of weapon when she first laid eyes on it.

"I bet the Duchy Yliri knows how to play the harp," she grumbled, glancing at the raven-haired woman sitting across from her with legs crossed at the ankles and hands folded decorously on her lap. Lairelosse favored metallic fabrics because they accentuated her flawless dark skin, and today her robes were made of silver satyn while a chain of black star sapphires hung from her neck. She looked regal and beautiful enough to make Rey feel a bit foolish in her heavy crown and elaborate dress, but, to make matters worse, the Duchy had also been getting on her nerves for the past hour and a half.

"Again, please, Your Grace." Lairelosse's mellifluous tones contained no sign of the exasperation that she herself must have been feeling. "Just a vague smile, like you have a secret, and peer up at me through your lashes instead of directly meeting my gaze— no, don't blink so much, you look like you have something in your eye— and soften your mouth—"

"Pardon me, my lady," Rey burst out, finally at wit's end, "but why are you teaching me how to flirt?"

"Because this is a form of female power," Lairelosse smoothly replied. "Granted, we don't have much use for it within the Consortium, but other governments aren't as advanced as ours. Emperor Ren is the head of his people's government, and you must deal with him accordingly."
"He and I were trying to kill each other eight months ago," Rey pointed out. She could speak more freely with Lairelosse, whose family had been unfalteringly loyal to the Royal House for generations and whom the Queen Mother had taken into confidence. "He might find it a little surprising if I start seducing him out of nowhere."

Lairelosse smirked. "And why shouldn't a woman seduce her betrothed?"

"It's not—" Warmth flooded Rey's cheeks. "I don't think about him in that way. I don't like him!"

"No, you don't," the Ducha blithely agreed. "You hate him and he hates you. But hate is just a kind of passion, isn't it? And the thing about passion is that it can, with some cleverness, be diverted to another course. You don't have to set him afire with lust—" at this, Rey pretended to gag, but Lairelosse ignored her—"but you can spin him around. Men are so much more malleable when they follow their blood, and we need Ren to be as malleable as you can make him. Despite our strong start in the negotiations earlier, I assure you that we are very much on the losing side."

Rey bit her lip. She was aware that, while the Consortium could run rings around the First Order in the political arena any day, it was military might that would always win out in the end. She had two objectives, as far as she could see: prevent a war, and keep Kylo's forces away from the Corsair Outback. She could only accomplish both these things if she submitted to the marriage treaty and got him to lower his guard.

While she didn't think she could ever stomach outright flirting with him, she could at least learn how to be both charming and unflappable.

"Then of course there is the mood at court to consider," Lairelosse continued. "We are divided, currently. There are those like the Ducha AlGray and myself who see this union as a lucrative deal, and there are those like Archon Thane who see it as a betrayal of everything the Consortium stands for."

"Thane?" Rey echoed, startled. "Then why is he on the negotiation panel?"

"To mollify the opposition," said Lairelosse. "Ta'a Chume felt it would be wise to ensure that all interests are represented. Thane has earned a name for himself as incorruptible and devoted to his ideals. With him on the panel, no one can accuse the Queen Mother of selling out Hapes. And with you reining in your distaste for the situation, more of the court will follow your lead."
"I wouldn't be so sure of that. They've known me less than a year."

"That is immaterial. You are the Chume'da, She Who Will Come After. There are more than a few lords and ladies striving to prove themselves indispensable to your future reign."

"Including you, Ducha?" Rey questioned wryly.

There was an oddly pleased glint in Lairosse's eyes, as if Rey had passed some sort of test. "I seek only to serve the Royal Hapan House, as did my mother who was Ducha before me," said the woman draped in silver. "Shall we proceed with the lesson, Your Grace?"

"I still don't see how smiling seductively at someone qualifies as getting under his skin," Rey complained.

"And that," said Lairosse, "is precisely why Ta'a Chume thinks you still have much to learn."

*#

The First Order delegation had an entire wing of the palace to themselves, it seemed. Kylo's tastefully furnished room of dark homogoni wood, crimson fabrics, and brass accents opened out into a fragrant rose garden with a miniature waterfall, bisected by two stone paths; one led from his door to the main hallway, while the other met the first one at its terminus and linked up with what appeared to be someone else's suite of rooms in the opposite wing, judging from the canopy bed he glimpsed through a gap in the curtains on the other side of the garden.

Such luxury was not without its price. A signal jammer had been installed somewhere, turning all attempts at HoloNet communication into nothing but static. Kylo could hardly blame the Consortium for this— he would have undertaken the same precautions had the situation been reversed— but it did mean that he was unable to contact Snoke's fortress. The ysalamiri cages affixed to walls and pillars at five-meter intervals and rigged to alarms in case of tampering also ensured that he couldn't use the Force to commune with his master.

Kylo sat down on one of the agate-tiled benches by the waterfall, staring into the glassy depths of a pool teeming with colorful jewelfish. He looked up at the sound of footsteps, and it was Hircine coming to stand respectfully beside him. Unmasked, the oldest Knight of Ren was a man in his fifties, with close-cropped gray hair, a bushy beard, and stoic brown eyes.
"Settling in all right, my lord?" he asked Kylo, who lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "You don't have to do this, you know." They'd swept this particular spot in the garden for surveillance equipment and found none, but Hircine spoke in a low voice, anyway. One could never be too careful. "Just say the word and we can squirrel you out of here in no time."

Kylo wondered if that was even an option, if he would be permitted to walk away from this. Then again, Snoke had made it clear that he disliked Rey's effect on his prized apprentice—perhaps he would call a halt to the nuptials once he was informed of the Hapan Chume'da's identity. Kylo had no way of knowing right now; his shuttle had already been transferred to one of the Fountain Palace's many hangars, signal-jammed and guarded by ysalamiri, and he didn't think the Queen Mother would look too kindly on him nipping off for a bit in the middle of negotiations. He could request that he be allowed to contact Snoke, but what would that signify? That he was merely a puppet of the Empire's true ruler—

But that's what you are, isn't it? sniped the treacherous part of himself that had been awakened by Han Solo's death. The part that he was trying so hard to keep secret from Snoke. You are emperor in name alone.

"Lord Ren?" Hircine prompted after too long a silence."What do you want to do?"

"We stay," Kylo said tersely. "It's true that Hapes needs this alliance more than we do, but..." He trailed off. He had his orders but he was loath to admit it out loud.

Hircine bowed. "You are my master," he said heavily, as if he had read Kylo's mind. "Mine and the other knights'. Our loyalty is to you and we will do as you say without question."

Kylo nodded, too stunned to speak. Such a declaration skirted close to treason against Snoke but, then again, the Knights of Ren had never played by the First Order's rules. They recognized only strength and trial by fire; Kylo was their leader because he'd bested them all in single combat and led them to victory countless times since. As long as he continued to prove himself in battle, he would have no cause to question their allegiance.

There were no politics among the Knights of Ren. It was comforting, in its own way.

"I just don't know if you and the Jedi girl getting married would be safe for either party involved," mused Hircine. "Given your antagonistic history."
"On the bright side," said Kylo dryly, "if I'm found in bed one morning with my throat slit, none of you will have to exert much brainpower to figure out who to blame."

Hircine coughed. "Will you be sharing the same bed with her, then?"

Kylo had been so preoccupied with the strategic aspects of his impending marriage that he'd failed to take into consideration what else it would imply. Now it was all he could do to refrain from getting to his feet, boarding his shuttle without another word, and flying to the edges of the Outer Rim, never to return. "Not every union has to be consummated," he heard himself telling Hircine, his own voice sounding like it was coming from a long way off. "Least of all one marked by such a distinct lack of... affection on both sides."

"But you will eventually need to secure your reign with an heir," Hircine ventured, obviously ill at ease. Kylo was willing to bet that the older man had drawn the short straw among the knights as to who would broach this topic with their master.

"That is a conversation for another time," Kylo mumbled. "She and I aren't even formally engaged yet. We'll cross that bridge when we get there."

* 

The late evening found Rey in a terrible mood. She'd snuck out of her chambers to steal— borrow—a ship, only to discover much to her chagrin that security measures had been tightened due to First Order presence. Before any of the increased number of guards could notice the Chume'da skulking around the entrance to the hangars, she crept back to her rooms via the unmonitored garden path, frustration curling low in her gut. The Resistance needed to be informed of this new development as soon as possible— preferably before Finn got wind of it from a third party and launched an imprudent rescue mission, doubtless with Poe, Chewbacca, and Jessika at his side— but it looked like she would have to wait and, if worse came to worst, trust in Leia to talk her friends out of doing anything stupid.

This particular garden section of the Per'Agthra opened up into the sky, allowing copious amounts of moonlight to come spilling down over the grass and the waterfall and the violet-red Malreaux roses, so dark in color that they were almost black. It had taken Rey a while to get used to the brightness of a Hapan night, the combined illumination from the stars and the seven moons intense enough that it was almost a kind of soft, silvery daytime, and now she wondered if there was a part of her that missed true, primal darkness, when all lights went out and the world rested until morning.

Standing in the middle of the garden, she tipped her face up to the heavens, which pulsated with
arctic celestial mazes and the distant emerald veils of the Transitory Mists. Breathe, she told herself, closing her eyes. There was no Force to be found here, so close to the ysalamiri cages in the guest wing, but perhaps the scent of the roses and the cold night air would help her regain inner peace.

"It is you, after all."

Rey opened her eyes to glare at the source of the deep, sardonic tones. She met Kylo's obsidian gaze from across a distance of roses and water as he took in the sight of her shabby tunic, gray wraps, and leggings, her face scrubbed clean and her hair pulled up into the usual three buns.

"And here I was harboring the faint suspicion that the Hapans were foisting some other girl off on me," he continued. "You clean up very well, Your Grace."

"What are you doing in my garden, Your Majesty?" Rey demanded, all of Lairelosse's advice from earlier in the day flying right out the window.

"Ask whoever thought it would be a good idea to put me in the suite directly across yours."

Great. Just great. As if it wasn't bad enough that she had to suffer his presence in the palace in general, he had also invaded—invaded!—her little nook. The garden had already been here when she'd taken up residence, but she tended the roses herself, and had named every single jewelfish in the pool. Located in a secluded wing of the Per'Agthra, it was one of the few places where she could be alone with her thoughts—a sanctuary, of sorts. And now she couldn't have even that.

Rey took a wary step back as Kylo moved forward, a man made of moonlight, clad in a long-sleeved black tunic and loose trousers and bearing the under-eye circles of one who had been unable to sleep. "Tell me, how does the Chume'da of the Hapes Consortium wind up a scavenger on Jakku?" He sounded for all the world like he was initiating a casual conversation, but his face revealed him as it always did, all creased brow and slight, puzzled frown.

"Wouldn't you like to know," Rey scoffed.

Annoyance flickered over Kylo's sharp features. "Perhaps you are unaware," he taunted silkily, "but it is inadvisable for husbands and wives to keep secrets from each other. Quite a few marriages have come to grief because of such a thing."
Rey nearly took the bait. Nearly screeched at him, "We aren't married yet, you absolute dolt!" However, she remembered something Lairelosse had said, about how losing one's composure was as good as losing the argument. "The betrothal hasn't even been finalized," she serenely pointed out. "But I'm glad you're excited. That makes one of us, at least."

"I wouldn't go as far as to profess myself excited, but I am looking forward to peacefully welcoming the Hapes Cluster into the Empire's fold."

"What would the Master of the Knights of Ren know of peace?" Rey challenged.

"Certainly more than the girl who almost bit my head off for asking a simple question," Kylo retorted.

"I didn't bite your—" She stopped, taking another deep, calming breath and trying to be surreptitious about it. He was an expert at making people angry; he probably got that from his parents. "Civil war broke out when I was five years old," she said in icy tones. "I was evacuated, but something happened. I don't remember what. I think my escorts were the ones who left me on Jakku." She deliberately omitted the fact that her ship had been headed for the Republic capital on Orinda— the fewer connections established, the better. Somehow, she didn't think he knew about Leia's history with Isolder at all, because that was the sort of thing he'd have snidely mentioned by now.

Kylo didn't immediately respond and, for a while, the only sound in the garden was the burble of water cascading over stone ledges. His dark eyes were enigmatic as he subjected her to another one of his penetrating stares, the sliver of his thin scar pale in the moonlight. "I was fifteen when the Hapan civil war took place," he said at last, as mildly as if he were commenting on the state of the weather.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Rey asked.

"You're very young." He wasn't smirking, not exactly, but he looked like he was enjoying a private joke at her expense.

"Well, you're ancient," she huffed. But she knew even as she said it that it wasn't the truth. He had a deceptively boyish face, bearing the vague awkwardness of someone who never quite grew into his odd angles, framed by waves of luxuriant dark hair. Adding to the illusion were those pensive eyes of his, as well as the unexpectedly sensual lips that, despite his constant efforts to press them into a hard line, always went soft at the corners... "Perhaps that's why I keep besting you in combat," she added, taking refuge in belligerence to make up for the fact that she'd stared at him for far too long. "Because you're old and slow."
One moment she was standing a couple of feet across from him; the next, she was backed up against the very edge of the pool, one wrong move away from falling into it, and Kylo was all that she could see, the expanse of his broad shoulders, the ends of his hair curling at the collar of his tunic, the dark of his pupils wide in the radiant night, the constellation of beauty marks on his ivory skin. He had one large hand pressed to the small of her back, holding her to him in a mockery of an embrace, and her own fingers flew to grasp at his shirtfront in a bid for either self-preservation or vengeance. If she ended up going for a midnight swim, then she was taking him down with her.

"You need to learn to respect your elders, my lady." It was obviously meant to be a sarcastic quip, but he said it in too low a voice, said it too close to her ear.

"Do you mean to push me into the water, then?" she inquired with as much icy dignity as she could muster, tightening her grip on his shirt.

"Who said anything about pushing? All I have to do is let you go." His fingers stirred at the base of her spine, burning and sparking even through the fabric that separated his skin from hers.

Rey couldn't think, couldn't breathe. It wasn't that she feared drowning— she doubted the pool even went up to her neck. No, it was the adrenaline rush, that knife's edge between staying upright and falling into freezing cold water, the imposingly rigid heat of Kylo's body against hers. It was the predatory glint in his eyes, his husky drawl, the satellites and hundreds of stars that she saw over his head when she lifted her chin to glare at him in defiance despite her precarious position.

"I respect my elders," she gritted out, "when they act their age—"

Her sentence cut off in an affronted squeal as he suddenly clamped both hands around her waist, hauling her off her feet and then swinging her around to deposit her further away from the pool. The instant she was on solid ground once more, she automatically widened the distance between them, her heart racing at how effortlessly he'd picked her up, as if she weighed nothing more than a feather.

"What are we doing?" The question left her lips on impulse. "This whole— thing. Surely you're aware that it's a horrible idea."

"It is," Kylo agreed. "But it prevents a war."

"You know what else would prevent a war?" Rey snapped. "If you left Hapes alone!"
"I cannot do that."

"The First Order already controls most of the galaxy, you have the resources of millions of systems at your disposal—"

"And how many of these systems will be content to submit to my rule with a completely independent sector right in their midst? How many will continue to respect the might of the First Order once the notion spreads that we were too afraid to breach Ta'a Chume's Veil? We did not crush the Republic and the Resistance by doing things by half measures. You should know— you were there."

_I'm going to kill him._ Rey wasn't so enraged by his flippant remark that some part of her couldn't marvel at this epiphany. _One of these days, I am actually going to kill him._ "So you're saying that it's all worth marrying me for. Me, Ren. Think about it." Perhaps she could prevail upon their mutual loathing to sway him from this course of action— and if that meant she sounded like she was disparaging herself, so be it. "You can't tell me that I'm anywhere near the kind of person you'd take for a spouse."

Kylo's gaze dropped to the water that he'd almost dunked her in. Just as she started to hope that he was mulling over her statement, his fists clenched at his sides. He wasn't wearing gloves, and it belatedly occurred to her that this was the first time she'd ever seen his bare hands, or indeed any inch of unclothed skin below his jaw. "I came here to marry the Hapan Chume'da," he said with hollow resolution. "That she happens to be you... is immaterial. I suggest you resign yourself to that fact."

"Oh, the ruin you will bring upon each other," the Winged Goddess whispered in Rey's memory. Tears of frustration sprang to her eyes. Had the deity on Stalsinek IV foreseen this little arrangement? When she decreed that the threads of destiny were coming together, had she meant that it was Rey's fate to be trapped in a loveless marriage? "It's not like I have a choice, is it?" Rey's voice sounded bitterly exhausted even to her own ears.

"You did have a choice," Kylo said. "Instead of scrambling to find your pitiful band of anarchists and going into hiding with them after the Battle of Coruscant, you chose to reclaim your birthright. Unfortunately for you, wealth and glory come with a hefty dose of responsibility as well."

This was quite possibly the most insulting thing he'd ever said to her. "It was never about wealth and glory. How dare you—"
"I misspoke," he interrupted, the words leaving him in a rush, too fast for her to process that this was as close to an apology as he was willing to give. "This court setting brings back unpleasant memories of the kind of people who comprised the Republic Senate. Despite what else I think of you, I know you're nothing like they were." He paused, and then appeared distracted, lost in his own thoughts, when he said, "I know you wanted a family."

"You're so lonely, so afraid to leave—"

"Get out of my head—"

"I'm not that girl anymore," Rey told Kylo Ren, willing away the metal bite of Starkiller Base to focus on the present moment, on the moonlight and the marble of where she had been born. "I'm not the scavenger you chased through a forest and strapped down to an interrogation rack. I'm not the no one whose secrets you stole." His eyes widened as she approached him, as she took the lead in invading his personal space for once. "I am the Jedi apprentice of Luke Skywalker," she savagely declared. "I walk with the Force and I crafted my blade from durindfire, the heart of the desert. I have held my own against you, the Knights of Ren, and the First Order countless times. I am also Kira Ka Djo of Hapes, Isolder's daughter and Ta'a Chume's heir. I am She Who Will Come After, and I have power here. The next time you manhandle me here, you will regret it. Do you understand?"

Kylo's face always gave him away. He regarded her like she was equal parts wild and thing and puzzle he was trying to figure out, every inch of him still except for the slight twitches of his fingers. The seven moons shone down upon them both as the sound of water and the scent of roses permeated the air.

Finally, he offered her a stiff nod. "I understand." He said it less like surrender and more like a tactical retreat for now but, if he thought she would give up this hard-won ground, he would be sorely disappointed. "Until the morning, then, Chume'da."

Rey stalked off to her rooms, fuming and struggling against the urge to look back at him even as she felt him watch her go. So much for regaining inner peace.

Chapter End Notes

Body-wood.

Dreamsilk.

Satyn.
Homogoni.

Jewelfish.

Malreaux rose.

Rey's "You know what else would prevent a war?" line was inspired by a comment from the wonderful Somaybelikeno.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Before anything else, here there be **spoilers for Bloodline**, so, if you have plans to read the book, you may want to abstain from this chapter for now.

As it's Monday where I am, I'm rushing to post this before I head to work. Your reviews would be fantastic company while I'm listening to politicians argue all day ;) Have a good week, everyone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next few days went by in a whirl of bargains and compromises and concessions, interspersed with impasses and threats thinly veiled by a veneer of icy courtesy. Kylo let Hux and Daala do most of the talking, taking a cue from Ta'a Chume's strategy of playing the role of observer while Isolder, Daemora, Lairelosse, and Thane haggled in her name.

Rey stayed fairly silent during these meetings as well, although she would occasionally ask pointed questions in a tone bridling with suspicion and contempt. She showed up every day in stunning dresses and beautiful crowns, her features enhanced by the clever application of cosmetics that were in turns shimmery and delicate or bold and striking. But Kylo's mind kept wandering to that first night in the garden, how he had been able to see her freckles, how her bare, toned arms had shone in the moonlight. How her glorious eyes had blazed when she cut him down to size, and how something had caught within his chest to see the Rey that he remembered standing amidst the roses, looking up at the starry sky.

He was certain that his odd thoughts were a byproduct of having to wrap his head around the idea of marrying the scavenger. There were times in the council room when he would look at her seated across from him at the conference table and he would remember the dip of her tiny waist and the curve of her slender spine in his bare hands, the way the warmth of her skin had seeped through the thin shirt that bunched up at the pressure of his fingertips. Before that night by the waterfall, he hadn't touched anyone without his gloves in years. Even during the few occasions he'd taken a woman to bed, he'd kept them on, along with his arm-guards.

And now it was as if some long-forgotten hunger had been awakened. Now it was as if his hands burned with need, even though they were safely encased in worn leather once more. He could feel Rey's body against his fingers, in his arms, like a ghostly echo of sensation. He feared that it would slowly drive him mad.

By the fourth day of negotiations, the First Order and the Consortium had hammered out a trade agreement and a mutual defense pact. It was not without its casualties— Daemora's polite smile was
a little worn at the edges, and Hux and Lairollosse seemed about ready to wring each other's necks. Even Ta'a Chume had started getting snappish with her own advisors. But now they were finally ready to discuss the wedding itself.

Today Rey wore an empire silhouette gown spun from teal-green veda cloth, with silver lotus blossoms lavishly embroidered along the square neckline, the fitted waist, the hem of the flowing skirt, and the cuffs of the wide, trailing sleeves. Her hair was loose, the tousled chestnut waves softening her face and cascading down her shoulders, crowned by a silver tiara with a small, intricately carved dragon's head perched at the center, its ruby eyes matching the scarlet lining that peeked out from Rey's sleeves and the drapes of her skirt.

She looked... fetching, and Kylo grimaced inwardly— what was it about her that reduced him to such whimsical adjectives? He tried to reassure himself that it was just the novelty of seeing her all dressed up, that she would stop having so bewildering an effect on him once he got used to this new version of her.

Hux currently had the floor. "The wedding must be held on Coruscant," he was railing. "It is the Empire's seat of power and, as Kira Ka Djo will be the future Empress, she needs to be there to assume her role."

"So conduct an official coronation on Coruscant," retorted Lairollosse, "after the wedding, which needs to be held here. Her Grace might be the First Order's future Empress, but His Majesty will also be her consort. If you want the Hapans to accept him as such, then the nuptials must take place on Hapan soil."

"Consortium laws also require that all major ceremonies be conducted on Hapes itself," Thane added. "For a Coruscanti wedding to be deemed valid, we would have to amend our constitution—a process that might take months."

More like years, Kylo thought snidely, all too familiar with the inefficient bureaucracy that tended to cripple the legislative branch of government. "It's settled, then," he said out loud, in a firm tone of voice. "We will celebrate—" he couldn't quite contain his sarcasm— "the nuptials here, and then there will be a crowning ceremony on Coruscant."

Hux scowled but dutifully made a note on his datapad. It was Rey who spoke up, saying, "I don't want to go back there."

"As my wife, you will have to hold court at the Empire's capital every once in a while," Kylo coolly informed her. "We can discuss a schedule later. It doesn't even have to be more than one visit per
year, if you prefer. What isn’t negotiable is your coronation."

Rey opened her mouth to argue, but Ta'a Chume abruptly broke her regal silence. "Emperor Ren is correct, Kira. Isolder and I will, of course, accompany you after the wedding. As for the subsequent visits, I am sure His Majesty will allow you to take whoever you wish to make your stays more... bearable, for lack of a better word."

Kylo nodded. "Each and every one of your courtiers will always be welcome at the Citadel."

Rey subsided, glowering mutinously as she leaned back in her seat, claws retracted. Stars, she was going to make him pay for this—he could feel it in his bones.

From her place at the head of the table, Ta'a Chume caught Daemora's eye and nodded. The Ducha AlGray coughed discreetly, calling everyone else's attention. "I’d now like to discuss the marriage contract. This is a written declaration that will be signed by the bride and groom during the wedding ceremony, before being sealed and preserved in the Royal Archives." She tapped a button on the holoprojector in the center of the table, conjuring an image of an ornate cursive alphabet scrawled in gold ink on a sheet of cream-colored paper. "For the panel's edification, this is my own marriage contract, drawn up and signed—goodness, has it really been twenty-five years?"

"You don't look a day over thirty, my lady," Isolder gallantly opined.

Rey cringed, eliciting a faint half-smile from Kylo. If this had been any other time and place, if he had lived any other kind of life, he would perhaps have told her in good-natured jest to get used to being embarrassed by her father. But to say that here and now would be to recall the red light and the falling, and it would shatter the civility that they were making an effort to maintain.

"The contract is in Hapan, so allow me to translate," said the Ducha AlGray. "Daemora, daughter of Liir from the Moons of Relephon, daughter of Kaida from the Olanji Breakwater, daughter of Viera from the Fastness of Archais, daughter of Melestel from the Sundered Plains, is getting married to Tam, son of Thalassa from the banks of the Infinite, daughter of Nayru from the Serpent's Trace—"

"I think the First Order's gotten the idea," interrupted Ta'a Chume. "Anyway, the gist is that it goes back four generations along the matrilineal line."

Kylo was already shaking his head before she'd finished speaking. "I have renounced my birth name, as well as my affiliation to Leia Organa. It would be dishonest to enter into a marriage on those
"But your mother's pedigree would look so nice on paper, Your Grace," Daemora said mournfully. "Whether we go with her biological or adoptive relations, it would still be House Naberrie of Naboo or House Organa of Alderaan."

The reminder that his ancestry was common knowledge to the galaxy at large hit Kylo in an irrevocably damaged place. He had been in his early twenties when Ransolm Casterfo dropped that particular bomb at the Senate, and Kylo had found out that he was Darth Vader's grandson the same way everyone else did—via scandalous headlines on the HoloNet. The old betrayal still stung after all these years as he narrowed his eyes at the Hapans' chief negotiator. "I will sign no such document," he snarled. "If your side insists, then we might as well call off this whole affair."

"I believe it would be best if we skipped the contract altogether," Isolder said into the uneasy silence that followed. "For one thing, we will have to send an envoy to Dathomir in order to acquire the specifics of Kira's ancestry on her mother's side. That will take time."

"But it's a royal wedding!" protested Lairelosse. "There has to be a ceremonial record in the Archives."

"Perhaps a simpler version of the contract?" Daala suggested. "Just the names of the couple and their titles?"

Her proposal was accepted after some more bickering. From there, the talks dragged on well into the late afternoon, during which Kylo steadfastly avoided the speculative glances that Rey was casting his way.

The fiery light of the setting sun streamed into the garden as Rey scattered a handful of fish food across the surface of the pool. The water clouded with flashing scales and long, veil-like fins, and she smiled softly to herself. It had been another long day of political maneuvering, but she could always count on the jewelfish to cheer her up. They had their distinctive individual personalities and quirks, an observation she'd learned to keep to herself after one of her ladies-in-waiting looked at her like she'd grown an extra head before carefully replying, "As you say, Chume'da" a few months ago.

Rey had dismissed her ladies, wanting some time alone before the banquet later that night. Now that
the negotiations were halfway complete, Ta'a Chume had decided it was time for her court to start getting used to the idea of treating the First Order politely in a social setting. She'd made clear in a private conversation that Rey was expected to put her best foot forward and be as diplomatic as possible during the whole ordeal. "Like it or not," the Queen Mother had said, "the more accepting the Hapan nobles are of the First Order, the more the First Order will feel secure enough in this bargain to leave us to our own devices. Remember, your objective is to keep them from snooping around in the Corsair Outback and finding the Resistance."

At least they're not making me change outfits, Rey consoled herself. The teal gown was the most comfortable one she'd worn yet, with no stiff petticoats or fussy lace. And she liked the dragon tiara, it wasn't as heavy as the other crowns she'd had to deal with thus far.

There was a rustle of black at the corner of her eye as Kylo entered the garden. Rey paid him no mind at first, mulishly keeping her gaze fixed on the jewelfish in the water at her feet. His own steps were hesitant, as if he were being compelled to approach her even though he knew it was a bad idea, and he sat down on the stone bench beside the waterfall with the wariness of a man straying deeper into enemy territory. Which wasn't too far off-base— she'd told him in no uncertain terms that this was her turf, after all.

Try as she might, she couldn't muster any ire for him at the moment. Perhaps she was even more exhausted than she'd thought, or perhaps it was the melancholy quality of sunset that softened all things, including her temper.

"Why don't you want to go back to Coruscant?" he asked her after a long silence, and she—

— didn't feel like playing word games or hiding behind strategic pleasantries anymore—

"I was happy there," Rey said. "I didn't necessarily enjoy how busy and crowded it was, but I was with my friends. It was home, same as D'Qar. And then, same as D'Qar, you came along and tore everything down. I just don't want to see what it looks like now."

"We've rebuilt," Kylo told her, a hint of earnestness creeping into his solemn tone. "The city is much more organized, cleaner and grander than it ever was in the days of the Republic."

"At what cost?"

He sighed. "When the old ways have been set in stone, when the rot has gone down deep, creation
must be an act of violence. That is what you never understood. Coruscant has changed for the better, and it won't be long before the rest of the galaxy does, too."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, I guess," she grumbled under her breath. She refocused all her attention on the waterfall and the pool, hoping he'd get the hint. Unfortunately he turned out to be quite dense— instead of taking his leave, he just sat there, his pensive gaze raking over her from head to toe. She struggled not to fidget, struggled against the sudden urge to fix her hair or smooth down her skirt. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of appearing self-conscious, even if that was what she currently felt.

"Your mother was from Dathomir," he said at last. It was less of a question and more of a command to fill him in.

Rey wasn't particularly inclined to acquiesce, but there was no point in antagonizing him. Over the past few days, she'd come to the realization that her future would be rife with conflict. She might as well learn to pick her battles, save her energy for the ones that mattered. "Her name was Teneniel Djo. Of the Singing Mountain Clan. She died a few months after I was born."

Kylo's pale brow creased. "What could kill a Force witch?"

Rey shrugged. "It was a mysterious illness, by all accounts. And it was fast. She slipped away before they could figure out what was wrong."

Kylo looked off into the distance, his jaw clenching, and Rey wondered what was so broken about her that, even under these circumstances, she could take some quietly savage delight in him being at a loss for words.

"Why Rey?" He embarked on a new line of questioning. "Who gave you that name?"

"Why Kylo Ren?" she retorted. "I'm not the only one here who was someone else before."

"The boy I used to be had no place in the new world that I wanted to build. You found a world that you had lost. Our stories are in reverse of the other."

"You're deflecting," she accused him.
He made a strange sound just then in the back of his throat. To her ears it was almost the beginning of laughter, before he caught himself and stoppered it. "That's what we do in politics, Your Grace, although I feel obliged to remind you that you were the one who answered a question with another question."

"Fine, then, don't tell me," she huffed. "I won't tell you about my name, either."

"Fine."

"Fine," she repeated, baring her teeth.

"Great," he said with a tiny smirk, further cementing his position as the most infuriating man she'd ever known in her life.

"Excuse me," said the familiar nasal tones of General Hux.

Rey hadn't even noticed the redhead's approach, too wrapped up in her and Kylo's verbal repartee, and she cursed herself for once more allowing him to distract her from paying attention to her surroundings.

Kylo, for his part, looked annoyed. "What do you want, Hux?"

"I hate to interrupt," drawled the general, "but it's time for His Majesty to prepare for the banquet."

Daala was waiting for Kylo and Hux in the hallway of the guest wing, and she effortlessly fell into step beside Kylo during the brisk walk to his chambers. "I appreciate the thought," he sniped when the two officers followed him into his room, "but I am capable of dressing myself. I do not require either of your services in lacing up my corset, if that's what you're worried about."

Hux and Daala exchanged looks. Even bereft of the Force as he was, Kylo had no problem telling
that they were locked in a silent battle of wills as to who would be the one to say something their emperor didn't want to hear.

"Your Majesty," Daala finally said, shooting one last exasperated glance at Hux, "ever since we arrived, we've been dining in our own hall and spending our limited free time confined to this area of the palace. Tonight marks the first of many public events, and General Hux and I merely wish to ascertain that you make a good impression. In other words, we thought we could help you select your outfit for the banquet."

"And what makes you think I would need fashion advice?" Kylo growled, the expression on his face thunderous.

There was another awkward silence, and then Hux squared his shoulders and drew himself up to his full height even more than Kylo had believed possible. "With all due respect, Emperor Ren—"

While the general wasn't quite there yet, he seemed to be getting better at pronouncing Kylo's title without that barely-concealed trace of revulsion, probably an effect of having to refer to him as such so often in front of the Hapans— "I've noticed something about the Consortium. They let their clothes speak for them. Every day they show up at the negotiations bedecked in utmost finery, while we— well." His blue eyes darted from his and Daala's austere charcoal-gray uniforms to Kylo's all-black ensemble of leather and rough fabric. "Our progress in the talks has thus far not been ideal, and Admiral Daala and I suspect that the other side is growing bolder with each passing day. Appearance plays a huge role in their culture, and this banquet is a chance for you to dress as befits your status and remind them who they're dealing with."

"We also hope," Daala added with as much delicateness as a seasoned war veteran was capable of, "that an improved wardrobe might make the Chume'da more amiable towards you, and that it would lead to the talks being less of a living hell, so to speak."

*There's something in the water on Hapes,* Kylo reflected. First, one of his knights had asked if he planned to consummate his marriage, and now two of his officers were telling him that he needed a makeover. Was it because he didn't have his lightsaber and couldn't use the Force? He would make them pay for this insubordination sometime in the near future, but, for now, he had to concede that Hux and Daala had a point. Perhaps a second opinion or two would come in handy.

"Very well." Kylo nodded imperiously at the wardrobe containing the few items of formal wear he'd brought over just in case. "On with it."

What followed was the strangest hour of his life. And that was saying something.
"This looks nice," Admiral Natasi Daala remarked without much confidence, gingerly prodding at the sleeve of the brightest coat that Kylo owned.

"It's teal," sniffed General Armitage Hux. "That's the color of the Je— the Chume'da's gown. A bit too on the nose, don't you think?"

"I don't think anything of all this frippery," Daala grumbled. "What about this, then?"

"Anything but black," said Hux.

"That rules out ninety-five percent of His Majesty's clothes."

"Well, we'll just have to work with the remaining five percent."

Daala frowned, pulling out a set of gray robes for Kylo's perusal. "What do you think, Emperor Ren?"

"I think," Kylo said darkly, "that the Hapes Consortium's propensity for excess had better carry over onto their liquor selection. It would be this day's only saving grace."

Chapter End Notes

The marriage contract is based on an Iyer wedding custom as suggested by deepti1011.

Olanji.

Archais.

Ransolm Casterfo.

Singing Mountain Clan.
Thanks so much to the wonderful people who've made absolutely gorgeous photosets for this fic! Uursaminors, reylohues, kotay111, degouges, and eyre-bones, this chapter is for you.

It's six in the morning here and I'm about to fall asleep into my keyboard, so I'll keep this short and sweet: I have the best readers in the world, I hope you all enjoy this update, and I would be ecstatic if you left a review and/or hit that kudos button :3

"What do you mean he has to escort me into the dining room?" Rey cried, staring at her grandmother's holo in disbelief while Esli, one of her ladies-in-waiting, ran a brush through her hair.

"I mean exactly what I say," Ta'a Chume replied, her visage arctic in the powdery static beam of the holoprojector. "We are one step closer to formalizing your engagement. You must get used to the idea of Emperor Ren escorting you into all manner of rooms, my dear."

*I'm not your dear,* Rey longed to snap at the manipulative old woman whom she was growing to resent as the days passed and she felt more and more like a piece of junk being haggled over at the Concession Stand in Niima Outpost. She held her peace, however, because she didn't want to give the timid Esli an untimely stroke.

Once the Queen Mother had ended the comm, another lady-in-waiting poked her head out of the walk-in closet, catching Rey's eye in the mirror. "Your Grace, are you absolutely certain that you have no wish to change?" implored Janassa. "Perhaps the Denebrillan star silk with the lovely potolli fur stole?"

"Nope," Rey said firmly. "You got me into this dress this morning and you're not getting me out of it until it's time for bed." Besides, the teal gown's cut ensured that she didn't need to wear one of those blasted corsets; she always ate more than her fill during feasts, and she'd learned the hard way that there was no other feeling in the galaxy as uncomfortable as literally bursting at the seams by the end of the night.

Janassa sighed but obediently made her way to the dressing table to fix Rey's makeup. "You know, Chume'da," she mused as she dabbed fresh concealer onto the hollows under Rey's eyes, "I was just thinking the other day that Emperor Ren isn't so terrible-looking for an outsider. In my opinion, as far as physical appearances go, you could've done far worse."
"Thanks for trying to make me feel better," Rey joked.

Janassa giggled. "I'm serious! He's a bit on the broody side but he's tall and he has beautiful hair. Right, Esli?"

"I find him frightening," the other girl confessed with a shudder, "dressed all in black like that. And the scar..."

"It makes him look dangerous," Janassa excitedly declared. "How do you think he got it? He's a Sith, isn't he?"

Esli lowered her voice to a whisper. "I heard he used to be a Jedi. And then he betrayed Luke Skywalker and destroyed the academy on one of the Yavin moons in the Outer Rim."

"You should stop reading sludgenews," Janassa scoffed. "Hardly any of it ever turns out to be true."

"Well, I think Galactic Gossip was on to something," Esli mumbled with a spark of rare stubbornness as she wound a section of Rey's hair around a curling iron. "How else do you explain why the Jedi Order never came to the Republic's aid? Something must have happened to them."

"Something did happen to them, half a century ago," argued Janassa. "They were wiped out by Palpatine's empire. Luke Skywalker is a myth."

Rey could only sit there and marvel at the strange nature of truth, how drops of state secrets could trickle down to the masses via word-of-mouth, via the HoloNet waves. She suspected it wouldn't be long before the details of Kylo's parentage leaked to the rest of the Hapan court. In the meantime, she filed away the knowledge that the low-grade sludgenews publications could occasionally be relied upon, after all.

"Perhaps the Chume'da would know better than us," Esli shyly ventured. "You've been out in the galaxy, Your Grace, and you can use the Force. Have you ever met Luke Skywalker?"

Rey was spared from having to tell an outright lie when Janassa made an impatient noise in the back of her throat. "I'd much rather discuss Her Grace's betrothed."
Rey stared at her reflection, willing it not to color. It was no use; red deepened her cheeks beneath the petal-pink blush that Janassa had applied. "There's really nothing to discuss. He's obnoxious. I'm sure he got that scar from someone fed up with his fat mouth."

Esli and Janassa burst into peals of scandalized laughter, and a smile tugged at the corners of Rey’s lips. Her ladies-in-waiting were in their late teens and could sometimes be flighty and irreverent, but being around them made Rey feel like the girl life hadn't allowed her to be.

"Speaking of his mouth, though," Janassa started to say, "it's very—"

"Y—you stop right there!" Rey sputtered, provoking another round of mirth from the two other people in the room that she wasn’t inclined to join in this time. She refused to talk about Kylo Ren’s lips. Precisely because she'd begun noticing them for the same reason Janassa obviously had.

A command from the Chume’da was a command, and so Janassa didn't pursue this topic. However, her dark eyes sparkled with fond amusement as she dusted a shimmery highlight over the bridge of Rey's nose. "Is there courtship beyond the Veil, Your Grace? Here we give small tokens of our affection, send love letters, hold hands, steal a kiss or two. Is it the same throughout the rest of the galaxy?"

"I wouldn't know," Rey answered. "I never had time for any of that." And then it occurred to her that what Janassa had said didn't quite adhere to her own observations of Hapan culture. "I thought most marriages here are arranged as well."

"Yes, but there are some who wed for love," said Janassa. "Esli's cousin, for example. The Marchioness Sevanar."

Esli nodded. "She and her husband were childhood sweethearts. Their story is like a fairy tale, actually."

"I hope to someday be as fortunate," said Janassa, with the soft smile of one who had yet to be jaded by life in the heart of the Consortium. "And for you, Chume’da, I hope that Emperor Ren romances you properly, at least for a little while. Stolen kisses and all."

Esli tittered. Rey groaned.
As befitted the occasion, Moreem and the rest of Rey's *Chume'doro* were all dressed in a gilded, opalescent version of their ceremonial armor, maskless and sporting sapphire capes. In sharp contrast to the gaiety of the ladies-in-waiting, they looked more like they were accompanying her to a funeral rather than a banquet, their eyes hard as flint and their mouths pressed into grim lines. The ladies on the other hand made no secret of their excitement, Esli and Janassa whispering giddily with Niobe, Vanya, and Sayl, the hems of their pastel gowns gliding over the marble tiles as they trailed after Rey through the Per'Agthra's shining corridors.

"You look about as happy as I feel, Major Espara," Rey observed.

"This isn't right, Your Grace, if you don't mind me saying so," Moreem grunted. "One hears rumors in the Armed Forces. Emperor Ren is not a kind man."

Rey wondered if the major was talking about Kylo's reputation as a whole or specifically the skirmish on Stalsinek IV, but she pried no further. Neither did she chastise Moreem for speaking out of turn. While she should be taking steps to ensure that the Hapan people accepted this betrothal, it was a comfort to know that at least *some* of them were on her side instead of encouraging her to make out with her nemesis.

The entrance to the Royal Banquet Hall was located at the end of a red carpet running down the length of a wide passageway lit with glow-lamps fashioned to look like torches. Ta'a Chume, Isolder, and the guests were already seated inside, so it was only Kylo and his retinue waiting for Rey by the open doors. She saw him first in profile, his head bowed slightly as he conversed with Daala in low tones. Clustered with them and Hux were three other people whose identities didn't take long to figure out, but all thought of evaluating the unmasked features of Hircine, Boethiah, and Jyggalag Ren flew from Rey's mind in the next moment when Kylo registered her approach and turned to face her, straightening his posture.

*He's not wearing black,* was her first, most instinctive reaction. The silvery white illumination afforded by the glow-lamps brought out the midnight blue shade of his high-collared cutaway tailcoat, embellished with sumptuous gold brocade and revealing glimpses of the ivory ribbed-silk shirt beneath. The slim fit of his formal blue trousers flattered his lean hips, his muscular thighs, and the sheer athletic length of his legs. With his naturally haughty expression that was only marginally softened by the thick, dark hair that fell about his face in casual yet elegant waves, he looked every inch the young emperor, radiating power and self-assurance.

Behind Rey, one of the ladies-in-waiting— it sounded like Vanya— giggled before being shushed
by the other four as the respective entourages moved aside, forming a half-circle around Kylo and Rey as she drew to a halt in front of him.

*Kriff*, Rey thought, staring up into Kylo's eyes, which were rendered a lighter shade of brown in the glow of the torches and somehow seemed all the more gentle because of that, yet no less piercing in their scrutiny, *emperors don't bow but am I supposed to curtsy? The Chume'da curtsies only to the Queen Mother but he technically outranks me*—

After a moment of what appeared to be hesitation on his part, he stiffly offered his arm out to her. Months of etiquette lessons kicked in and she automatically tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow, trying her best to ignore how warm and solid he felt through the coat sleeve beneath her fingertips.

"Ready?" he asked in a voice meant for her ears alone, a quiet bass rumble that curled down her spine.

Not trusting herself to speak, Rey nodded, and Kylo led her forward, through the doorway and into a swell of light and music and glittering people. It was all she could do to hold on.

Kylo didn't think it was an exaggeration that he'd seen city streets shorter than the table that ran down the middle of the Banquet Hall, draped in white cloth and set with an array of bountiful floral arrangements, centerpieces crafted from crystal and gold, jewel-encrusted goblets, porcelain plates, and vermeil silverware. The chairs looked like they were wrought from solid gold, cushioned with dark crimson velvet, and the people sitting on them rose to their feet as one at the Emperor and the Chume'da's entrance— with the exception of the Queen Mother, who watched cannily from the head of the table as an obsequious usher led Kylo and Rey to two empty chairs that he noted with some mild alarm were right next to each other, and smack dab in the middle of the table. He would be surrounded by Hapans all throughout dinner, effectively cut off from Hux, Daala, and his knights. Going to this thing had been a mistake.

Rey's slim fingers dug into Kylo's arm as they followed the usher. *She's nervous*, he realized, glancing down to see her bottom lip trembling as if she were chewing on the inside of it. Whoever applied her makeup— probably one of those infernal teenagers who'd shadowed her along the hall— had done an expert job in rendering dewy skin and rosy cheeks, but no amount of mascara or champagne tint could disguise the apprehension in her hazel eyes, not when she was this close to him.
"It's not too late to make a run for it," he quipped.

"I'm in heels," she shot back.

"So that's why you seem taller," he mused. "Not by much, though."

"We can't all be overgrown trees, my lord," she sniffed, and she was so oddly adorable in that moment, in her defiance layered over the attack of nerves she was trying to hide, with her chestnut-brown hair spilling down her shoulders from beneath her silver tiara, that his mouth softened with the beginnings of a genuine smile.

The string quartet in the corner had launched into a new piece upon Kylo and Rey's arrival, and it was to the graceful notes of the famed Hapan lute that Rey took her appointed seat. The other diners followed, along with Kylo, whose arm did not— did not— suddenly feel bereft of her touch.

Cuisine was the one aspect of her father's culture that Rey had had no problem wholeheartedly embracing thus far. To somebody who'd subsisted on veg-meat and polystarch for fourteen years of her life and then on the nourishing but bland military rations served up in the Resistance's mess hall, Hapan dishes were a rainbow of delights with their complex spices, enticing aromas, and scrumptious textures.

Sadly, tonight's peculiar circumstances ensured that she was unable to pay as much attention to the food as she usually did. With Kylo sitting beside her and everyone else subjecting the two of them to hawk-like scrutiny, the three kinds of appetizers brought out by the service droids for the first course— the pheasant terrine with a red onion compote, the skate cheek with crushed pea and mint, and the fig and gill-goat's cheese tart— all tasted like dust in her mouth. It certainly didn't help that it had fallen upon her to make the necessary introductions between Kylo and the people near them, and now those lords and ladies were lobbing pointed conversational volleys designed to not quite hide their displeasure with the betrothal.

"I believe, Your Majesty, that you and Her Grace knew each other prior to the fall of the Republic," purred Verisya Galney, the golden-haired Ducha of Terephon. "Would you care to enlighten us as to the nature of that acquaintance?"

Rey held her breath. Everyone at the table already knew what had transpired— if not the nitty-gritty
details, then the vague and overarching shape of it. They just wanted to trip Kylo up.

There was a brief silence as he picked at his tart, obviously buying time while he formulated a diplomatic answer. "Three years ago, while conducting intelligence-gathering operations, I was made aware of a Force-sensitive individual from a desert planet," he said at last. "I attempted to convince her to join my cause. I was not successful."

Rey would have snorted at Kylo's wry understatement but something else drew her focus— at his mention of the Force, several gazes subtly flickered to the ysalamiri cages on the walls before swiveling back to him. They really do fear it, Rey thought, remembering her early days at court when Ta'a Chume had advised her to put her lightsaber away and to refrain from using her abilities. They fear us.

She caught herself with a frown. There was no us when it came to her and Kylo Ren. She might be marrying him, but she was not on his side.

*Stars, I'm marrying him.*

There it was again, that throb of panic that coursed through her system like the first pulse of the *X'us'R'ía* through the narrow pathways of Kelvin Ravine, made all the more charged because Kylo was beside her, looking entirely too handsome and imperious in dark blue and dusky gold.

"Is that what you were doing on Stalsinek IV, Your Majesty?" asked Jobal Feara, a portly, aging lord from the Wodan system. "You were recruiting?"

"Call it unfinished business between me and your Chume'da," Kylo tersely replied. "However, judging by the fact that you have a Chume'da, I'd venture to say it all worked out in the end."

He was reminding the court that Kira Ka Djo had only been found because of him. Which in a way was true, but that didn't make it any less infuriating, and so Rey couldn't blame the Countess Rakshesh of Harterra when she thundered, "You committed trespass and destruction of property, killed twenty of our soldiers, and stole one of our starfighters, Emperor Ren! How are we supposed to trust the First Order after that?"

Kylo's gloved hand tightened around his fork. "I do not regret my actions, as I did what had to be done at the time. The point of this new treaty is to prevent further discord between our realms. Upon ratification, I assure you, Countess, that I won't be the first to renege on the terms."
More than a few pairs of eyes darted to Rey. They were waiting for her to either defend the betrothal or to join in cutting the enemy down to size, she realized, and the next words to issue from her mouth would dictate the flow of the conversation.

But her mind had gone blank. Common sense demanded that she present a united front with the Emperor of the First Order, yet how could she appear to submit so meekly to a forced marriage? *Save your friends. Save your father's people, who are your people, too,* an inner voice urged, only to be drowned out by another voice that screamed, *Save yourself, Rey of Jakku.*

"The terrine is sublime, don't you think?" she blurted out.

Lord Feara's brow wrinkled in utter confusion. "Your Grace?"

"The terrine," Rey repeated in little more than a pained whisper. "The head chef has outdone herself tonight."

The Ducha Galney was the first to move in the abrupt, tense stillness, bringing a fork to her lips and taking a small bite of the aforementioned dish. "Yes," she said slowly, "it's exquisite."

"A marvel," Esli's cousin, Ysanne Sevanar, hastened to opine. She was a svelte young woman with fawn-colored skin and straight, jet-black hair, and her dark almond eyes were almost beseeching as she turned to Countess Rakshesh. "Would I be wrong to presume that such fine pheasant can only have come from Harterra, my lady?"

The fierce old countess appeared startled for a moment—and more than a bit piqued that the discussion had taken a completely different turn—but social norms dictated that she respond to Ysanne's question. "Not at all, my dear marchioness. Harterra prides itself on being Ta'a Chume'Dan's sole supplier of this particular game bird. It is one of our primary exports, second only to moonstone."

At that moment, Ysanne's husband gave a barely perceptible jolt—Rey suspected his wife had kicked him under the table—and spoke up. "I've been thinking of breaking into the mining industry, myself." He was a curly-haired man with blue eyes, a wry grin, and a languid manner of speaking. "Perhaps the Countess Rakshesh could give me some tips?"

Rey made a mental note to thank the Sevanars as the conversation shifted to mining. Beside her,
Kylo decorously dabbed at his mouth with a napkin, but she glimpsed the upward curl of his lips and a flash of white, slightly crooked teeth peeking out from the cloth. Was he laughing? The amused glance he sent her way served to prove her suspicions. He was laughing at her for idiotically blathering on about the terrine. The nerve!

Rey fumed all the way through the soup course—a savory cream of acid-beet—and the entrées, but she made it a point to smile gaily and engage in courteous small talk with the other nobles. Kylo found his footing as well, speaking mutedly with Daemora AlGray, who was seated to his right and gradually looped him into her own circle of high society matrons. Everything was going well, for the most part; further down the table, Hux, Daala, and the Knights of Ren were keeping to their own but no one seemed inclined to start flinging wine in anybody else's face. Rey could relax...

Kylo leaned over. "Would my lady care to share her expert culinary opinion on the roasted squab?" he murmured in her ear.

"Very funny," she grumped.

"I take it that means it is less than sublime?"

"You're less than sublime."

Kylo exhaled that sound of strangled mirth again, the one that Rey first heard in the garden. She wondered what he would look like when he actually smiled, what he would sound like when he laughed outright. She wondered if the face he'd make would remind her of Leia or of Han.

"Will Her Grace remain with us after the nuptials?" questioned Verisya, causing Rey to immediately straighten up in her seat and look away from Kylo. "Or will the Chume'da's court relocate to the First Order capital?"

"I'm staying here, Lady Galney," Rey answered, and a wave of visible relief passed through the Hapans. Her heart warmed a little bit; she didn't totally understand these people, but, for all their haughtiness and pomp and vicious cunning, they firmly believed that she belonged with them, and it was somewhat touching. In a way.

"I remember when you were born," Lord Feara told Rey with gruff fondness. "They rang the bells in the Starlight Tower all morning, all afternoon. Gave me a damnable headache, but no one would've dreamed of leaving Ta'a Chume'Dan at that point. There was celebration and there was feasting,
"The birth of the next Queen Mother is always a joyous occasion," said Daemora. "Of course, His Royal Highness probably remembers it differently."

The older people chortled. Rey glanced further up the table at her father, who was conversing with Beed Thane and Ta'a Chume and blissfully unaware that he was now a subject of discussion. "What did Prince Is— my father do?"

"He was running around like one of our pheasants after its head had been cut off," snorted Countess Rakshesh. "Your mother was in labor all through the night, you see. Lady Teneniel insisted that the birth be natural in accordance with her people's beliefs. Prince Isolder was so worried, he threatened to throw the attending physician into the dungeons and deliver the child himself."

"I told him, 'Your Highness, please calm down, would you care for a drink?'' boomed Lord Feara. "He then promptly threatened to throw me into the dungeons along with the poor physician!"

Their part of the table erupted into laughter. It wasn't long before Rey joined in, giggles bubbling up her throat at the mental image of her mild-mannered father ordering the Royal Guard to arrest random people. She threw her head back, laughed hard and long, and, when it was over, when she had settled down, Kylo was frozen in his seat, staring at her like he'd never seen her before. The man appeared utterly gobsmacked.

"What?" Rey hissed after furtively checking to make sure that everyone else was too caught up in mirth and in reminiscing to notice. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Nothing." Kylo shook his head as if to clear it. And then he—

He did something weird just then. He reached out to sort of— brush his gloved fingers along the teal sleeve of her gown that covered her upper arm. It seemed too deliberate to be accidental, but he retracted his hand as swiftly as if it had been burned. As she continued to frown at him, perplexed, he returned all of his attention to his food, and did not look at her again for a long, long while.

He had never been one for big events. In an old life now lost, he'd suffered through a surfeit of galas
that Leia had dragged him to, sometimes along with Han back when she'd still been keeping up the pretense of a normal, happy family. While a part of Kylo could muster some disdain for the memory of that gangly boy who was all ears and elbows and mildly traumatized by the throngs of people whose uncharitable thoughts—about his appearance, his attitude, and his half-smuggler pedigree—he could hear as clearly as if they were in his own head, there was also a part of him that had never outgrown it. Even though things were different now and he'd long since learned to shield himself from unwanted external stimuli, he would have gladly jumped at the first opportunity to retire to his chambers.

*It's the sheer artifice of it all,* he mused. With the exception of his own retinue—and he wasn't even sure about Hux—everyone at this table wouldn't hesitate to order his assassination if they thought they could get away with it. Yet here they were, eating and chatting like nothing was wrong, and he had to play along because that was what politicians *did.*

Ben Solo had feared becoming like his father. Perhaps he should have been more afraid of turning out like his mother.

His thoughts drifted to Rey and how she had laughed at Lord Feara's anecdote. For some reason, Kylo had been expecting a sound lighter than air to complement her elegant gown and stately surroundings, but Rey's giggles had been vibrant, dulcet, just the slightest bit unrefined at the edges. It had been a moment devoid of falsehood, the first time he'd ever seen her laugh, her sparkling hazel eyes warm like brandy. It had tugged at the frayed edges of his soul.

He revised his previous conclusion. Rey wouldn't give any order to assassinate him. *She'd kill me herself,* he thought, and it was with something dangerously close to affection, because that made her the most genuine person in this room.

Halfway through the sorbet course, a hush fell over the end of the table nearest the entrance, gradually spreading to the rest of the guests. Daemora trailed off in the middle of recounting an amusing story from her debut, her mouth hanging open in mid-sentence at the sight of something to Kylo's left.

He turned to where she—and everyone else—was looking. A lanky masculine figure stood in the open doorway, dressed in an ensemble that wouldn't have been out of place at the seedy cantinas frequented by pirates and bounty hunters all over the galaxy—fitted black leather armor with brass studs, knee-high boots, and a black cape, two blasters holstered at the wide utility belt slung casually around his hips. The new arrival was in his early twenties, dark hair falling across his forehead in disheveled waves and violet eyes *blazing* with barely-controlled fury as they swept the Banquet Hall. The expressions of the people that gazed back at him ranged from confusion on Rey and Kylo's end to full-blown alarm on that of the Hapan nobles.
"Who is that?" Rey inquired, sounding curious but careful to keep her voice low as if out of respect for the dramatic atmosphere.

"Trouble," It was Ysanne who answered, agitated. "The Lady Daemora's nephew from a cadet branch. Aleson Gray."

"He loathes the First Order," added Verisya, shooting a look in Kylo's direction that could have passed for nervousness in someone more prone to showing their emotions. "This isn't good at all."

Chapter End Notes

Concession Stand.
Denebrillan star silk.
Potolli.
Sludgenews.
Galactic Gossip.
Hapan lute.
Veg-meat.
Polystarch.
Gill-goat.
The Ducha Galney of Terephon.
Wodan system.
Moonstone from Harterra.
Acid-beet.
Aleson Gray. In my mind he totally looks like Space Pirate Captain Harlock lololol.

I promised photos of Kylo's outfit but I couldn't find anything that fit what I had in my head. Think Francis' formal jackets on Reign!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Still so deeply grateful for the continued support! Please let me know what you think of the story so far, either here or on my Tumblr!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was Lairelosse Yliri who broke the frozen tableau that the Banquet Hall had become, springing to her feet with an enviable, almost impossible litheness on four-inch heels. "Aleson!" she merrily called out as she swept towards the newcomer, a dazzling smile on her face. "How good of you to join us—"

"Save it, Laire," snarled Aleson Gray. He brushed past her and made his way to the head of the table, his gaze meeting Rey's for a fraction of a second as he passed across from where she sat.

Despite the Hapans' otherworldly beauty, their features were so human that Rey tended to forget they were a different species. It was the eyes that gave them away; Hapan irises were jewel-toned, from Ta'a Chume's jade to Isolder's silver-blue. Even the brown shades, such as Lairelosse's and Ysanne's, revealed hints of gold or topaz when one looked closely in the right kind of light. Like his aunt Daemora, Aleson's eyes were far less subtle— they were a brilliant, piercing amethyst, and they darkened in recognition upon seeing Rey. He had to be around her age or perhaps a little older, but she supposed that he'd seen holos of Teneniel Djo and put two and two together.

He drew to a halt before the Queen Mother and dropped to one knee, head bowed, the gesture more perfunctory than respectful. Ta'a Chume regarded him warily for several moments, as if he were a mongoose that had infiltrated her snake's nest, in the silence of a hall where even the string quartet had stopped playing.

Finally, she nodded. "Welcome home, Lord Gray." She spoke for everyone's benefit, her cold tones ringing through the vast chamber. "I trust your journeys have been pleasant."

Lairelosse, meanwhile, had sidled up to Rey and was now mumbling pertinent information in her ear. "He's something of a spacer, spends most of his time beyond the Veil. Six years ago, he started lobbying the Consortium to join forces with the Republic and put a stop to the First Order. He was convinced they would eventually pose a grave threat."

"Well, he turned out to be right, didn't he?" Rey whispered back. Lairelosse was speaking very
quietly, as if she didn't want Kylo, who was on Rey's other side, to hear. As if she wanted to protect Aleson from the Empire's wrath. It was a sense of loyalty to the young Duchy that had Rey following suit.

"Aleson Gray is one of the main critics of Hapan isolationism," Lairelosse continued. "He believes that the way forward is for the cluster to integrate with the rest of the galaxy. After the destruction of the Hosnian system, he and a few other nobles began exerting more pressure on Ta'a Chume to send the Dragon Fleet to the Resistance's aid. They weren't successful, obviously, but if anyone is going to be vigorous in their objections to this betrothal, it's going to be Aleson."

The dark-haired lord had now risen to his feet, gauntleted fists clenched at his sides. "My journeys were pleasant enough, Ereneda," he told Ta'a Chume. "However, I had to cut my drive up the Balmorra Run short when I learned that you were brokering an alliance with a murderous despot."

"Shit," Lairelosse swore under her breath, and Rey would have spared some shock at such a coarse expletive issued from the sophisticated aristocrat's mouth, had Kylo not glanced over at them.

"It seems that your friend doesn't like me very much, Lady Yliri," he remarked.

"I do apologize, Your Grace," Lairelosse hurried to say. "I've known him since we were children. He's rather impulsive and opinionated, but—"

Ta'a Chume spoke again, effectively putting a stop to the ripples of scandalized murmuring that had blossomed among her guests. "First of all, my lord, you will remove your weapons in the presence of your sovereign. Secondly, there is a proper time and place to air your grievances with my decision, and this banquet is not one of them."

"On the contrary, Your Majesty, there is no better time and place," Aleson retorted, even as he unfastened his utility belt and tossed it, along with the attached blasters, onto the floor. "Everyone is here to bear witness as I state for the record that I formally protest this union."

"The boy has a death wish!" Lord Feara exclaimed, aghast.

"I'll say," Rey muttered. "Throwing around loaded weapons like that, he's going to shoot his own foot off."
Kylo stilled, tearing his eyes away from the scene at the head of the table to gaze over at her once more. His wry expression told her all she needed to know; he was remembering the Battle of Vendikar Station, in the Colonies, when she'd telekinetically sent a blaster sailing towards Finn's waiting hands but misjudged the angle, causing the object to bounce off a nearby wall and then go off, shooting Meridia Ren in the arm— which had been Finn's objective in the first place. Kylo and Rey had been embroiled in their own duel but, in the space of a heartbeat, his masked visage had looked at the freshly-fired blaster on the floor and then at her before he resumed his attack. She'd wondered about that look later, if the expression under the helm had been one of disbelief or of contempt, or perhaps even amusement.

It was surreal to think about that time in her life here and now, amidst the marble and gold of the Per'Agthra. Already the war felt as distant as if it had happened to someone else.

"I've been all over the galaxy, Ereneda," Aleson was saying. "I've seen for myself the devastation the First Order has wrought. They would eradicate individual thought and freedom for the sake of their twisted view on what makes a perfect society. This is not what the Consortium should stand for."

"I won't sit here and be lectured by a boy who spends more than half of each year away from the Hapes Cluster," hissed Ta'a Chume. "Given such a schedule, how could you even presume to know what the Consortium stands for?"

"I know that we don't coddle those guilty of genocide!" Aleson shot back heatedly. "I know that we value our independence! I know I told you years ago that we should help the Republic before the situation worsened— and I was right!"

"Yes, he's dead, the fool," sighed Countess Rakshesh. "It's a pity. I will miss him."

But Rey could see for herself that the mood at the table was slowly shifting— that some of the lords and ladies were exchanging knowing, disgruntled looks, as if they agreed with Aleson. He was giving voice to their own resentments, their own fears.

"The First Order will not last, Ta'a Chume." He sounded earnest, impassioned, almost like he was now begging the Queen Mother. "This has happened before. Palpatine's shadow fell over the galaxy and Hapes did nothing, but justice and liberty won out in the end. This is an opportunity for us to be on the right side of history for once."

There was some part of Rey that could appreciate how neatly Aleson had cornered the Queen Mother. By confronting her out in the open, he'd ensured that she couldn't fall back on the same
reasons she'd given Rey about letting the First Order think they had the upper hand. Still, Rey was surprised that Ta'a Chume would let anyone defy her so brazenly—in full view of her court and a fellow head of state—without having him clapped in chains or banished from her sight.

"He is popular with the younger set," Lairollosse told Rey as if she'd read the latter's mind, "and his family commands one of the largest private armies in the cluster. Their matriarch is bedridden; Aleson is the heir. Not to mention that he is also related to House AlGray, one of Ta'a Chume's staunchest allies. She can't afford to step on Lady Daemora's toes."

Ta'a Chume's next words seemed to substantiate Lairollosse's explanation. "We will discuss this some other time, Lord Gray," she said with an air of ringing finality, and that was how Rey learned that her grandmother had actually been caught off-guard and was now feeling around for a chance to regroup.

But Aleson was having none of it. "When will we discuss it?" he pressed. "When the deal is final and Hapes is at the Empire's beck and call? When Her Grace Kira Ka Djo has been sent into the jaws of the wolf? You say you won't sit here and be lectured by me, Your Majesty, but neither can I just stand quietly by and let our Chume'da marry the grandson of Darth Vader!"

It was almost comical, the collective gasp that rose up from the rest of the long table, the way the people seated near Kylo automatically shifted in their chairs to distance themselves from him. Everyone at court knew that Leia Organa was Vader's daughter, but only the negotiation panel had been aware that Kylo was her son. Glares of renewed suspicion and hostility were now being levied Kylo's way, and he—

He did nothing. Showed no reaction whatsoever. It was as if another kind of mask had slammed over his face, his features schooled into an expression of careful blankness—perhaps even mild boredom. It was only Rey who saw that his hand had dropped to his side, who saw that his fingers were now digging into his thigh so hard they left indents on the midnight blue fabric.

However, he was quick to relax his grip once he became aware that she had noticed. His jaw clenched and he looked away, forcing his hand to lay flat. She could only stare at him like everyone else was doing, her heartbeat too loud and too slow in her ears.

"Well?" Aleson demanded, whirling around to narrow his amethyst eyes at the Emperor of the First Order. "What do you have to say for yourself, Kylo Ren?" He spat out the name as if it were a curse before scornfully adding, "Or is it—Ben Solo?"
"You've got to hand it to that kid," Boethiah commented, currently the only one at her end of the table who bore no resemblance to a horrified statue, "he's a bit cheesy but he has great dramatic flair."

"Now is not the time, Boethiah," Hircine chided, shaking his head. "Oh, I have a very—"

* 

— very bad feeling about this, Rey thought, the room so silent that one could have heard a pin drop.

Kylo slouched back in his seat and crossed his arms, projecting a languid insolence that might as well have been Han's. "Unfortunately, there is nothing left to say," he drawled with urbane composure and a haughty smirk. "His lordship seems to have done all the talking for me."

Rey hadn't thought it possible for Aleson to look more furious than he already did, but he was swift to prove her wrong. Even without the benefit of the Force, she could taste it, the rage of someone who believed in something. That was the most dangerous kind. It burned. It was the same fire she saw in Leia Organa and even in Poe Dameron, although he was more circumspect. It was the kind of rage that could lead a princess to an Imperial shield generator on a forest moon, that could make a pilot take aim at a powerful darksider amidst sand and ruin and stormtroopers.

It was the kind of rage that could cause a Hapan noble to declare, "Then you leave me no choice, Ren." Aleson drew himself up to his full height, his demeanor taking on a certain formality. "By my right as an aggrieved citizen of the Hapes Consortium—"

"Aleson!" Isolder thundered from his seat on Ta'a Chume's left, an emphatic warning that was summarily ignored.

"— in accordance with the ancient laws of the Dragon Throne—"

Daemora was halfway out of her chair, hand pressed to her heart. "The little fool," she whispered, her lower lip quivering with a concern that was almost maternal.

"— I, Aleson Gray of Kavan, Lord of the Serpent's Trace, hereby challenge Emperor Kylo Ren of
the First Order to a duel of honor!"

To their credit, Kylo's entourage reacted with admirable celerity; Hux, Daala, and the three Knights of Ren stood up and bolted to the emperor's side even before Rey could finish processing what Aleson had just said.

"Your Majesty, I must strongly advise against taking Gray up on his challenge," Hux was telling Kylo in urgent tones, but he was drowned out by Hircine, Boethiah, and Jyggalag excitedly sharing their individual assessments of the Hapan lord's strengths and weaknesses and what method of combat would be most effective against him. Hux made a valiant effort, continuing, "We are guests of the Queen Mother, it will be a diplomatic headache if you end up killing him, you are cut off from the Force, which means he might end up killing you—"

Kylo held up one hand in an unmistakable signal for silence, and the First Order delegation immediately complied, although Rey could sense from the knights' hungry expressions that they were starting to feel the stirrings of bloodlust. A darksider was a darksider even without the Force. Even unmasked. Hircine was an older man with a salt-and-pepper beard; Boethiah was all copper skin and golden eyes; Jyggalag, the knight who had replaced Malacath, was little more than a teenager, with reddish-brown hair and slate-gray irises. They looked nothing like the monsters that Rey had imagined were lurking beneath their helms, but, then again, neither had Kylo Ren.

Kylo was now making a show of looking around the Banquet Hall, at the crystal carvings, flowers, sparkling cutlery, and finely-dressed guests. "Here?" he asked Aleson with a trace of bemusement.

"On your feet," snapped the younger man, "you evil, homicidal, autocratic bastard!"

The smirk on Kylo's face blossomed into a wild, malevolent grin. "Definitely here." He stood up and made his way around the table, but it wasn't long before Rey had risen as well, scrambling to keep up with his long-legged strides and then block his path.

"You don't have to do this!" she told him sharply, because she knew what he was capable of, knew that a Hapan honor duel didn't end until one of the participants surrendered or died. He was not the type to surrender, and neither, it seemed, was Aleson.

Kylo wouldn't look at her but his hands dropped to her shoulders, firmly keeping her in place as he
stepped around her. "Stand down, Chume'da." In contrast to the cavalier attitude he was displaying to the rest of the court, there was anger in the words that he said for her sole benefit— anger not directed at her, but at the situation in general.

The honor duel was the sole arena of Consortium jurisprudence where physical prowess mattered more than political skill. As such, it was considered a last resort— and even slightly barbaric. But the rules were clear; whatever conditions were agreed upon had to pass into law depending on who emerged victorious. It was therefore on tenterhooks that Rey watched from the sidelines as Aleson and Kylo faced each other, about two meters apart, while Ta'a Chume shifted in her seat so that she could have an unobstructed view. She looked rather like she was having a migraine, but not even the Queen Mother herself could stop a duel of honor once it had been declared.

"Terms?" Ta'a Chume brusquely demanded.

"Should I win, Ren will forfeit Her Grace Kira Ka Djo's hand in marriage," Aleson replied, "and he and his lackeys will leave the Hapes Cluster posthaste."

"Should I win," Kylo retorted, "his young lordship will allot me and the First Order the respect that is our due and shut his mouth on matters that he knows very little of."

"What does he think he's doing?" Rey heard Hux mutter to Daala. "He should at least ask for some strategic concession."

From what Rey knew of Hux, the general was probably smarting from being called a lackey. However, it occurred to her that Kylo was being strategic— if he pressed for a Hapan aristocrat's banishment or execution, that would hardly endear him to the Consortium. By being lenient in his own stipulations and treating the duel as a minor nuisance, he was positioning himself as a level-headed, tolerant ruler dealing with the hot-blooded troublemaker who was causing a scene at an important event. It was absolutely devious, a mix of Leia's ability to subtly manipulate a room and Han's artless compulsion to enrage the opponent.

It wasn't easy for you, having parents like that, Rey mused, her gaze fixed as if entranced on the stone-faced emperor in the middle of the hall, who looked more lonely than villainous, more warrior than king. You've had to live in the space between two worlds all your life.

The diners who had been sitting with their backs to what was now the field of combat stood up; some merely turned around while others made their way to the opposite wall, to lean against it and whisper among themselves. Ta'a Chume dispatched one of the ushers to fetch the customary weapons and, by the time the man returned, the atmosphere in the Banquet Hall was crackling with
The swords were of a traditional Hapan make, with curved durasteel blades and ornate, guarded hilts. Heavier than a lightsaber, less maneuverable. Kylo first held the hilt as if he were testing the heft of it in his palm, an expression akin to distaste shadowing his features. It wasn't long, though, before he sank into the same opening stance that Aleson had adopted, feet apart at a perpendicular angle, knees slightly bent.

There was no ceremonial beginning to the duel—all chatter ground to a halt when Aleson lunged and Kylo met him in the middle, a metallic clash of interlocking blades. The Hapan lord spun away and struck again at the end of his rotating movement, a blow that Kylo parried by sweeping to the side.

The two men regarded each other for a while, circling like apex predators whose paths had crossed in the wilderness. It looked as if they were catching their breath, but Rey knew better—they had finished sizing each other up, had each gotten a feel for their opponent's reach and reaction time, and now the duel was about to begin in earnest.

What followed next was a dizzying series of attacks and ripostes, Aleson and Kylo slashing and stabbing and crossing blades up and down the length of the gilded hall. They were evenly matched; Aleson wielded the sword with the fluid proficiency of one who had been using this specific make since he was a child, but Kylo had more muscle, as well as a certain recklessness that broke through his opponent's guard time and time again. But there was something different about his fighting style—it was more intricate and footwork-oriented, but it was familiar all the same...

After a few more moments of careful observation Rey was able to figure out where she'd seen it before. There was an Old Republic holocron that Luke had found long ago, one of the few that had survived both Order 66 and the Knights of Ren's siege on the Yavin 4 academy. It contained lectures on the seven forms of lightsaber combat, and what Kylo was utilizing now bore striking resemblance to Makashi—Form II, the one most suited for dueling. She could all but layer his sequences over the grainy sample footage she'd seen in that holocron, the calculated flourishes of a Jedi Master named Dooku. And she remembered what Luke had told her, that Ben had studied all the forms with equal care so that he might one day become an expert in Niman, which was an amalgamation of its predecessors.

"My nephew was my most ambitious student," Luke had mused, his blue eyes weary and full of regret as he stared out over the oceans of Ahch-To. "Perhaps I should have guided that ambition, instead of trying to extinguish it altogether."

It was Kylo who drew first blood, his sword gliding across Aleson's bicep in one smooth slice. Rey heard Daemora cry out while, at the periphery of her vision, Lairelosse shuddered as if she had been
the one struck. Blood dripped from Aleson's wound onto the marble floor; he ignored it in favor of launching a new offensive, this one speedier and more relentless than the last. Kylo was forced to give up ground, retreating, retreating, all the way to the far wall opposite the main doors.

The man was actually breaking a sweat. This surprised Rey because for so long she had been the only one who could hold her own against him with melee weapons. Then again, for someone like him to fight without the Force, it must be like fighting without a center of gravity, without a sense of self.

Aleson's blade flashed silver in the light of the glow-lamps. More blood spattered the tiles, this time from a cut along Kylo's thigh. His features twisted in menace, and Rey remembered snow. Remembered that false night, the blue and red and black of it all.

Kylo surged forward with a growl, driving Aleson back until they were once more level with the banquet table. The emperor suddenly switched forms, Makashi's complex bladework giving way to an overhead Djem So strike, the raw power of which tore Aleson's weapon from his grasp. It skidded away, far from reach, and time seemed to slow in the next few seconds as Rey watched various decisions play out over Aleson's face. Despite disarming his opponent, Kylo was still advancing, still caught up in combat mode, already pulling his elbow back for another blow—

Aleson dodged the other man's wide-angle swing, in the same seamless movement retrieving one of the blasters from his discarded utility belt. He raised his arm and fired, and Rey heard someone gasp. Only to realize it was her. She had made that sound.

Kylo automatically deflected the bolt. He wasn't wielding a lightsaber but the sword was durasteel, nonetheless— resistant even if it wasn't laser-proof. The shard of green light careened into the wall, dislodging one of the cylindrical ysalamiri cages, which fell to the floor and rolled away with a thud.

Rey was too near another cage to benefit from the break in the nullification field, but she saw the exact moment the Force came crashing over Kylo Ren. She saw the triumph in his brown eyes, the wildest and highest kind of exhilaration coursing through his broad frame. There was no more room for politics, no more room for diplomacy. He was a creature of instinct, ensnared in the nets of the dark side.

With a flick of Kylo's wrist, invisible currents lifted Aleson off his feet and sent him slamming bodily into the wall. By some miracle he'd held on to his blaster, and even as he lay crumpled in pain, he fired off a couple of rounds at the man prowling towards him with lethal menace. Kylo reached out an arm, freezing the two laser bolts in the air; they strained against his hold, humming with suppressed energy as scattered exclamations of shock and fear rose up from the audience.
Rey could already tell what was going to happen next, and she could also tell that, if Aleson Gray died tonight, the Consortium would be up in arms. Even though the alliance had been Ta'a Chume's idea, her people were more than capable of rebelling against her. They'd done it before.

Heart racing, with no thought for her own safety, Rey hurled herself forward, into the field of combat. Her high heels slipped and slid against the floor but she managed to stay upright, darting between the two duelists—

— just as Kylo redirected the lasers—

Green light filled Rey's vision. The Force surged into her veins, hot and rich, as if some long-dormant pulse had been restarted. Through the emerald haze of the oncoming lasers, she saw Kylo's eyes widen in sheer terror, his lips forming the shape of her name—

— right before she spread her arms in a slashing movement, latching on to the beams of energy with energy of her own and sending them in opposite directions before they could collide with her torso, one bolt hitting a pillar, the other scorching a windowpane—

An earth-shattering stillness fell over the hall. Rey lifted her chin, meeting Kylo's gaze with a defiance that she didn't quite feel, rattled as she was by what had just occurred. His chest was heaving; he was looking at her with the oddest mixture of fury and relief and darkness on his pale, scarred face. It was as if the monster that had awoken with the return of the Force had— not slunk away, not exactly, but subsided, still dangerous. That was okay, she could handle him, as long as she steered clear of the other ysalamiri cages—

Kylo took a step towards Rey, and then stopped like he'd thought better of it. He shook his head as if to clear it, and the next time he moved it was to turn around and address the stunned, deathly quiet Hapans.

"Ever since my delegation and I arrived in Ta'a Chume'Dan, we have made every effort to treat peaceably with the Consortium." His tone was cool but Rey was close enough to glimpse the embers of the dark side blazing in his narrowed irises. "Unfortunately, you have not seen fit to extend the same courtesy to us. All of you seem to be laboring under the delusion that we are pushovers. That ends tonight." He looked sharply at the Queen Mother. "You will no longer keep me and my knights from the Force. Take down your precious cages— I never want to see them again. Tomorrow will be the last day of negotiations. If we have not yet finalized the agreement by nightfall, then consider our sides officially at war."

Rey braced herself, expecting the Queen Mother to put up a fight. But, instead, Ta'a Chume simply
nodded, as if she, too, realized the peril her entire realm was in.

Kylo returned the nod, although there was something vaguely mocking behind his gesture. Without another word, he strode out of the Banquet Hall, followed by his knights and his two officers. He was limping slightly from the cut in his thigh, but otherwise he paid it no mind as Rey watched him go.

Chapter End Notes

- Balmorra Run.
- Vendikar Station.
- Colonies.
- Kavan.

This chapter was actually inspired by suggestions from eyre-bones and Rei of Sunshine that one of the betrothal customs be a test of skill or of the prospective groom's capabilities. I couldn't find a way to incorporate that into the narrative, so have an honor duel instead! The concept is taken from the EU, but I've made some changes for the purposes of this fic. Eyre-bones' comment also made me realize that it was high time the Consortium be reminded that Kylo is a force to be reckoned with. Never let it be said that I don't listen to my lovely readers :) 

- Holocron.
- Makashi.

For those who haven't read my Sword of the Jedi series but would like to learn more about the traditional forms of lightsaber combat without slogging through Wookieepedia, I have an overview on my blog.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

An update before the weekend, because the enthusiastic response to the last chapter inspired me so <3 It would be really cool if you could leave a comment or a kudos on this one as well :')

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once the First Order delegation had vanished from sight, it didn't take long for the Royal Banquet Hall to devolve into chaos. Most of the Hapan nobles who hadn't already been standing now rose to their feet; the few who remained seated added their voices to the clamor as everybody started talking all at once.

"Ren dared to use the Force in the Queen Mother's presence!" Lord Feara shouted, momentarily drowning out the rest. "Not only that, he very nearly killed the Chume'da! What's to stop him from trying again? We cannot go through with this!"

"You must have been watching an entirely different duel, my lord," retorted the Margrave Taurendil, who was representing Calfa-5 and its desert moons. "From what I saw, Her Grace acted bravely by putting herself in harm's way to save the life of a reckless young fool!" He threw a venomous glare at Aleson from across the room. "Challenging a guest to a duel! During dinner! The shame of it—"

"Lord Gray was well within his rights," snapped Wyllah Novar, the Ducha of Arabanth. "Through his actions, he has exposed the true face of the First Order. They plan to subjugate us, to destroy everything we hold dear."

"Only if the negotiations fall through," countered the elderly Ducha Onasi from the lush green world of Thrakia. "This alliance is our last hope." She banged the end of her cane on the floor for emphasis. "I refuse to lose any more sons to another war!"

"Would you rather your sons be cast in chains?" yelled Procyon Kantale, Lord of Stormhold. "Make no mistake, that is what all of us face. Why should we bow to outsiders?" He gestured towards the head of the table, where Ta'a Chume remained in her chair. "There sits my only sovereign!"

"This marriage pact was the Ereneda's idea in the first place," scoffed the Viscountess Barizaan. "A fine subject you are, Stormhold, disobeying her command."
"It occurs to me," Wyllah snidely remarked, "that this whole issue could have been avoided if the Consortium had joined forces with the Resistance years ago."

"Of course the issue would have been avoided if we'd done that," said the viscountess airily, "because none of us would be here now. The entire Hapes Cluster would be space dust. That is what we are trying to avoid!"

In Rey's experience over the past several months, Daemora AlGray could be counted on to mediate during times of disagreement, steering the court into more civil waters with her pleasant smile. That was why Ta'a Chume had named her chief negotiator. Tonight, however, the Duchà of the Telephon Moons was markedly silent; she was staring at the Queen Mother with an imploring expression on her face, too preoccupied with her nephew's fate to mollify the angry nobles. Ta'a Chume's other stalwart ally was no help, either; Lairelosse had rushed over to Aleson and was now kneeling beside him, blistering his ears with a tense, low-pitched stream of choice insults and reprimands. It stood to reason that Lairelosse could make even losing one's cool seem graceful.

"I did what I had to do," Aleson insisted once the Duchà of Talcharaim had paused for breath. "I could never have lived with myself otherwise."

"This is a delicate matter of state, with millions of lives at risk, and you made it all about you," Lairelosse hissed. "You almost got the Chume'da killed, you thoughtless oaf! You rash, naive, irresponsible scoundrel!" She poked him in the ribs, eliciting a grunt of pain from the dark-haired lord. "Stars, how will your poor, ailing mother feel when she hears about this? I could shake you!"

Rey turned away from the blazing row at the banquet table. "How did you learn about the betrothal?" she asked Aleson bluntly. If the news had leaked out of Ta'a Chume'Dan, there was every chance the Resistance would catch wind of it. If they hadn't already. She had visions of Finn bursting into the palace at any minute to rescue her from Kylo Ren's evil clutches— that was the last thing they needed now.

It was Lairelosse who answered, her voice dripping with disdain. "The Lord Gray has a vast network of informants. It's a pity he was not informed enough to be prudent."

Aleson rolled his eyes as he picked himself up off the floor. He automatically offered his hand to Lairelosse, who grudgingly took it and got to her feet. Once they had relinquished their grip on each other, he bowed to Rey. "Welcome home, Your Grace. I regret that we must meet again under such distressing circumstances."
"Again?" Rey queried. She really should start taking him to task for the stunt he'd pulled, but her interest was piqued by this new glimpse into her past.

"Frankly, I don't remember it myself, but back at my family home on Kavan there is a holo of the two of us when we were children. I shall have to bring it next time, for your perusal."

"If there is a next time," Lairelosse said dourly, her gaze now as fixed on the Queen Mother as Daemora's was. "You'll be lucky if Ta'a Chume permits you entrance to the capital after this."

The ruler in question cleared her throat, prompting the squabbling aristocrats to fall into a silence that was rather more begrudging than deferential. "My lords and ladies," said Ta'a Chume, "everything I have ever done— every decision I have ever made— has been to ensure the safety of the Hapes Cluster. You have heard for yourself the dire ultimatum issued to us by Emperor Ren. I am telling you now in no uncertain terms that, should it come to open conflict, his forces will crush ours through sheer numbers alone. Many of you gathered here tonight fought for me against Kalen the usurper. I am asking you now to make peace for me so that we may preserve our home and our way of life."

"But, Ereneda, Ren is Vader's grandson," protested Countess Rakshesh. "How can you permit the blood royal to be tainted so?"

Rey nearly jumped out of her skin. She was most definitely not going to bear Kylo Ren's child or, indeed, do anything with him that would lead to such! The mere thought of it horrified her; she was turning red again, beneath the cosmetics that Janassa had so meticulously applied.

"I shall place my faith in the more favorable aspects of the emperor's lineage," Ta'a Chume replied. "By law, he is the crown prince of Alderaan, and by blood he is descended from Padme Amidala, Queen of Naboo. That should be illustrious enough for our standards, don't you think, Countess?"

"I'm more interested to know what the Chume'da thinks. She's the one who'll be saddled with him for the rest of her life," said Lord Feara. "That is another point of contention, Queen Mother, if you don't mind me saying so. Arranged marriages are all well and good, but forced marriages? We do not do this to our women, and especially not to She Who Will Come After!"

Feara's declaration was met with passionate agreement from most of the other nobles. This was not something Ta'a Chume could talk her way out of. Rey studied the sea of proud, belligerent faces, and a staggering epiphany hit her like an ice spike through the chest. She could have prevented this, or at least mitigated it somewhat. Every time she'd treated Kylo like dirt, every time she'd let the Hapans cast aspersions on his character either behind his back or to his face, she'd been solidifying in their
minds that she was some hapless martyr. This went against the very grain of their matriarchal culture. Lairelosse had been right when she said that the people would follow Rey's lead, and her blatant aversion to her circumstances had spread through them.

She had been selfish, acting like her happiness was the only thing at stake. She had let her emotions get the best of her, and in doing so had not only pushed the Consortium one step closer to a war they could not win, but also placed the Resistance at greater risk of discovery.

"It's not a forced marriage." Rey's words cut through the hubbub and every eye in the room immediately swung in her direction. "I stand with the Queen Mother. I accept Emperor Ren's hand of my own free will." Her voice was going to waver at any moment and so she drew on the Force, let it swell inside her and straighten her spine and root her feet to the ground in a vast and fortifying hymn. "Have I not proven myself his equal in strength?" she asked, some instinct telling her that she should not let these nobles forget what they had witnessed tonight. Kylo was powerful, but so was she. "There is no subjugation here. Tomorrow, when we've finalized the agreement, he will be my betrothed." She took a deep breath, her eyes flashing as she concluded with imperious finality, "I am your Chume'da, and you will afford the Emperor of the First Order all the respect that is his due as my future consort."

* It was dark and quiet in the guest wing of the Per'Agthra. At Kylo's insistence, the glow-panels had been extinguished and the Hapan guards that usually patrolled this corridor had been banished along with the ysalamiri cages. Only the Knights of Ren stood stationed outside his room.

"We should've brought reinforcements," Jyggalag repeated what he'd said several days ago. "Or retreated to the Heresiarch up in the black. If Ta'a Chume gives the kill order—"

"Let them try." Boethiah was exultant, her golden eyes shining in the gloom as she reveled in the currents of energy that had been denied to her for so long. "We have the Force."

"I thought we'd have to fight our way out of the Banquet Hall once Lord Ren made that ultimatum," Hircine mused. "The Hapans seem to have come to their senses and part of me is sorry for that. I would've loved the opportunity to give one of those snooty lords a shiner."

Boethiah cocked her head. "You'd stop at that?"
"Of course," said Hircine. "We're being diplomatic here."

Boethiah snorted and Jyggalag laughed, and then the latter switched to a more serious topic of conversation. "Did Lord Ren seem a bit off to either of you on the way back here?"

"A little shaken," Boethiah agreed. "I'm sure it had to do with Rey. Or Kira, or whatever her name is."

"You think he's pissed that she stopped him from killing Gray?" Jyggalag asked.

"That's what you think," Boethiah said dryly. "In my opinion, she gave him a scare, jumping in front of those blaster bolts."

The youngest Knight of Ren's mouth twisted in a thoughtful frown. "I can see he'd be worried about inadvertently starting the war if he killed the Chume'da, but actual concern for her welfare?"

Hircine shrugged. "The thing about having a sworn enemy is that, after a while, you develop a certain respect for them. Getting mowed down by blasters is hardly a fitting death for a Force user, isn't it? It has to be lightning or the business end of a lightsaber, or nothing at all."

"Yes, I'm sure that's what it is," Boethiah purred in that manner of hers that suggested she was enjoying a private joke at everyone else's expense. "Respect."


Rey's statement had subdued the court more effectively than she'd dared hope. Perhaps they'd been afraid that she would start hurling random people against the walls. In any case, the previously cantankerous nobles hadn't put up much of a fuss when Ta'a Chume seized control of the situation once more and declared an end to the evening's festivities. Now it was only Rey, Isolder, and Daemora who remained in the Banquet Hall with the Queen Mother, half-eaten sorbets and almost full wineglasses glimmering mockingly in the light.

"Oh, do stop fretting, Ducha AlGray," Ta'a Chume sighed. "I may have some choice words for your nephew later, but you know as well as I do that he'd be a bigger headache dead or banished rather than alive."
Daemora's spindly frame, elegantly draped in cerlin and opals, all but sagged with relief. "Thank you, Ereneda."

Ta'a Chume dismissed the other woman, waiting until she had left the room before looking at Isolder. Rey had found it odd that her father held his peace all throughout the arguing, but now she learned why he'd done so. "Well?" Ta'a Chume asked him. "From your observations, who do I have to watch out for?"

"Feara is more bark than bite, always has been," Isolder replied. "Kantale, Novar, and most of the younger set are truly angry, but they will follow Aleson. You have taught me that it's the quiet ones who are the most dangerous because you don't know what they're thinking. Verisya Galney, in particular, never said a word."

"She and Thane had that in common," revealed Ta'a Chume. "It was a risk telling him that Ren is Organa's son, but at least now we have confirmed that he can't be trusted."

Rey blinked. "You think he's the one who snitched to Aleson?"

"Not directly, I'm sure. He's much too smart for that," said Ta'a Chume. "The right words whispered in the right person's ear, starting a chain of gossip that eventually trickled down to the young lord's spies, or perhaps a communiqué that just so happened to be very easy to slice and decode... Who else could it be? Lairelosse and Daemora would never have gambled Aleson's life like that."

Rey's brow creased as she retraced the Queen Mother's line of thought. "You were aware that it was a risk, letting Ren's parentage slip on that first day of negotiations?"

"I've had my eye on Beed Thane for a while. Now he has shown his hand. What I didn't count on was Aleson being foolish enough to storm the palace and challenge Ren and myself so brazenly." Ta'a Chume smirked. "I forgot what it's like to be twenty-five. I shall not make the same mistake again."

Rey was stunned by the depths of her grandmother's machinations. This is how you do it, she realized. This is how you play the game. Ta'a Chume was in a league of her own.

Shaking her head in amazement, Rey turned to Isolder. "You implied that the younger nobles aren't a threat because they'll follow Aleson. Shouldn't it be the exact opposite?"
"It should, but then you went and nearly took two lasers to the chest for him. He owes you a life debt now, one that you may call in at your discretion. By the way, my dear—" Isolder chucked her under the chin. "I'd appreciate a warning the next time you decide to do something like that. My heart stopped, you know."

"Sorry." Rey beamed at him, quite unabashed and yet warmed by his gentle concern. And then another thought occurred to her. "But the life debt is based on a code of honor. Aleson reached for a blaster during a sword fight. That doesn't strike me as the actions of someone honorable."

"Technically, Ren was the first to break dueling rules by continuing to advance on a disarmed opponent instead of waiting for him to surrender or to retrieve his sword," Isolder pointed out. "That makes what Aleson did justifiable as self-defense, and our people will see it as such. However, what they won't be able to forgive is if a Hapan lord refuses to fulfill what is very clearly a life debt to his Chume'da."

Rey's guards and ladies were waiting for her outside the Banquet Hall. Aleson was with them, chatting with Niobe and Sayl, who were in the thick of fluttering their lashes at him. Rey struggled not to roll her eyes at the girls' antics and met the man's gaze instead.

"Is it my turn, then?" he asked her with an air of charming resignation that served to send Niobe and Sayl into a fresh round of giggles. Apparently, when not staging insurrections at important state dinners, Lord Gray was something of a flirt.

He disappeared into the hall at Rey's nod, and she and her entourage had barely taken a couple of steps back to her quarters when the yelling began, bits and pieces of Ta'a Chume's stridently-couched words drifting to Rey's ears as she made her way down the corridor.

— Shame on your house— never in all my years— you could have died— such flagrant disrespect— your poor mother—!

On the whole, it was a good thing that Rey had decided to bring up the issue of Aleson's life debt some other time. He already had enough on his plate.
Once she was alone in her chambers, Rey immediately darted out the side door leading to the garden. She really should have changed into a more comfortable pair of shoes, but she was loath to put off talking to Kylo one second longer than necessary. While Isolder had advised her to wait until morning, when there was an increased chance that the emperor's mood had improved, Ta'a Chume had been adamant that Rey began the process of mollifying him as soon as possible. It wasn't that Rey agreed with her grandmother or that she was particularly eager to face Kylo again; she just had to do it now, before she lost her nerve.

"Apologize to him for any discourtesy on our part," Ta'a Chume had said. "Make it clear that we still very much desire this betrothal. Right now, you have to put your personal feelings aside and focus on damage control."

Rey could do that. Her pride would take a beating, but it was her pride, more or less, that had emboldened a large portion of the court to support Aleson in the first place. Tonight, she had to be a Jedi as well as the Chume'da.

It was easier now that she'd regained the Force. The light side wrapped around her in a peaceful hum as her silver heels clacked on the stone pathway leading to Kylo's room, the hem of her teal gown rustling over the dew-damp grass. The glow-panels that usually blazed through the windows of the guest wing had been switched off, so it was only moonlight that illuminated her way to Kylo's door. She could tell that he was still awake, his energy signature prowling restlessly behind his mental shields.

Rey squared her shoulders and knocked, the determined rap of her knuckles eliciting a flare of light from one windowsill as a glow-panel was ignited. The door slid open, and Rey had the merest of seconds to register the livid expression on Kylo's face before his fingers dug into her sleeve almost hard enough to bruise and he yanked her into the room, all but slamming her back against the closed wardrobe as he planted a heavy hand beside each of her shoulders, caging her between his arms.

He had taken off his gloves and his coat. The ivory shirt clung loosely to his powerful frame, incapable of disguising how the lines of his upper body had gone utterly rigid with tension. His eyes were so dark they were almost black, glittering with menace against the paleness of his face as he glared down at her. "You beautiful little idiot!" he spat. "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

"I..." Whatever she'd been about to say in her defense died on Rey's tongue as Kylo's shields came crashing down and she saw his despair in the Force, a wavering current rising from veils of dark and... light? No, that wasn't possible. She extended her perception in an effort to get a closer look, but it was too late— he retreated behind his walls once more, his consciousness flitting out of her reach.
She didn’t know how long they stood like that, with but a sliver of space between their bodies and the scent of him overwhelming her senses, that same dizzying blend of smoke and hot skin overlain with discreet tones of sandalwood and amber and myrrh. His hair was disheveled, as if he’d raked his fingers through the midnight waves in frustration before she came knocking. Those same fingers were now trembling just the slightest bit against the wardrobe, and then they slid downwards, his palms drawing level with her waist.

Rey moved as well. She had some vague idea of pushing Kylo away but her hands slid across his chest and just... stayed there, feeling the warmth and hardness of his pectorals beneath a layer of ribbed silk, his heart racing in erratic pulses against her fingertips. She was pinned in place by his scorching eyes, by the formidable maleness of him that surrounded her, and perhaps even by the Force that seemed to skitter and sigh through this moment of live wire and glass.

"Answer me, Rey," Kylo commanded in a harsh rasp.

"What... what was your question?" Stars, the instant the words flew out of her mouth in that breathless little voice she didn't even recognize was her own, Rey wanted nothing more than the ground to open up and swallow her whole. But she truly could not remember what he'd asked— all logic, all situational awareness had disappeared somewhere between picking up his scent and noticing the way his muscles rippled beneath his shirt.

Kylo blinked at her. A funny look came over his face just then, a mix of disbelief and surprise and something else that was slow to be replaced by an inscrutable mask similar to what he'd adopted in the Banquet Hall. He wrenched himself away, stalking over to the bed and sitting down heavily on the edge of the mattress, all the while studying her like she was the most confusing puzzle in existence. "What," he finally repeated in softer but more guarded tones, "did you think you were doing?"

Now that they were apart, Rey could breathe again. Could summon the answer from the strange inertia her brain had been trapped in only a scant minute ago. "I was preventing a diplomatic incident," she sniffed with as much haughtiness as she could muster. "I don't know what you were thinking, continuing to attack Aleson like that after he lost his sword."

"Aleson," he jeered. "I'm glad you and his seditious young lordship appear to have become such fast friends."

"Now is not the time to lecture me on etiquette," Rey said hotly. Over the months, she'd improved at referring to people by their courtly address, but it wasn't ingrained in her just yet. She tended to slip up when she was flustered.
"I wasn't—" Kylo broke off with an exasperated sigh. He looked away, his jaw clenching, and Rey had the unsettling feeling that she'd missed something. That she'd misinterpreted what he'd been trying to imply.

"Anyway," she hastened to tack on, belatedly recalling why she was here in the first place, "I just wanted to apologize for what happened tonight and also this whole past week. I know the court hasn't exactly been welcoming, but that changes now. I'm reaffirming the Consortium's willingness to cooperate—"

"Shut up."

Rey bristled. "Excuse me?"

"Shut. Up." Kylo's gaze snapped back to meet hers. He seemed more incensed than ever before. "I'm familiar with how all of this goes. Giving that ultimatum was a calculated maneuver on my end. If they sent you here to do nothing but parrot your grandmother's words at me, then I believe we can skip that part. I already know how it all goes," he repeated, more to himself than to her. Underneath his anger she sensed... disappointment, a faint thread that she couldn't understand. "Feel free to remove yourself from my odious presence at any time," he continued, inclining his head towards the door. "The sooner the better for both of us, I think, Chume'da."

But Rey stayed rooted to the spot, hopelessly confused. Something nagged at her, forcing her to retrace the events leading up to this moment. The way his eyes had widened through the green light in the Banquet Hall, the way he had called out her name. The way he'd pushed her against the wardrobe and spoken to her in, she realized now, much the same manner in which Lairelosse had castigated Aleson for putting his life on the line.

Were you worried about me? Rey wanted to ask Kylo point-blank. But if he denied it, this encounter would end on a rather embarrassing note for her.

However, if he said yes, it would somehow be so much worse.

"Rey." The sound of her name in Kylo's low voice jolted her from her reverie. "Get out."

She couldn't move. Perhaps it was her ego that balked at scurrying from the room like a frightened mouse. Perhaps it was some mad urge that insisted she didn't leave until she made it clear that she
hadn't come to him solely on Ta'a Chume's orders— but she had, hadn't she? Whatever the case, her mind was already frantically casting around for a reason to stay, and it wasn't long before her gaze fell to the slashed fabric at his thigh.

"I thought I'd help you with that," she said— briskly, in order to cover up her awkwardness. "Your wound, I mean." She'd marginally improved at healing in the year since Stalsinek IV; she'd worked on it with Luke, and she was confident that she could pull off a Force Assist if the cut wasn't too deep.

"It's taken care off," Kylo curtly replied, just as Rey noticed that the blood on his trousers was dry even though she detected no bandages. "I sealed it myself."

Her brow knitted in bewilderment. "You can't Force-heal. Master Luke told me—"

"Skywalker's teaching methods were abysmal," Kylo growled. It had been a mistake for her to bring up his uncle at a time like this; his knuckles clenched to white at the edge of the mattress, as if his temper was about to hit boiling point. "He was too much of a coward to let me harness the dark side so I could access my true potential. When I find him, I will make him pay for all those wasted years."

_Danger, danger_, blared the sirens in Rey's mind. She had grievously miscalculated. She had to get out of here before she ended up revealing that she knew where Luke was, before Kylo saw it on her face or read it in her Force signature.

"Are you quite done playing the part of concerned nursemaid?" he asked brusquely. "You have my assurance that the First Order's displeasure with this evening will not interfere with tomorrow's negotiations, as long as they are concluded within the alloted time. That is why you came to my chambers, is it not?" He flicked his wrist at the door and it burst open, almost wrenched off its hinges. Rey started as cold night air blew into the room.

Kylo flashed her a smirk that, for all its cruelty, was somehow still self-deprecating. "What kind of gentleman would I be if I didn't open the door for a lady?"

A dozen retorts sprang to the tip of her tongue but she bit down on all of them. While it would rankle that he'd gotten the last word, she really had to cut her losses. She couldn't antagonize him any further, not when his fleet lay in wait just beyond the Transitory Mists.

Rey marched out of the room with her head held high, taking refuge in a dignity that no one else
needed to know rang false within her. She forced herself not to look back even as she felt his eyes follow her, and she was halfway across the garden when she realized something else. Something that had been lost in the heat of the moment but now made her stop in her tracks as her mind replayed their encounter.

Kylo had called her beautiful.

She turned around, but he'd already closed the door and switched off the light. His chambers were once more plunged in darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Calfa-5.

Arabanth.

Thrakia.

Lairelosse's dialogue on Aleson making it all about himself was inspired by a comment from Shadow1. Likewise, the idea of Aleson owing Rey a life debt was suggested by Cassiopaya.

Cerlin.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

It's been a while, and I apologize— I was abroad for my birthday. This chapter is a bit shorter than usual but hopefully I can update again soon... with the right motivation ;)
Speaking of which, thank you so, so much for all the comments on the previous installment. I've been busy since I got back but I'll definitely catch up on replies when I have free time.

Belated happy BEST TRAILER EVER OMG day to everyone <3 It actually dropped on my birthday so you can imagine how ecstatic I was :')

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kylo found sleep hard to come by that night. When he closed his eyes he saw Rey jumping in front of the lasers; when he opened them he saw her pinned against the wardrobe, asking him to repeat his question in that breathless, oh so distracted voice. For a moment he'd found himself pierced by the small, sad hope that he was not alone in this strange and inconvenient attraction, but it was getting more and more difficult to tell pretense from reality here in the Hapan court. She'd come to his room on her wily grandmother's orders; that much had been clear the instant she started spouting off about apologies and the Consortium's willingness to cooperate. It seemed that his little scavenger was becoming quite the politician...

His?

Kylo froze, alarmed by the direction his thoughts had taken. There was no denying the fact that he'd begun feeling a cloying sort of possessiveness towards her during the war, but that had been borne of a desire for vengeance, some deep-seated insistence that he be the one to meet her in battle and finish what had started in the forest of Takodana. How many times had he stormed through ranks of foes and allies alike, hauled along by his instincts or by the dark side, he could no longer tell, hacking and slashing and Force-shoving his way to where white light blazed like desert heat, Rey, I know her, I sense her, she is mine—

But that was eight months ago, almost nine, and they were different people now. In order for this sham of a marriage to produce the intended effects, he had to stop considering her his perpetual nemesis, and he had to get his hormones under control. Stars, the way he was acting at present, he was no better than a teenager.

You were perfectly fine doing without as a teenager, whispered some treacherous inner voice. You had more important things to do. But after Starkiller Base, after Rey...
Kylo bolted upright in bed, a frustrated snarl escaping from his lips as the covers slid down to his waist. He would not think about that. Not now. Not ever again.

He didn't know how long he sat there in the shadowy gloom of his chambers, the thick curtains drawn against the bright light of Hapes' seven moons that seared through the minuscule gaps between fabric and windowpane. Eventually, though, he felt it, the demand for entrance tugging and scratching at the corners of his mind like long, clawed fingers, a call that he was powerless to ignore.

\textit{You are emperor}, that same voice mulishly insisted. \textit{You shouldn't have to answer to anyone.}

Kylo shuddered. He took a deep, meditative breath, adopting a blank, calm facade right before he unlocked that part of himself where his master resided. That part where Snoke was always waiting.

\textit{K â skutqy â sikanjat.}

Kylo was in a throne room, grim and austere unlike Ta'a Chume's, sporting black marble pillars and a floor hewed from the mineral-specked ore of burnt asteroids. There were no windows and no visible source of illumination, but a bluish-gray haze surrounded the figure on the throne like a mixture of dust motes and starlight. This was not a real place but, rather, a memory from an ancient time, and it was where Snoke preferred to commune with his acolytes.

"Master." Kylo was already speaking as he approached the throne. Snoke was no doubt displeased by the lengthy communications blackout and— unless he'd had a miraculous change of heart during that period— he would be even \textit{more} displeased by the identity of the Hapan \textit{Chume'da}. If there was to be punishment, Kylo was anxious to get it over with, so he explained the situation as quickly and as succinctly as possible, starting from the ysalamiri cages to why they were taken down. When he dropped the bomb about Rey being the Consortium heir, there was a flicker in Snoke's beady eyes, but his expression remained impassive. It was this lack of reaction that worried Kylo more; he felt small, like an errant child awaiting parental judgment, fear and resentment hollowing out his chest in equal measure.

Finally, the colossal being on the towering throne spoke. "I must admit to some... \textit{bewilderment}, Kylo Ren, regarding your failure to insist that you be able to contact me. Did you forget that we've had the upper hand all this time?"

"The Hapans see me as the Empire's figurehead, Master, and they would have questioned my authority to negotiate—"
"So it was your pride that got in the way," Snoke silkily interrupted. "Have we not discussed how achieving true order in the galaxy requires total selflessness? I had believed that you took that lesson to heart when you killed Han Solo... Perhaps you did not want to lose face in front of the scavenger? Or perhaps you were afraid I would disapprove of the union?"

Kylo remained silent. There was no defense left to him, not when Snoke was talking in that deceptively gentle manner of his that almost always indicated a taste of pain in the very near future. The air in the throne room seemed to have grown thinner even though it was all just in Kylo's head. Dark energy crackled at corners that did not exist, not really, and strange shapes lurked in the shadows.

"Once again you have let the girl cloud your common sense," Snoke growled. "A revelation of that magnitude— you know you should have informed me right away, and yet you didn't. Why didn't you, little emperor?"

"I wanted to respect Hapan protocol. I wanted to make them amenable to—" A burning shard of the most immense agony sliced through Kylo's mind as Snoke pounced in a brutal search for weakness, unearthing the memory of Rey from a little while ago. What... what was your question?— I thought I'd help you with that—

Snoke started chuckling. It was low, gravelly, condescending, and amused all at once. It reminded Kylo of how Han had used to laugh at him when he'd shared his more fanciful musings as a child, or when he'd started banging his head against low ceilings and bumping into furniture as a gangly, too tall teenager. His cheeks flushed as hotly now as they did then.

"Kylo, Kylo, Kylo." Snoke shook his head, voice tinged with black mirth. "Falling victim to a woman's wiles— I expected more from you. Your potential betrothed is the scion of a bloodline composed of the most cunning rulers in galactic history. Women who stopped at nothing to gain power, who understood that a pretty smile, a little skin, could bend lesser men to their will. I see that the Hapan court is training her well." He clucked his tongue. "My poor, naive apprentice, did you honestly believe she would ever feel that way about you?"

Kylo stared at the floor, humiliated. To hear someone else put it into words made him feel so unbearably stupid— and angry, that Rey had tried to trick him like that.

"There will be no punishment tonight, although the Force knows you deserve it," Snoke decreed, magnanimous yet cold. "We must discuss what is to be done about the Hapes Consortium and the Resistance."
"The Resistance?" Kylo echoed.

Snoke lost his temper then, slamming a heavy fist into the throne's armrest so suddenly and viciously that it took all of Kylo's control not to flinch. "You utter fool!" In contrast to its previous mildness, the voice now roared like thunder, filling the world. "Had you been thinking with your brain, you might have seen what was in front of your very eyes! Of course the girl knows where the Resistance is hiding—or, at the very least, they will attempt to make contact with her one of these days. You are going to extract their location from her when the time is right. Perhaps after the wedding, once she has let her guard down a little."

"You mean for me to go through with this?"

"Regardless of the Chumeda's identity, the advantages of marrying her still stand," Snoke replied, although Kylo had the uneasy feeling that this wasn't all. The flicker in his master's eyes earlier hadn't been one of rage or shock; it had been interest, pure and sharp, something predatory lurking in the depths of those frosty eyes. "And now, if you will attend to me, Emperor Ren, here is how you must deal with the Hapans from this moment on..."

The final round of negotiations wrapped up in the early afternoon of the following day. The First Order was firm and brusque, the Consortium uncharacteristically acquiescent. Indeed, it seemed to Rey that they had lost more ground on this last day than they'd gained all week, but Ta'a Chume obviously wanted to avoid adding fuel to Kylo's ire. He was in the blackest mood that Rey had ever seen, forfeiting all trace of politeness in favor of a sullen menace that made clear it would take only one more misstep on the Hapans' part for him to rain down the wrath of his lurking fleet on their heads.

The contract glowed in silvery High Galactic atop the holoprojector field, streams of legalese that Rey would have had trouble parsing if she hadn't witnessed every step of each clause being debated upon and decided on. Negotiators from both sides took turns signing their names on the last page, the scene bearing a ceremonial quality as scrawled initials blossomed like firebrands at each stroke of the stylus. Kylo was the second to the last to affix his signature, his penmanship an elegant cursive that was a surprise coming from that large, gloved hand that had killed so many and caused so much destruction. This was the first time Rey had ever seen him write anything, and she was brought up short by a flare of panic at how little she actually knew the man she was going to marry.

But there was no opportunity for second-guessing, no room to call off the whole affair. Kylo held the stylus out to her and she stepped forward on pitifully shaky legs, her heart in her throat. In line with
her newfound resolve to stop acting like a petulant martyr, she offered him a courteous nod. One that he did not return, his expression stony.

She willed herself to not be mortified, hastily reaching for the stylus. As she did so, her bare fingers brushed against the leather of Kylo's glove and he recoiled, jerking his hand back as if he'd accidentally touched something disgusting.

Well, isn't that just great, Rey seethed, her pride taking another hit. Last night he'd called her beautiful and now he was acting like he wouldn't throw water on her if she were on fire. Perhaps later she'd puzzle over why this bothered her so much, but the present situation demanded all of her focus to act with poise, to keep a steady hand as she signed the contract. She hadn't learned how to write in High Galactic until recently and once she'd added the last stroke she was painfully aware that her signature looked clumsy and crude next to Kylo's. Everyone in the room was watching her, their gazes inscrutable— with all his training, not even Isolder would show any emotion at a politically charged moment such as this. She'd never felt more alone in her life.

Rey set the stylus down on the table, and then it was over. She was engaged to Kylo Ren.

It had been Jessika who'd introduced Rey to the concept of marriage proposals. "It varies from culture to culture," the pilot had said, "but on my homeworld, at least, someone gets down on one knee, with a ring." She'd even recounted a public proposal she'd witnessed in a city park as the sun was setting; the man had hired a band to play the song he and his girlfriend danced to on their first date, and there had been teary eyes and applause from the spectators when the woman said yes. "It was cheesy," Jessika had concluded, "and I'd personally knock a guy's teeth out if he ever popped the question in front of a crowd. But that lady was so happy. It was nice."

And Rey, who had known nothing of first dates and city parks and music, had treasured this little anecdote and for a while daydreamed about a proposal of her own, about somebody who was kind and who loved her, asking if they could spend the rest of their lives together. This cold, businesslike arrangement was so far from her silly longings that she was seized by the mad urge to cry, and Kylo's markedly aloof demeanor wasn't helping matters. She peered up at him, hoping to catch a trace of the man who had almost laughed in the garden and who had teased her in the Banquet Hall, but she found only a harsh, imperious stranger who looked like he would rather be anywhere else but here.

"It's settled, then," Ta'a Chume said stiffly, breaking the silence. "The wedding will be held in another week's time— that should give the Consortium sufficient opportunity to prepare the venue and handle all the logistics. There will be more meetings over the next few days to discuss the specifics of the ceremony, but for now I think we can safely say that this one is at an end."

"It is," Kylo agreed. "However, there is one last matter to take care of so that we may remove all
doubts about the legitimacy of this alliance."

Ta'a Chume raised an eyebrow. "What doubts could you possibly still harbor, Your Majesty?"

"About who I'm marrying," Kylo tersely replied. "The Chume'da will now accompany me to the Heresiarch for a DNA test."

"That's preposterous, Rey wanted to snap, with a healthy dose of I'm not going anywhere with you thrown in for good measure. However, Ta'a Chume was already nodding, her mouth set in a tight line.

"Of course, Emperor Ren. It is vital that you confirm for yourself that Hapes is not treating with you under false pretenses." The Queen Mother appeared to say this more for Rey's benefit, as if she sensed mutiny in the way her granddaughter was currently glowering. "I trust you will not object to the presence of Her Grace's guards aboard your ship."

"And my presence as well," Isolder added. "While you could scan for Hapan blood in general, it would certainly put your mind more at ease if you matched her DNA with mine, would it not?"

Kylo's jaw clenched. If Rey had to guess, he probably disliked the idea of having more Hapans on his ship than was strictly necessary. "I do not wish to inconvenience you, Prince Isolder."

"It's not an inconvenience." Isolder smiled, all teeth. "As a matter of fact, I cherish the opportunity to spend more time with my future son-in-law."

Kylo blanched, and some small, petty part of Rey couldn't help but cheer at his discomfiture.

"Who does he think he is, questioning Her Grace's identity?" Janassa fumed as she helped Esli wind starcrystal-encrusted ropes of glittering sapphires through the intricately braided sections of Rey's

Rey's ladies-in-waiting were even more put out than she was by Kylo's high-handed demand. Any nonsensical swooning over his dark good looks was superseded by their loyalty to the Consortium.
hair. They had an hour before she was set to leave on the vessel that would fly her, Isolder, and their guards to the Heresiarch; the First Order delegation had already gone ahead on their own shuttle. Rey's ladies had been tasked to take her back to her quarters and freshen her up, but it seemed like they were preparing her for battle instead—the floral gown she'd worn to the negotiations had been discarded in favor of royal blue robes liberally embellished with more starcrystals so that the bodice practically counted as armor. The only hint of softness was the gossamer cape flowing from a heavy silver band draped around Rey's shoulders, and even the diaphanous fabric, too, was embroidered with countless threads of tiny arctic jewels.

"I don't like to say it, but I think Lord Gray's brashness cost us a lot of hard-won ground," Niobe remarked as she soaked used makeup brushes in pots of warm water. "For a while, it seemed that the First Order was more or less willing to let us negotiate on our terms, but now we have to scramble to appease them."

*You're very smart,* Rey thought, glancing at the petite redhead. *You must also be very good at eavesdropping.* She vowed to remember this; something told her that she would need capable spies of her own in the future.

Her attention darted back to the dressing table mirror, and she shifted uncomfortably at the sight of her own reflection. Of course, no real piece of armor would ever reveal so much skin below the collarbones. The V-shaped neckline's lavish ornamentation of silver stars and crescent moons did little to detract from the fact that she was sporting cleavage. It wasn't a lot, but it was there.

As Vanya fussed with the fall of the cape, her eyes met Rey's in the mirror. "You look lovely, Your Grace," she assured her with a hint of grim satisfaction. "That arrogant Emperor Ren won't know what hit him."

Rey met her father on one of the landing pads behind the palace, their respective security details immediately forming a protective barrier around them. He was standing by a row of sleek Express-class ambassadorial shuttles, each one only half the length of the Falcon, and Rey gestured to the nearest one with a rather dubious look on her face.

"Are we taking that?" she asked. With all their guards, it would be a tight fit.

"No," said Isolder. "We're taking that."
Rey followed his gaze to the middle of the landing pad. The *Song of War* blocked out the sky, distinct from all other Battle Dragons due to sheer size and the rich crimson paint on its two hulls stamped here and there with the golden crest of the Royal House that blazed in the sunlight. As Isolder's personal flagship, it was the largest vessel in the Hapan navy second only to the *Dragon Queen*, heavily armored and bristling with customized weapons specifications that put the *Finalizer* to shame. Using *this* to get up to the *Heresiarch* was a statement, much like the change in Rey's attire.

"It's like we're going to war," she commented with good humor. "We signed the peace treaty an hour ago, didn't we?"

"On the contrary, my dear—" Isolder offered Rey the crook of his elbow so that he could escort her onto the ship's ramp—"the war is just beginning."

Chapter End Notes

"Rey, I know her, I sense her, she is mine" is taken from KYLO'S ACTUAL DIALOGUE IN BATTLEFRONT 2 LIKE CAN YOU BELIEVE.

"Kuskutqâsikanjat" is my pitiful attempt at *Sith*. It basically means something like "to dream of the Force" and I *think* it's grammatically correct, but if it's not, sorry xD

*High Galactic.*

*Express-class ambassadorial shuttle.*

*The Dragon Queen.*
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Before I forget, I've extended the projected chapter count to thirty after taking pacing issues and new ideas into consideration.

Now that that's over with, a very big thank you to lulzapalooza for gracing this fic with beautiful art, kotay111 for another lovely moodboard, anon for this darkly gorgeous manip, and everyone else for being such wonderful, supportive, and patient readers.

I would dearly appreciate feedback on this latest installment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"They brought a warship!" Hux hissed at Daala as they watched the red Battle Dragon's approach from the bridge of the Heresiarch. "Surely this constitutes an act of aggression—"

Daala rolled her eyes. "You're just champing at the bit to render the peace treaty we worked so hard on null and void, aren't you? For crying out loud, the metaphorical ink hasn't even dried yet."

"I still maintain that a full-scale invasion would have been less of a headache," Hux muttered.

"And that," said Daala, unable to resist, "is why you are not emperor."

He glared at her. "Speaking of— where is he?"

"Down in the hangars," she replied. "Waiting to receive his... fiancée."

There was a brief pause as the two officers considered how very odd this sounded. The thought of Kylo Ren having a wife in general was surreal enough, but for that wife to be a scavenger turned Force-sensitive Resistance fighter turned heir to the Hapan throne— well, it moved the situation into the realm of the absurd.

"Ah, Natasi, didn't you know, the Force works in mysterious ways," Wilhuff Tarkin would have sarcastically quipped, his mouth curling into the disdainful sneer that he'd reserved for the supernatural powers of the Jedi. It was not often that Daala thought of the Grand Moff these days— he had perished on the first Death Star almost four decades ago and was now a ghost in her
memories, someone who had happened to her in a different life.

"I do not have high hopes for this union," Hux finally remarked.

Daala scrutinized the younger man. Even though he'd pulled his weight during the negotiations, she still didn't trust him. Hux liked to give the impression that he was someone who kept his cards close to his scrawny chest, but she'd had him all figured out within seconds of their first meeting. Ambitious, ruthless, chip on the shoulder a mile wide—yes, she knew the type well, and in her experience these were the most dangerous precisely because they had something to prove.

Just like Tarkin. Just like her.

"I'm not optimistic about the upcoming marriage, either," Daala said with a shrug. "But at least it's bound to be entertaining to watch."

/*

The Chume'doro were on edge as they disembarked from the shuttle that had ferried them from the Song of War to the Heresiarch. Rey couldn't say she blamed them; while they were technically not in enemy territory due to the terms of the agreement, the sight of hordes of stormtroopers assembled in the hangar bay for their arrival was still unsettling.

Kylo held up the vanguard, flanked by Hircine, Boethiah, and Jyggalag. There were a couple of other figures in black armor behind him, identical in every way from their masks to their boots, and Rey cursed under her breath. While she'd never been a fan of the twins in the first place, they were the absolute last thing she needed now.

"So many soldiers, Emperor Ren," Isolder mused as he and Rey approached Kylo. "One might think you don't trust your allies."

"Your guards have cannons mounted on their shoulders that are each one capable of destroying a small building," Kylo pointed out. "Welcome aboard, Your Highness and Your Grace." He looked at Rey then, really looked at her for the first time since she emerged from the shuttle, and was it her imagination or did his eyes widen just the slightest bit before darkening as he seemed to swallow a sudden lump in his throat, his fists clenching at his sides—
Kylo turned on his heel and marched out of the hangar bay, leaving Rey and Isolder no choice but to follow him, trailed by their guards. There was a shift in the crowd and soon the two identical knights had wedged themselves on either side of Rey as they walked.

"Hello, little Jedi," sneered Meridia, her tone raspy through the helm's voice modulator. "Or should I start calling you princess?"

"She cleans up so well, doesn't she?" Mephala opined from Rey's left. "I almost didn't recognize her."

"Oh, I'd know that smell anywhere," Meridia said airily. "Smells like desert rat."

Rey did her best to ignore them, keeping her gaze trained on Kylo's back. He had tensed, somewhat, but otherwise he made no move to put a stop to the twins' antics. Isolder opened his mouth, no doubt to issue a scathing reprimand, but Rey caught his eye and shook her head. Meridia and Mephala thrived on rankling other people, and the most effective way to deal with them was to not take the bait.

"What's the matter, princess?" Mephala continued to goad. "Are you too high and mighty to chat with the common folk now?"

"I am the Hapan Chume'da, not a princess," Rey said as evenly as she could manage, still staring straight ahead, refusing to look at either of her attackers. "You will address me as 'Your Grace,' and after my coronation as Empress of the First Order, you will call me 'Your Majesty.'"

That shut them up. They fell back, the weight of their resentful gazes boring into Rey's nape. Perhaps there was some benefit to be had in reigning over her foes, after all. She wouldn't deny that she felt a surge of satisfaction at having gotten the last word with the reminder that the Knights of Ren would soon be her subjects. It was almost worth marrying Kylo for.

Almost.

His flagship was the first dreadnought of its make that Rey had ever set foot on. Snoke's forces had fought the majority of the war with Resurgent-class battlecruisers like the Finalizer; the Sovereign-class was something else entirely, and there had only been four of them at last count. According to old Resistance intelligence, the Heresiarch measured fifteen thousand meters in length and hosted a complement of thirty-five TIE interceptor squadrons, five bomber squadrons, and
seventy-five AT-ATs. To prevent it from wreaking catastrophic destruction during broadsides, they'd have to take out the axial superlaser first...

*Stop thinking like that,* Rey chided herself. *There is no war, these people are your allies now.* But as Kylo led the way deeper into the heart of the ship, she couldn't resist looking around, committing the layout to memory, cataloging the tech on display. At this point she could no longer tell if it was battle instinct or a scavenger's compulsion.

The DNA test took place in the medbay of the Heresiarch. It was a simple enough affair, a sleek black-and-silver droid extracting blood from Rey and Isolder and then feeding the samples into the sequencer. As they waited for the results, Rey was reminded of a similar scene from months ago, the Royal Court observing warily as her blood was matched with Isolder's, Ta'a Chume's, and an archived sample from one of Teneniel's medical tests. She'd been on tenterhooks then, so afraid that a mistake had been made and she wasn't Kira Ka Djo after all. And yet there had been a part of her that had also hoped for a negative result, because the Hapans were cold and regal and such a far cry from the people she had imagined belonging to. Some of the lords and ladies had been less than welcoming, treating her with outright distrust right up until the moment the screen flashed with confirmation that she was the heir to the throne. And then they had bowed— every single noble in the room.

There was definitely no bowing now. Once the sequencer had verified the DNA match, Kylo merely nodded at Rey and Isolder. "That settles it, then. Would you care for some refreshment before you return to Ta'a Chume'Dan?"

Rey blinked. "Refreshment?"

"You have been very gracious in acquiescing to my request for DNA verification. It would be the height of rudeness for me to send you away without offering the finest vintage I have on board." The invitation was extended without a semblance of warmth; it was clear that Kylo was going through the motions of social niceties, fully expecting her to refuse.

Rey took one look at his icy expression and made the impulsive, ill-advised choice to call his bluff. "Some wine would be lovely." Petty triumph sparked in her veins as surprise and annoyance flickered over his pale face. "I'd like to see for myself if your treatment of guests has improved." Oh, it was a wicked thing she was doing, bringing up old wounds at a time such as this.

Kylo turned to Isolder as if half-hoping that the latter would help him out of the situation he'd gotten himself into. Instead of courteously declining, however, the aged prince seemed content to follow Rey's lead, flashing another brilliant, toothy smile. "Yes, yes," he boomed jovially, "Her Grace and I would be most honored, Emperor Ren! Thank you!"
"The honor is mine," Kylo gritted out, well and truly trapped. "Please follow me."

After the Resistance's crushing defeat at Coruscant, the majority of Rey's daily routine had been spent in the gilded marble halls and extravagantly furnished rooms of the Fountain Palace. Thus, the large but austere salon that Kylo led them to was rather underwhelming, even though the scavenger girl that Rey had once been would have nearly swooned at the mere luxury of an actual table, actual chairs, and a viewport that spanned the length of the entire wall on one side, displaying a breathtaking panorama of the stars and moons that surrounded Hapes Prime, silver flecks and cold white globes irradiated by the emerald haze of the Mists.

As the Chume'doro and the Knights of Ren stationed themselves outside the salon, the three royals took their seats— Rey and Isolder on the couch, Kylo in a handsome black leather armchair that appeared too small for him, as Rey suspected most standard-sized furniture would be. He hunched in on himself and stretched his legs out further than was strictly decorous; it would have been endearing if he'd been anyone else.

The door hissed open and a timid-looking lieutenant brought in a bottle of wine and three slim flutes carefully balanced on a tray, which he set down on the table. He uncorked the bottle and made to pour the wine into each of the glasses, but Kylo stopped him with a curt, "We'll help ourselves, Mitaka," and the lieutenant all but scurried from the room.

"Ah, avedame." Isolder sounded reluctantly impressed as he eyed the label on the bottle with interest. "From the Jasserak Highlands. This is a rare treat, Your Majesty. You have good taste."

Kylo blinked, giving Rey the impression that the compliment had thrown him off-balance. "Thank you," he said at last, awkwardly. "It is nothing, of course, compared to Hapan gold."

"The Chume'da doesn't care overly much for the gold. She finds it too bitter," said the prince. "Perhaps the avedame will be more to her taste."

And it was, as it turned out. The reddish purple wine was earthy and sweet, and Rey tried not to let on how much she delighted in each sip. Kylo for his part drank sparingly, more interested in swirling the liquid around in its flute. He was probably waiting for the whole ordeal to be over, counting down the minutes in his head.
"It is good that we have the chance to talk in private, just the three of us," Isolder ventured after a drawn-out silence. "I thought I should prepare you both for a certain topic that will doubtless crop up over the coming days as we plan for the wedding. I speak of consummation—"

Rey almost choked on her wine. Kylo's fingers tightened around the stem of his glass so violently that the crystal seemed in danger of snapping in half.

"There will be a banquet after the ceremony," Isolder soldiered on, "and at some point the two of you will abscond to the Chumeda's suite, where you will spend the night in accordance with Hapan custom."

"There is no need for that," Kylo hastened to protest. "I do not expect Her Grace to—" He faltered, a flush of red leaching into his pallor.

"Naturally there will be no coercion involved," Isolder declared in stern tones, giving Kylo such a forbidding look that a lesser man would have flinched. "However, the union will not be valid in the eyes of the Royal Court until you share your wife's quarters."

"But that is so unnecessary!" Rey cried, echoing Kylo's sentiments. "The Queen Mother herself knows that this will be a marriage in name alone..." Something about Isolder's grim expression caused her to trail off.

"To be sure, there is no pressure on you as of now," the prince carefully said. "It will be a different story once you have ascended and there is need for a new Chume'da, but I believe that is a matter best saved for another time. What the two of you need to discuss now is your wedding night and how to handle the issue when Daemora AlGray brings it up in a future meeting. Given your shared history, it's a contentious subject that I feel should be preemptively resolved."

This is a back-channel negotiation, Rey realized. Ta'a Chume often employed this technique for the more delicate aspects of trade or political agreements—conflicts would be discussed in secret so that they would already be ironed out when it was time to draft a formal treaty, both parties putting on a show for public sake. Given the circumstances of this betrothal, it was a wise move to ensure that things would go smoothly from now on, and Rey wondered if Ta'a Chume had put Isolder up to this. She would have appreciated some warning beforehand, but they'd probably been worried that she'd refuse to set foot on the Heresiarch if she had known. Part of her resented having been manipulated—again—but an even bigger part was actually grateful that she wouldn't have to sit there, taken aback and mortified, while both the Consortium and the First Order discussed her and Kylo's sex life.
Rey sneaked a glance at the dark-haired emperor, her mind wandering down a dangerous path that she couldn't abstain from now that the topic had been broached. The more she told herself not to think about it, the more it became a fixation with each starlit moment that passed. Kylo wasn't terrible to look at— she'd long recognized that fact even though she still hadn't come to terms with it — and a flicker of something wild and nervous curled in her abdomen as she took in his massive frame, his thick fingers, the lips that were made for—

*Nope. She was not* going to think about him in those terms, least of all when *her father* was in the room.

Unfortunately, it wasn't long before Isolder stood up. "I'll leave the two of you to it, then, shall I?"

Kylo started from whatever strange reverie he'd been brooding in for the past few minutes. "To it?" he repeated, somewhat faintly.

Isolder scowled. "To *talk,*" he stressed, his blue eyes narrowed at the younger man, "about your situation, in your *very much separate seats.*"

Rey contemplated pitching herself out the nearest airlock.

Once Isolder had exited the salon, the door sliding shut in his wake, Kylo leapt to his feet with a frustrated hiss of breath and stalked over to the viewport, fists clenching at his sides. It was a while before Rey could bring herself to look at him; he was doing his best to glare a hole into the transparisteel, his posture rigid as the glow of the celestial wastes illuminated the unscarred half of his sharp profile.

"I would not be averse to sharing a room," Rey managed to say. "You know, to keep up appearances." She could certainly do that, couldn't she? It was just for a night— the First Order had made it clear during negotiations that they would be staying in-system only until the day after the wedding. Then they would journey back to Coruscant, where Rey would join them a few days later for her coronation. And after *that,* she had a hard time imagining she and Kylo would be seeing each other any more than was strictly necessary.
"I can take the couch. What is one more inconvenience, after all?" He said it without meeting her gaze, his tone layered over with angry sarcasm. It was the anger that puzzled her, the frenetic current wrapped so meticulously around his Force signature that it was almost as if he took refuge in it. It made her own temper spike. Honestly, she was the one who had more right to be upset—none of this would be happening if the First Order had left well enough alone. It was because of Kylo's desire for power and his fanatical devotion to Snoke that they were even in this mess in the first place.

Rey was aware that she ought to stay calm, but her crappy fiancé's crappy attitude was making it so difficult. "You don't have to sound like that, like it's my fault," she admonished, keeping her voice neutral but firm. While she might have committed to keeping the peace, she was no doormat, either.

"How should I sound, then? Like I'm excited?" Kylo asked snidely, flashing her a thin, humorless smirk. "You're the only one in this room looking forward to our wedding night, Chumè'da."

The barb shouldn't have hurt her as much as it did. It sank deep into her skin. Maybe there was a part of her that thought he would never say something like that, some tiny, uncertain part that had sparked when he called her beautiful last night. "If you're insinuating what I think you're insinuating, you're wrong!" she snapped. "I wouldn't sleep with you if you were the last man in the galaxy!"

"At least now we're being honest with each other," he retorted. "This arrangement is complicated enough as it is without us having any illusions."

"I've never had any illusions about you!" Rey shouted, although it was a lie. There had been those brief moments in the garden when he'd seemed less of a monster. She could kick herself for falling for it. "You are exactly who I thought you were from the very beginning—a vile, arrogant, cruel, and despicable jerkass, and when the rest of the galaxy has had enough—when they finally denounce you and your despotic goons—I swear to you, Emperor Ren, I won't think twice before joining them!"

She had gone too far. Her words were tantamount to nothing short of treason. Kylo was upon her, quick as a flash, his fingers clamping around her upper arm hard enough to bruise as he forced himself into her personal space so inexorably that she had no choice but to look up at him.

"While I share your contempt for this situation in which we find ourselves, do not mistake it as apathy," he hissed through gritted teeth, dark eyes burning. "I hardly expect your disposition to sweeten, but I will be damned if I allow my future Empress to behave in a manner that reflects poorly on me and on the First Order!"
"If you *allow?*" She wrenched her arm out of his viselike grasp, batting his hand away for good measure. "I don't belong to you. I don't belong to *anyone.*"

"That might have been the case back when you were a scavenger on that pitiful scrap heap of a planet, but now?" His sardonic gaze flickered over her silk robes and the jewels woven through her elaborate braids. "Now you are the *Chume'da,* and the *Chume'da* belongs to her people. Their fate is entirely in your hands. Should you cross the line, it is they who will suffer for it. Am I making myself clear?"

"I hate you," she said bitterly.

He sneered at her. "See? Already you are acclimatizing so well to married life."

"This isn't a marriage." Rey stepped back, towards the door. She had to get out of this room before she made any more tactical mistakes. "It's a farce."

"As opposed to all other marriages out there, brimming with devotion and contentment?" Kylo frostily countered. "You have been eight months at court. You should know better. I neither expect nor want your love or your friendship, but I *will* require your cooperation. Do you understand?"

She glared daggers at him, but she nodded. What else could she do? He had just reminded her in his own brutal fashion that the welfare of the Hapes Cluster was contingent on the *benevolence* of his empire.

"Good. Now, I shall spend the night here on my ship, as there are certain matters that require my attention. I'll see you at the palace in the morning."

"What matters?" Rey asked suspiciously.

"I was in Ta'a Chume'Dan for almost a week. During that time, I have sorely neglected my own affairs of state." He said it like he was blaming *her* for the backlog, the prick, and she rolled her eyes and turned to leave.

"One more thing," Kylo added, and Rey grudgingly came to a stop, staring at the door as she waited for him to piss her off more than he already had. "Regarding what happened earlier with Meridia and Mephala— the Knights of Ren answer only to me. I shall be reminding them that they must afford
you the respect due to you as my wife, but they are not your subjects. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," Rey muttered. As she remembered the taunting she had endured at the hands of the twins and contrasted it with how she was now being scolded like an errant child for standing up for herself, tears pricked her eyes. She hurriedly blinked them away, determined not to give Kylo the satisfaction of making her cry.

After dinner back at the Per'Agthra, Rey wandered the halls in a black mood. Despite the First Order's absence, security was still tight and she suspected it was her grandmother's doing. Ta'a Chume had most likely sensed that Rey would scamper off to the Corsair Outback the first chance she got and so had decreed that the hangars remain on lockdown.

But Rey knew that she couldn't put off contacting the Resistance any longer. She had to do it tonight.

She heard voices from around the corner—a man's, light and teasing, mingled with a woman's soft, dulcet tones. Surreptitiously peeking into the corridor that ran perpendicular to the one she was in, Rey saw Aleson and Lairelosse in the act of bidding farewell to each other. He bowed and she curtsied, and then he watched her walk away.

Rey was struck by an idea. It was risky, but it looked to be her best option yet. She waited until Lairelosse had disappeared around the opposite corner and then she made her way to Aleson, after checking to ascertain that no guards were in sight. She'd dismissed her Chume'doro for the evening, firmly stating that she wanted to be alone.

Aleson smiled when he noticed her approach, but it was a smile that had a wary edge to it. "Your Grace," he said with another quick bow. "As I understand it, congratulations are in order."

"Spare me," Rey bit out. She'd quite had her fill of sarcastic young men for the day.

Aleson quirked an eyebrow but wisely changed the subject. "I'm off to Kavan. Ta'a Chume has made it clear that I've outstayed my welcome for now. I suppose the next time I see you will be at your wedding."

That surprised her. She knew that all the noble houses had to send a representative, but she'd been half-expecting him to boycott the event. He must have deciphered the bemused look on her face.
because he went on to explain, "My mother is too ill. I shall have to attend in her stead. I have already sworn to Ta'a Chume that I shall do nothing to disrupt the proceedings, and I reiterate the same to you. You have my word."

"And how good is your word?" Rey carefully asked. "How true is your honor?"

One could hardly be a Hapan aristocrat without the ability to recognize certain cues. Aleson's amethyst gaze assessed her shrewdly from beneath a mess of shaggy black hair. "Is there something you require of me, Chume'da?"

"Yes." Rey's heart was pounding. "I'm calling in your life debt. I need you to take me somewhere."

Chapter End Notes

Superlaser.

Avedame.

Jasserak Highlands.

Hapan gold wine.

Back-channel negotiations are a real thing although I am of course taking the premise to its tropiest conclusion in this instance xD

Kylo's line about expecting neither love nor friendship is dedicated to NivMizzet because we were squealing over this post a few months back.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for the heartwarming response to the previous chapter! I haven't had enough free time to catch up on everyone's comments— something I will do my best to rectify this weekend— but know that you all inspired me to finish this latest installment sooner than I thought possible. Enjoy (I hope), and please consider leaving a kudos or a review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As the chronos of Ta'a Chume'Dan struck midnight, the light of seven moons shone down on a slim figure in a hooded cloak, leggings, and jerba-hide boots rappelling the towers of the Fountain Palace, moving swift and sure from one battlement to the next. Rey kept clear of the windows and balconies, using the Force to shroud her presence as an extra cautionary measure. Once her feet hit the ground, she barely had time to zip the fibercord back into her utility belt, next to her lightsaber, before she heard the unmistakable sounds of an approaching patrol. She dove behind the bushes and stayed in a half-crouch as the guards marched past. They weren't Chume'doro and could therefore speak more freely, and she listened over the blood pounding in her ears.

"What I don't understand," one was telling his companions, "is why we don't just shoot that destroyer out of the sky. The Emperor is on board so that takes care of all our problems, doesn't it? There would be no need for us to go through with this wedding."

"Not all of Ren's high-ranking officers are on the Heresiarch, though," countered another guard. "If we kill him, they're going to want revenge. Besides, I don't even think he's the real power behind the throne. Before all this, the First Order had a Supreme Leader, didn't they? Whatever happened to that guy?"

"You have got to stop reading sludgenews. I saw that article, too. A colossal, all-powerful being from the Unknown Regions? Pull the other one, it's got bells on—"

"It's not that far-fetched to me. Not after what happened in the Banquet Hall—"

"Where the Chume'da proved that she was more than a match for the Emperor," a third guard chimed in. "So let's just rest easy. The Consortium knows what they're doing."

"In the meantime, stock up on miriskin," joked a fourth speaker, eliciting a round of muted chuckles.
Once all was silent again as the patrol disappeared around the corner, Rey darted out of her hiding spot and embarked on the steep, treacherous journey down the side of the basalt crag. Unlike Coruscant, which never slept, Hapes' capital city lay still in the moonlight, the only significant flares of neon emanating from the night markets scattered throughout the various districts, which in themselves were already winding down. The main street leading from the Per'Agthra's bluffs to the heart of Ta'a Chume'Dan was deserted, but there were people milling about on the public docks, mostly freighter crew barking orders at droids as they wrangled with late-night shipments, and Rey drew her hood further over the face that had been plastered on holoscreens for a solid month after she'd been officially presented as the long-lost *Chume'da*. Nobody shot a second glance her way as she stole over to Aleson, but she noticed that he was being given a wide berth by everyone else.

Rey couldn't exactly blame them. With his leather armor, the blasters conspicuously holstered at his sides, and his dark, windswept hair, Aleson Gray looked more like a bounty hunter than a lord. His ship was a Mandal Hypernautics corvette, sporting the axehead silhouette and sharp edges ubiquitous to the *Crusader-* class; the hull was painted a frosted green color with a white serpent emblazoned on the aft end— the insignia of Kavan's ruling house.

"I was beginning to think you wouldn't show, Your Grace," Aleson remarked.

"I said I'd meet you here at half past midnight," Rey pointed out. "I'm early."

"It's a lady's prerogative to change her mind, yes?"

"Sure, when it comes to things like suitors or what dress to wear. This is *important*."

Aleson laughed. "I concede, then. Shall we?"

Rey followed him up the ship's ramp, discreetly tapping into his mindset with the Force. Even though she'd sworn him to secrecy under the terms of the life debt, she was all too aware that he was a wild card, reckless and unpredictable. Fortunately, he didn't seem to be hellbent on rallying the Resistance into an all-out attack on the First Order, but he was excited— no doubt to meet the fabled Leia Organa. He'd quite lost his aristocratic poise earlier in the hallway, hissing, *"The Resistance is here?*" with his eyes almost bugging out of his head. Rey had slapped his arm, warning him that he wasn't allowed to tell anyone, even Ta'a Chume and Lairelosse, that he knew. She didn't think the Queen Mother would appreciate her making an ally out of this man.

"This is a nice ship," Rey observed, looking around the spacious cabin as the main doors closed.
"What's she called?"

"He," Aleson corrected.

"Right. Sorry." Hapans referred to their vessels in masculine terms, something that Rey was still getting used to. "What's he called?"

Aleson hesitated as he strapped into the pilot seat, one gauntleted hand hovering over the controls. "Evenstar," he replied at last, in an uncharacteristically soft voice.

"Oh," was all Rey could manage. Lairollose's name in Basic translated to "the star of evening." Rey had been aware that Aleson and the Ducha were childhood friends, but...

The young lord gave every impression of not wanting to talk about it, so Rey busied herself with settling into the co-pilot seat, frantically casting around for a suitable change of subject. She remembered something that one of the palace guards had mentioned, and so— "Do you know what miriskin is?"

"A scam," Aleson said dismissively. "In the days of the Old Republic, when anti-Jedi sentiment was at an all-time high in the Hapes Cluster, con artists started selling these pieces of cloth to be worn around the neck, claiming that they were made from the skin of ysalamiri and could therefore grant immunity from the Force. It was all a hoax, of course— only a living ysalamir can cast the nullification field and, anyway, the talismans were made mostly from ronto or dewback leather."

"And people actually fell for it?"

"I think Your Grace will find that fear can lead people to the edge of desperation. The Jedi were seen as monsters with supernatural abilities, who controlled minds and stole children. This was a view encouraged by Ni'Korish, your—"

"Great-grandmother," Rey mumbled. She'd seen portraits of the woman— tall and willowy, dark-haired and blue-eyed. While Ta'a Chume wore a crown that looked like it was fashioned from ice, Ni'Korish had preferred the illusion of thorns, jet-black and vicious, woven around her head. There had been a certain savagery to her portraits that Rey had found more familiar than Ta'a Chume's coldness and Isolder's charm, and she'd immediately shied away from that realization.
"Now the tables have turned," Aleson concluded, "and it is a Force wielder who will lead us someday. It's funny how things work out, but Hapes will adapt, as she always has."

Further conversation was limited to running the preflight checks, and soon the corvette had taken off and was gliding away from the quiet, silver-white city, illuminated by a night that was almost as bright as day.

Kylo had taken a leaf out of Sheev Palpatine's book and assigned governors to each inhabited sector of First Order occupied space. It was far more efficient than the Senate system, with no room for petty squabbling and corruption— the Emperor commanded, the governors obeyed, and the sectors ran like clockwork.

Or, well, most of them did, anyway.

In a conference room on the Heresiarch, the holograms of seven Outer Rim governors flickered from various projectors built into the massive communications bay. Kylo stood in the middle, the glow of blue static reflecting off his mask as he listened to reports about clogged trade routes, piracy, breakdowns in the local chain of command, and— in the case of a little green planet called Artorias — uprising.

"The former king of that world eluded capture during our invasion," Darius Onneir, the governor of the Myto sector, was saying. "We suspect he is behind the spate of guerrilla attacks that have been targeting our munitions bases and supply lines."

"Concentrate your resources on locating his hideout," Kylo growled. "Don't bother arresting him— you have my permission to shoot Caled Galfridian on sight."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

Onneir's hologram vanished, and Kylo turned to Tol Getelles as the latter detailed the traffic problems caused by the Antemeridian sector's exports being routed straight to Coruscant. But Kylo was only half-listening— he had been in conference with various batches of governors all evening, and the defenses of his overworked brain were now faltering against the pull of other matters.

Namely, a very beautiful, very infuriating fiancée who'd had the nerve to show up on his ship in...
that dress.

Of course, Kylo had been aware— in some distant, logical way—that Rey had breasts. She was biologically female, it was only natural. But today marked the first time he'd had to... confront such a fact. Her gowns prior to this one had been relatively modest, relying on subtle hints rather than outright display. He'd never actually seen her cleavage before and, oh, it was far more tantalizing than he cared to admit. She wasn't overly endowed but that creamy skin had been decorated so prettily by the silver stars and crescents of that low sapphire blue neckline, and her breasts had looked like they were the perfect size for his hands to cup, the smooth valley between them made for his lips to caress. He would be lying if he said he'd never thought about her like this before, but to finally have a visual basis for his fantasies...

*It's all a ploy,* Kylo sternly told himself. *You shouldn't fall for it.* What was that Snoke had said? Hapan women knew that a little skin could bend a man to their will. Donning that kind of gown had been a calculated maneuver on Rey's part. But, if so, why had she then proceeded to verbally castigate him in the salon? Calling him names, declaring that she wouldn't sleep with him if he were the last man in the galaxy— why would she blow her cover like that?

Because his own taunts had gotten to her, he decided. He'd made her lose her temper and expose her true feelings.

*You know her better than that,* some part of him insisted. *You know that she stays calm and focused during missions. This is the girl who used to weather Boethiah's Dun Möch technique without batting an eyelash. She would never have let you rattle her if she had some endgame in mind...*

"Emperor Ren?" Getelles' hologram was peering at him in concern, holding a datapad. "I assume you are in favor of implementing this proposal straight away?"

Kylo had no idea what the man was talking about. "I'd like to hear more about it before I decide," he hedged.

Getelles blinked. "It's the proposal to chart new detours along the Perlemian Trade Route, Your Majesty... *You* authored it a month ago."

"Then obviously I am in favor of it," Kylo coolly replied.

Getelles nodded and signed off. Kylo then made a valiant effort to focus completely on what the next
It was noon on Stalsinek IV when the *Evenstar* made planetfall. Again the humid heat, crashing heavily into Rey the moment the cabin doors slid open at the edge of the rainforest. Again the various chattering, shrieking, cawing sounds of unseen creatures, rising up from the tangle of trees. Again the faint siren song of the Force nexus.

Rey and Aleson had docked at a spot that was far enough from the military outpost to avoid the prying eyes of Captain Elerron's men; the temple was roughly an hour's hike away. As they began walking, Rey activated the homing beacon on her utility belt—the signal couldn't be detected unless someone knew what they were looking for on an encrypted frequency, and she could only pray that, wherever the Resistance was in the Outback, they were keeping an eye on the comms. Hopefully, once she got to the temple, she wouldn't have to wait too long for Finn to show up. She needed to return to the Per'Agthra before the sun rose on Hapes Prime.

"So what exactly is the Resistance's plan, Your Grace?" Aleson asked as they set a steady pace beneath the coilwoods. "I doubt General Organa wants to hide forever."

"All information will be dispensed on a need-to-know basis," Rey said crisply. The truth was that she herself had merely a vague idea of what was going on in Leia's head—she hadn't seen the older woman since that long-ago meeting on the *Star Home*. From the sporadic rendezvouses—mostly with Finn, sometimes with Poe or Jessika—Rey had surmised that the Resistance had spent the past several months mostly just surviving and laying low and gathering as much intel as possible.

"Will she launch an attack from the Cluster?" Aleson persisted. "It's doable, you know. We can take the Inner Rim, cut Coruscant off from the major military bases in Fondor and the like—"

"**No one** is **attacking anything,**" Rey interrupted. "At least, not at this point in time. It's too big a gamble—"

"Could she kill her son, if push came to shove?" Aleson continued as if he hadn't heard her. "If it's what's best for the galaxy—"

Rey had been in the middle of batting aside a curtain of thick vines when he said this. Now, she gave it an almighty push in his direction, letting the tough green tendrils hit him square across the face.
"New rule!" she snapped. "You will not speak unless spoken to."

"But, Chume'da—"

"Nuh-uh. Life debt, remember?"

"Fine," Aleson sighed.

She shot him her fiercest, haughtiest glare and he lapsed into a grudging silence. Nothing more was said between them for the rest of the trek. And yet a curious thing happened as Rey walked amidst the trees and the undergrowth—perhaps it was the fresh air seeping into her lungs, the damp smell of moss, the way the physical exertion was making her heart race, the prospect of seeing Finn again, or the verdant wilderness that would always be a balm to someone who had grown up on a land as parched as Jakku. Whatever the case, she felt lighter than she'd had in ages. She hadn't realized how much she'd needed to get away from the stifling atmosphere of the Hapan court, even if it was just for a little while.

The sun's rays poured like honey into the clearing where the temple was located, causing the milk-white stones to gleam with snowy radiance. Rey heard Aleson's awed intake of breath behind her, and then he was striding forward, inspecting the runes carved into the pillars.

"Don't touch anything," Rey warned him. The Hapans weren't religious so she doubted he'd believe there was a goddess watching over this abandoned place, but the deity's ire when Kylo destroyed one of the pillars two years ago was still fresh on her mind.

"This is no language that I recognize," Aleson murmured. " Whoever built this temple, they weren't our ancestors."

Our. Rey fought down her uneasiness. She still didn't think of herself as Hapan, not really, and she wondered if she ever would. No matter what the DNA tests said, no matter the sense of déjà vu that sometimes stole over her when she was in certain areas of the palace or in conversation with Isolder, there was no denying the fact that she'd been gone too long. She'd grown up wholly independent of her father's culture, and therefore felt no connection to it.

It wasn't long before Aleson's gaze drifted to the silver fountain in the middle of the courtyard. Recognition dawned on his features but he made no attempt to draw near, squinting at it warily instead. "All this time, I thought it was only a legend. A tale for children and dreamers."
"It's as real as you and me," Rey said carefully, "but it's not the Fountain of Youth. It's a wellspring of the Living Force."

He took a step back—a small one, but she noticed it, nonetheless. For all his talk of modernization and opening up the borders, Aleson was still Hapan, through and through.

Rey sensed them before she saw them, their energy signatures moving through the constellation of forest life with that warm, bright aura she had come to ascribe to her friends. She was already smiling, already running with her arms thrown open wide when they started emerging from the treeline—Finn first, followed by Poe, and then Leia, and then Luke.

Finn caught her easily, hugging her so tightly to his chest that her feet were lifted off the ground. *I missed you, I missed you,* she thought over and over again, burying her face in his neck.

"Where have you been?" She could tell that he was trying to sound stern, but the effect was ruined by the joyous, relieved laughter in his voice. "We haven't heard from you in weeks—" he caught sight of Aleson over her shoulder and tensed—"and who's that?"

*Can he be trusted?* was the unspoken question that hung in the air.

"He won't be a problem, he's sworn to me," Rey said hurriedly. "We have bigger things to worry about." She let go of Finn and tackled Poe into a hug as well. "I wasn't expecting all four of you to come!"

"The cells moved around again," Poe explained, affectionately patting her on the back. "We've been planet-bound a couple days already."

Rey untangled herself from Poe and turned to Luke and Leia, and her mind suddenly—

— *went blank*—

The Skywalker twins were looking at her expectantly with soft, glad smiles on their faces. Smiles that faltered, in sync, when she did nothing but stare at them, at a loss for words as it hit her that she would soon be *related* to them, *oh, krieffing hell, abort mission, abort*—
Leia was the first to break the silence. "Rey? Are you all right?"

"I'm—" *I'm fine, no, I'm going to throw up—*

"I'm getting married," Rey bleated.

Finn and Poe were immediately up in arms. "To who?" Finn demanded, followed a beat later by Poe saying, "To him?" And then the two Resistance soldiers glared at Aleson, their hands clenching into fists as they made to walk threateningly over to him—

Rey barely had time to block their path. "No," she said, her eyes still locked onto Leia's, "to—"

She couldn't say it. She didn't want to say it. She would cheerfully have attempted to reclaim Coruscant all by herself instead of saying it. But every second spent in this forest was another second closer to a lady-in-waiting rousing the *Chume'da* for breakfast only to find out that she was neither in her bed nor anywhere else in the palace...

"I'll start from the beginning," Rey announced. "I don't have a lot of time, so I must ask all of you to refrain from interrupting me."

* They took it about as well as could be expected. Which was to say, not well at all.

"*Kylo Ren?*" Finn bellowed. Poe shushed him, furtively glancing around as if Hapan troops would burst into the clearing at any moment. "*Kylo Ren?*" Finn repeated in a quieter but no less savage hiss. "You're engaged to *Kylo Ren?*"

"Why didn't we know about this?" Leia was looking sharply at Poe. "We knew he was crowned Emperor, we've learned that they've abolished the Senate. How could *this* have slipped through our intelligence net?"
Rey was the one who answered. "Because it hasn't gone public yet, General. Ta'a Chume will make the official announcement tomorrow."

"That woman," Leia snarled. She turned to Rey with a shrewd, piercing gaze, the fury in her expression suddenly so reminiscent of Kylo. "Enough is enough, Chume'da. You have to learn how to stand up for yourself. I know you think you'll be endangering us by doing so, but you don't have to be a witless pawn in her games. Believe me, she needs your goodwill as much as you need hers." Leia's hands clamped onto Rey's shoulders, giving her a gentle but firm shake. "The Consortium has no qualms about deposing an heirless monarch—in fact, they were on the verge of doing so before you showed up. Without you, she risks losing everything. It is time you remind her. Do you think you can do that?"

"I... I'm not sure," Rey stammered. "Everyone's afraid of her, even Isolder— I'm alone—"

"No, you are not," said Leia. "You have my son."

Rey blinked, uncomprehending. The ambient sounds of the forest filled the tense space between words, and then Leia leaned in closer, ascertaining that the younger woman was meeting her eyes. "Power is a fluid, ever-shifting thing, dictated by alliances," said Senator Organa, Princess Leia of Alderaan. "Right now, it seems like Ta'a Chume holds all the cards because she is the Queen Mother of the Hapes Consortium. But... once you marry Emperor Ren, what does that make you?"

"Empress," Rey whispered.

Leia nodded. "Of the galaxy. That beats She Who Has No Equal any day of the week."

"You can't seriously mean for Rey to go through with this, General!" Finn protested.

"What choice do we have?" Leia countered. "If we take her with us and make a break for it, how far do you think we're going to get with four First Order fleets stationed right outside the Veil?"

"This buys us more time," Rey found herself saying. Not only was it easier for her brain to shift into battle mode now that she was back in the company of the Resistance, not only was she desperate to stop Finn from doing anything rash, but Leia's remark about her becoming the Empress had also unlocked an epiphany inside her that had been waiting for the right nudge to blossom into wildfire. "This puts me in the perfect position to spy on the First Order, to learn their weaknesses, to..." She trailed off, hardly daring to give voice to such a thing.
Poe finished the sentence for her, his brown eyes widening as he caught on. "To find the way to Snoke," he breathed.

"We can cut off the serpent's head, like we always planned but could never figure out how to do," Rey eagerly agreed. "Don't you see, Finn? Snoke is the real power behind the Empire. Once we kill him, it will all come crumbling down. And then we'll figure out what to do with Ren."

"Who will by then be your husband," Finn sourly pointed out.

"A minor detail," Rey said with rather more confidence than she actually felt. "Let's take things one step at a time, shall we? Right now, our priority should be to get to Snoke."

Finn wearily rubbed a hand over his face. "It's just—you are going to be in so much danger," he said in a helpless tone of voice. "You have to promise us that you'll call for extraction if things go south."

"I will," Rey said. She gestured towards Aleson. "I'll send him. Not only when I need help, but also when I have important information and can't meet you myself."

"Okay, but who is he?" Poe asked.

At Rey's nod, Aleson cleared his throat and introduced himself. The others regarded him with suspicion still, and so Rey launched into a summary of the duel that she had, in the interest of saving time, left out of her initial explanation. Once she was done, Finn and Poe were looking at Aleson with something close to respect, while Leia was more tight-lipped and reserved. And Luke...

All eyes turned to Luke. He was the only one who hadn't said a word thus far, his head bowed slightly as if he were deep in contemplation. Finally, he peered at Rey. "You have a difficult road ahead of you," he said gravely. "But I see no alternative than for you to walk it. Perhaps this is the path you were always meant to take. So—" he sighed—"if you feel that you are strong enough..."

"I have to be, Master," Rey said, lifting her chin.

"Then—may the Force be with you," Luke intoned. He let the echoes of the blessing fade into the
Rey grimaced, as did Finn and Poe. Leia's encouraging smile froze on her face.

"Perhaps that was too soon," Luke conceded after a while, with an apologetic shrug.

Humming to herself as early morning light filtered in through rose-tinted panels of window-glass, Janassa sashayed into the Chume'da's solar with a vase full of freshly-cut everlily blossoms that she intended to place on the coffee table. She stopped short, however, at the sight of a deathly pale Esli trembling in the open doorway that led to the bedroom.

"What's the matter?" Janassa asked. "Is Her Grace all right?"

"I don't know," Esli mumbled.

"What do you mean you don't know?" Janassa rolled her eyes. "Esli, darling, your parents shipped you off to court so that you'd come out of your shell. Now, since Emperor Ren will be making planetfall in a short while, straighten your posture and march in there and tell Her Grace that it's time to get ready for breakfast with her fiancé."

"I can't do that." Esli looked like she was about to faint.

"And why not?" Janassa demanded archly.

"Because she's not here!" the other girl burst out, wringing her hands. "Her bed hasn't been slept in and I've searched for her all over the palace—she's gone!"

Chapter End Notes

Jerba.

Miriskin.
Crusader-class corvette.

Artorias.

Myto sector.

Darius Onneir.

Caled Galfridian.

Tol Getelles.

Antemeridian sector.

Dun Möch.

Everlily.

**FYI on Luke's characterization:** I conceptualized this version of him and his dynamic with Rey before the trailer and all the new info about TLJ came out. As we don't know the whole story yet, I've decided to stick with my original plan for now. Once the movie drops, I will do my best to reconcile this Luke to what will be his canon characterization — there's a year's gap between the end of TFA and the start of this fic, so I believe I will have sufficient leeway in that regard.
Here is a nice, long, super Reylo-y chapter as my way of saying thanks to everyone for waiting so patiently for an update and, of course, for all the comments, tags and messages, and constant support that make this endeavor a whole lot more fun. Special shout-out to the very talented Black Cat who wrote this gorgeous fic of my fic!

Please note that there are mentions of past abuse in this installment. Nothing too graphic, but if you feel that may be a potential trigger for you, the relevant paragraphs begin with: “Ah. He knew where this was coming from” and "Then there was what had transpired during breakfast."

I might as well tell you guys now, the wedding will take place next chapter! This is your last chance to send me headcanons for the ceremony. Or you could, you know, just inspire me to write in general ;) I'm leaving for Cambodia in ten days and I'm really hoping I can update before then. Fingers crossed!

Kylo realized something was amiss the moment he disembarked from the shuttle that had ferried him back to Hapes Prime. It wasn't just the general uneasiness that he sensed in the Force as he was escorted out of the hangars by a stiff-gaited, pale-faced Daemora AlGray— it was the fact that the Per'Agthra seemed busier than usual, or, at least, too busy for such an early hour. Guards marched to and fro, their steps brisk but lacking the mechanical rhythm of routine patrol; courtiers and servants alike scurried about, exchanging whispers in the Hapan tongue.

The jittery atmosphere put his knights on edge as well. They were the only ones with him today—Hux and Daala had returned to their respective fleets for the time being in order to take care of any administrative matters that might have cropped up during their absence. "Stay alert, my lord," Hircine warned in quiet tones. "There's no telling what fresh hell your fiancée's cooked up now."

"And how can you be certain that she is involved?" Kylo asked.

"Isn't she always?"

Hircine was right. Ever since Rey's awakening three years ago, she had never failed to be at the center of every blight to Kylo's peace. He would have snorted at the older man's remark, but he had once again foregone his mask and it would hardly have been dignified.
Instead of taking him straight to the Queen Mother's salon where he and Rey were supposed to have their first breakfast as an engaged couple under her grandmother's watchful eye, Daemora stopped at one of the smaller, more discreet doors that Kylo had come to learn usually indicated the kind of private, soundproofed room where politicians committed their elegant brand of skulduggery. His suspicions were confirmed when the Ducha of the Telephon Moons flashed her patented cheerful smile—although this one seemed strained at the edges—and said, "Prince Isolder would like to have a word with you, Emperor Ren. * Alone,*" she stressed with a pointed glance at his black-clad entourage.

Kylo wasn't in the mood for whatever new game the Hapans were playing. He'd had a fitful night's sleep, tormented despite his best efforts by yet another spate of dreams about Rey that he blamed wholeheartedly on that blue-and-silver gown. He offered Daemora a curt nod and bid his knights to wait outside before stepping into the room where Isolder was already seated, waiting for him.

At the sight of the Hapan prince, Kylo was suddenly overcome by a paralyzing mixture of embarrassment and guilt. The dreams he'd had the night before were still fresh on his mind, and in them he'd been doing unspeakable things to this man's *daughter.* If Isolder possessed any telepathic skill at all, he'd probably be strangling Kylo with his bare hands right about now and no one would fault him for doing so, because the Emperor was a kriffing *pervert.*

Kylo forced himself to move, taking the seat across from Isolder. The prince seemed agitated, his blue eyes cloudy and his mouth set in a grim line. There was no trace of Rey on his features, and Kylo surmised in passing that she must favor Teneniel Djo.

"I shall cut to the chase, Your Majesty," Isolder said at last. "Her Grace is missing."

Kylo felt as if he'd been speared through the chest by a bolt of ice. "What do you mean she's *missing?*" he thundered, the cold shock quickly replaced by the dark red flames of a familiar wrath. He was back in the interrogation room on Starkiller Base, the girl was gone, and all his plans were crashing down over his head...

"I *mean* that she wasn't in her chambers this morning and we don't know where she is," Isolder replied. "We're conducting a thorough search of the palace and the rest of the city before we take foul play into consideration, although the chances of *that* are extremely slim. It's far more likely that she's run off."

Kylo was reeling from the mention of *foul play.* He had to remind himself that it would be next to impossible for anyone to breach the Per'Agthra's defenses, incapacitate someone with Rey's prowess in both physical combat and the Force, and escape completely undetected, with her in their clutches. "Why the hell would she run off?"
"I can think of a few good reasons!" Isolder snapped, his regal composure slipping with startling celerity, as if he'd been holding on to it by a thread. "Let's begin with how she is a woman barely out of her teens who, in the span of two years, learned that her mother is dead, lost a galactic war, got separated from her friends, was thrust into a strange new world that she doesn't know, and is now being forced into a political marriage with the man responsible for upending her life in the first place! Then let's also take into account the appalling treatment she has endured at your hands this past week!" Isolder fixed Kylo with a look of pure contempt. "I seem to recall, Emperor Ren, that you signed a treaty declaring that you would treat my daughter with kindness and respect. However, you scowl at her all the time, talk to her rudely, and allow your subordinates to insult her to her face. I can't claim to know what transpired after I left the two of you alone yesterday, but Rey was visibly shaken on the journey back to Ta'a Chume'Dan and I can only surmise that you picked a fight with her yet again—after failing to defend her from those two knights of yours. Given all this, it doesn't bewilder me in the least that she would be distressed enough to run away. As a matter of fact, I'm surprised it took her this long to get around to doing so!"

Kylo struggled not to flinch from the harsh truth behind the prince's tirade. "You are in no position to take that tone with me, Your Highness," he retorted, emphasizing the honorific with blazing sarcasm.

Instead of being cowed, Isolder only sighed. "That is not the response of a man who is willing to accept responsibility for his own actions. Neither is it the sort of attitude I would hope for in a man about to take a young wife." He sounded disappointed. "In any case, I've done what I can to explain what Rey is too proud to admit but you sorely needed to hear. We have no choice but to wait for the search to pay off or for her to come back of her own accord."

"Is she still even planetside?" Kylo spat out, taking refuge in a kind of low-grade surliness.

Isolder shrugged. "All ships in the hangars are accounted for. If she's not within palace grounds, she must have left on foot. Perhaps she's gone into the city for a while in order to clear her head."

"At the crack of dawn?"

"Who are we to question the whims of She Who Will Come After?" Isolder stood up, a sure sign that the meeting was at an end. "We promised you breakfast, Your Majesty, and Ta'a Chume doesn't believe that the current situation warrants starving an honored guest. Ducha AlGray will escort you to the Queen Mother's salon."
Isolder of Hapes couldn't help feeling a twinge of guilt as he watched Kylo Ren stalk out the door. While he had a pretty good idea where Rey had actually gone, it wasn't something he would be at liberty to share even if he were so inclined. With any luck, though, this little chat would go a long way in softening Kylo's attitude towards his betrothed.

Isolder was admittedly not holding his breath in that regard. Stars, he'd never before met such an angry young man in all his life. Had Rey not proven time and time again that she was more than capable of holding her own, Isolder would have done everything in his power to put a stop to the impending marriage.

There were other factors, of course. He had been quietly observing Kylo ever since the latter first arrived in the capital city. The Emperor of the First Order was a jumble of contradictions—haughty yet brash, ill-tempered yet aloof. He scowled at Rey a lot, that was true, but sometimes he also looked at her as if he were a cornered animal. The night she jumped into the line of fire, he'd shouted her name in a voice torn by anguish. Surely that signified he didn't hate her.

Isolder also couldn't stop thinking about what happened on the Heresiarch yesterday, the awkward manner in which Kylo had reacted to his praise about the wine. He'd seemed so uneasy, wide shoulders hunching as if in preparation for a blow that was certain to follow, and Isolder wondered... How long has it been since anyone sincerely complimented that boy?

His common sense kicked in. That boy killed his fellow apprentices and his father, blew up the Hosnian system, strapped your daughter to an interrogation rack, and destroyed the Republic. Now he stands ready to bend Hapes to his will. There can be no room for sympathy in your dealings with him. Kylo Ren is dangerous.

"It's all one big mess," Isolder mused out loud. He thought, then, of his old friend. "Ah, Leia, what am I supposed to do with your son? He is too much like his father, but also—" The prince chuckled ruefully, shaking his head—"too much like you."

At the Resistance camp on Stalsinek IV— which was nothing more than a tangle of dropships hidden deep in the forest— a gaggle of officers saluted, having just received their instructions from Leia, and dispersed to fulfill their tasks for the rest of the afternoon. No sooner had they left the General alone at the base of an enormous grayish-green strangler fig when she abruptly sat down on one of the tree's thick, protruding roots.

"Leia?" Luke hurried over, concerned but not particularly surprised. While his twin sister had been all business once they returned to camp after the meeting with Rey, he knew her better than that and
he'd merely been waiting for the other shoe to drop.

As he bent solicitously over her, she peered up at him, her brown eyes glistening with unshed tears. Leia Organa would never cry in front of her troops at a time like this, not when they were in these dire straits and morale was already running low, but Luke was close enough to spot the slight trembling of her bottom lip. "Oh, Luke," she whispered, "my boy is getting married."

Luke patted her shoulder tentatively. She made a sound that was caught between a laugh and a snort. "I'm being ridiculous, aren't I? Just a sentimental old fool..."

"We're both sentimental old fools," Luke assured her with a soft smile.

"I went into the city for a while in order to clear my head," Rey rehearsed under her breath as the Evenstar glided through hyperspace.

"At the crack of dawn?" Aleson asked skeptically, which earned him a dirty look from his passenger. "I'm just helping you patch up the holes in your story!"

"Yes, at the crack of dawn," Rey grudgingly said, "because I... was upset and couldn't sleep." Ta'a Chume and Isolder would see through this excuse, but perhaps it would be enough to fool Kylo. After all, he didn't know that the Resistance was only a couple of short jumps away from Hapes Prime. "I was meditating," she continued, struck by a burst of inspiration, "at the Starlight Tower... trying to regain inner peace so that I may... properly fulfill my duties as the Emperor's wife."

"Very nice," Aleson encouraged. "You managed to say that last bit without gagging."

"Thanks." Rey glanced at the chrono on the dashboard and slumped in her seat, burying her face in her hands. "Oh, I am in so much trouble."

"They'll be happy you came back at all," Aleson said. "I'm the one who runs the risk of severe punishment if the truth behind this little escapade emerges. What's the penalty for Chume'da-smuggling, do you think?"
Rey perked up, her eyes glazing over dreamily as she considered the prospect. "Perhaps they'll sew your mouth shut."

"You wound me, Your Grace."

Rey had left Stalsinek IV feeling the most centered she'd been in a while, invigorated by her newfound sense of purpose. However, that air of confidence had been promptly shaken by the ion storm brewing in the Rifle Worlds that delayed the Evenstar’s crossing from the Great Rim Route to the Gallinore Reach. As a result, she was now over an hour late for breakfast.

*An ion storm,* she groused. *Of all the freak occurrences...* She had the worst luck in the galaxy. She could only hope that her crappy fiancé hadn't woken up on the wrong side of the bed but, knowing him, she might as well be wishing for puffer pigs to fly.

Kylo wasn't exactly sure *why* he'd insisted on waiting for Rey to come back before partaking in the sumptuous meal spread out before him in Ta'a Chume's red-and-white salon. It could have been the lingering remnants of Leia Organa's etiquette lessons that had so far been serving him well in this new age, or it could have been sheer pettiness. In any case, it had definitely not been one of his best decisions— he was hungry and it was painful to sit across from the Queen Mother with nothing to do but make clumsy small talk and take generous sips of champagne-spiked fruit juice. He normally abstained from alcohol as it clouded the senses, but, the way things were going, his fiancée would make a drunkard of him yet. Perhaps *that* was her master plan.

The sole indication that Ta'a Chume was put out with her granddaughter was the fact that she had already started eating, although she passed it off as how she had several meetings right after breakfast and she was too old to go an empty stomach. After an hour had passed with still no sign of Rey, the Queen Mother appeared to get fed up with social chitchat and proceeded to business.

"I will announce the engagement this afternoon," she informed Kylo. "As it will merely be a live recording from my throne room— I do not make speeches in public due to security reasons— you don't need to be there. As a matter of fact, you and Her Grace will be attending a wedding planning session at that time. However, please ensure your presence at the ball that will be held later tonight in honor of—" Her lips pursed— "such a happy event."

"Ensure my presence?" Kylo repeated, quirking an eyebrow. "It seems to me that Her Grace is the one you should be worrying about, Erenera."
"Kira will be there," Ta'a Chume smoothly promised, using Rey's birth name in private as opposed to Isolder. "Now, if Your Majesty wishes to transfer any personal effects to Alqualonde, kindly inform Ducha Yliri as she is in charge of coordinating with the steward there. We are almost done fixing up the place and it will be ready for you and Her Grace to move in after the nuptials."

Alqualonde, the Reef Fortress, was part of Rey's dowry— a magnificent castle perched on an island in the middle of the Evernight, a sea so named for its mysterious blue-black waters. Traditionally a summer retreat for the royal family, Alqualonde had been ceded to Kylo as his permanent Hapan residence— and Rey's as well, at least until she ascended as Queen Mother and had to hold court at the Per'Agthra.

They shouldn't have bothered, in Kylo's opinion. It wasn't as if he'd be spending any significant amount of time in the Cluster once the wedding was over and done with. But Ta'a Chume had another motive, which she proceeded to explain to him. "Kira is the youngest Chume'da in our history to get married. It would be good for her to have experience running a household. In preparation for the future."

Kylo nodded, taking another sip of his cocktail. The Queen Mother was in her eighties, still hale but definitely approaching the end of the average lifespan. He felt a twinge of sympathy for Rey— finding her family had been all she ever wanted, he'd seen that in her mind three years ago, and it was unfair that circumstances had decreed that her time with her grandmother would be cut short. But compassion would be his downfall if he wasn't careful, and so he resolutely pushed the thought from his mind.

And that was when Rey burst into the salon.

She was wearing a sleeveless gown of peach-colored fabric so light it was almost sheer, the high-collared bodice sprinkled with the trademark Hapan embellishments of white-gold floral patterns and the filmy A-line skirt billowing around her ankles. The gown looked freshly pressed, as if she'd been zipped into it mere minutes ago, and, indeed, her face was devoid of all but the simplest makeup and her chestnut-colored hair hung loose around her shoulders in glossy waves, like there had been no time to style it more elaborately.

As he stared at her while she dropped into a hasty curtsy before Ta'a Chume, it took Kylo a while to realize what was wrong with his face. Warmth was creeping up his neck, all the way to the tips of his ears. He was blushing. He was blushing because the object of last night's erstwhile fantasies was only a few feet away— no, scratch that, was now sitting down next to him—

"So kind of you to finally join us, Your Grace," drawled Ta'a Chume.
"I'm sorry, Ereneda." Rey avoided eye contact, nervously smoothing the front of her skirt as she settled into her chair. "I was meditating at the Starlight Tower—"

"You may make your excuses to the Emperor." Ta'a Chume's words dripped with icy venom as she rose to her feet. "I have meetings to attend. Do remember to apologize to His Majesty for wasting his time."

Rey lifted her chin, her gaze fixed on the wall as the Queen Mother swept out of the room to respectful bows from the servants standing quietly by, like ghosts. She blinked once, twice, before taking a deep breath and assuming a calm expression. Kylo looked down, idly drumming his fingers against his cocktail flute, giving her as much privacy as he could— despite his annoyance that she was late, he knew that it was never easy to be chastised in public. It made one's throat knot up in the struggle for composure, the space behind the eyes stinging with humiliation...

The glass was cold on his bare skin. He'd dressed formally for today's events, but he couldn't find the gloves he'd worn to that disastrous banquet. *I need to find a valet, Kylo thought, and I still don't have a list of potential political advisors, either.*

"Are you all right?" Rey asked, and that was how Kylo realized his blush hadn't completely gone away. She looked so lovely in the morning light, and it was only adding to his cursed imagination from the night before. In his dreams he had been kissing those pert breasts as she tugged at his hair and gasped beneath him, her slim thighs wrapped around his hips, the heat and softness of her skin so real that he'd woken up hard and aching, the sheets damp with sweat...

"I'm fine." He cleared his throat, then lifted his glass as an excuse. "It's the champagne."

Rey appeared conflicted, as if she were locked in a fierce internal debate about whether or not to comment. In the end, though, she glanced surreptitiously at the servants and leaned in closer to Kylo, lowering her voice. "If you can't handle your liquor, then maybe you shouldn't drink."

Ah. He knew where this was coming from. That Crolute junk boss on Jakku— he'd valued Rey as one of his best scavengers, but he had knocked her about a few times when he was in his cups. Anger stirred inside Kylo, not only at the memory of those images but also at Rey's insinuation that he would ever be that brutish, and it exacerbated the crankiness brought about by his lack of sleep.

"For your information, I only had the refill so that I could occupy myself while waiting for you to grace us with your presence," Kylo sniped. He motioned one of the servants over and thrust his half-full flute into the man's hand. "Water," he ordered curtly, and another servant hurried forward to pour him a glass of the requested beverage.
Rey’s Force signature wavered. She bowed her head over her empty plate, blinking rapidly. When she peered up at Kylo again, there was an odd determination to the set of her features. "I apologize for being late," she said carefully. "As I mentioned, I went into the city to meditate and time got away from me." Kylo automatically extended his perception towards her, to check if she was telling the truth, but she had her shields up and it was like slamming into a brick wall. "It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't," he muttered, and they spent the rest of the meal in uncomfortable, suffocating silence.

Rey spent the rest of the morning hovering on the precipice of bursting into tears. There was just—so much to process. She was relieved that she'd gotten away with her lie to Kylo but on tenterhooks for the interrogation that Ta'a Chume would no doubt subject her to. She was happy that she'd been able to see Finn, Poe, Leia, and Luke, but tense because of the path that had been decided during that meeting. Plus, her grandmother's cold fury was eating away at her heart, bothering her more than she had expected it would.

Then there was what had transpired during breakfast. Rey cringed to remember how she'd basically nagged at Kylo for drinking— after she'd kept him waiting for more than an hour— but hearing him admit to being affected by alcohol had unlocked something dark in her soul, the memory of Unkar Plutt's putrid breath and meaty fists. She could count on one hand the number of times he'd hit her—and she'd always, always fought back— but once was too much, wasn't it? Although that was something she'd learned relatively late. Unkar had done it to everyone, including his thugs, so it wasn't until Rey experienced life on civilized worlds like D'Qar and Coruscant that she found out it was reprehensible to make one's underling a punching bag.

Kylo had gotten snippy with her, that was true, but then he'd switched to water, a startlingly considerate act that was so at odds with the sort of person she knew him to be. It was ridiculous, but that kindness so soon after Ta'a Chume's disdainful reprimand had made her eyes suspiciously wet.

Rey felt like she was going to combust from all her mixed emotions, and the afternoon's events certainly didn't help matters.

She and Kylo had a late lunch— in her salon, this time— and she was so eager to not have a repeat of their painfully silent morning meal that she seized upon the first topic that came to mind.
"Did you have a good night's sleep?" she asked him.

And, okay, perhaps that was a question she should have asked at breakfast, but surely her bad timing didn't warrant him choking on his soup and then* glaring* at her! He grunted something unintelligible in response, and Rey promptly gave up on making small talk.

After lunch came another round of wedding planning with Daemora and Lairelosse. As Isolder had warned, the subject of consummation soon cropped up. "Her Grace will leave the feast first," said Daemora, "and His Majesty will allot her sufficient time to prepare before following her to her chambers."

"Prepare," Rey said blankly.

"To freshen up and change into more suitable attire, *Chume'da,*" Lairelosse explained.

"More suitable attire."

Lairelosse broke into the widest, most mischievous smile that Rey had ever seen from her. "Well, the fastenings of your wedding gown will be very difficult to navigate—"

"I think I get the picture," Rey said quickly, willing herself not to flush scarlet as she glanced at Kylo. He looked like he'd swallowed a whole lemon. "My ladies, Emperor Ren and I have already discussed this part of the proceedings, so if we could move on—"

"You have chosen your witnesses, then?" Daemora asked.

"Witnesses?" Kylo and Rey sputtered in tandem, nearly rising from their seats in dismay.

"Don't worry," Daemora assured them, "there will be a partition around the bed, it's going to be very tasteful—"

"No," Kylo snarled.
"I understand your reservations, Your Majesty," Daemora said slowly, "but this is a royal wedding shored up by a bilateral agreement that encompasses trade, governance, and mutual defense, so there can be no room for doubt as to the legitimacy of the union—"

"Ducha AlGray," Kylo said just as slowly, dark eyes blazing with ire, "if the Consortium insists on having people watch as I bed my wife, I will declare war on Hapes."

Daemora shifted her beseeching gaze to Rey, who wasn't particularly inclined to offer her any assistance. "I, too, would prefer privacy for such an intimate act," she declared in firm tones. "If the court makes a fuss about it, they can be told that such a practice is alien to the Emperor's culture and therefore offends his sensibilities."

"My sensibilities?" Kylo said in disbelief, but Rey couldn't bring herself to look in his direction—both at that moment and for the rest of the meeting. It was all his talk about him bedding his wife. Logically, she knew it would never happen, but to hear him put it in those terms rattled her.

Back in the safety of her chambers, Rey grabbed her datapad. She'd missed the live broadcast of Ta'a Chume's decree, but the footage was everywhere, being replayed on various channels all over the HoloNet. She watched her grandmother's arctic visage relay news of the alliance between the First Order Empire and the Hapes Consortium in an emotionless voice and listened to her announce the wedding date, and it felt like the final nails were being driven into her coffin with every word.

*I won't cry, Rey thought mulishly. I won't. I haven't cried in ages. They can't take that away from me.*

By the time evening rolled around, she had sunk into that particular kind of numb gray haze that was a product of exhaustion, emotional upheaval, and lack of sleep. She was docile and unspeaking as her ladies bathed and dressed her for the ball; not even Vanya's humor-tinged recounting of how they'd rushed to get her ready for breakfast that morning— with Rey barreling down the corridors as Janassa struggled to keep pace and powder Her Grace's nose at the same time—could shake her from her stupor.

When they were done, the girls cajoled Rey into giving her reflection a once-over. She complied but could take no pleasure in her appearance—not in her long-sleeved white gown with its voluminous balloon skirt of scalloped pleats wreathed in pearls and opals, not in her tiara studded with rainbow gems, each glittering stone worth the price of a Mon Calamari cruiser, and not in the way her eyes were emphasized with gold dust and black kohl and her lips painted the color of sugared rose petals.
Rey saw only a fraud. Someone who was currently a disappointment to her grandmother, someone who would disappoint the Resistance because she wouldn’t be able to get close enough to Kylo for him to take her into confidence regarding Snoke's whereabouts or sub-hyperspace technology or any of the other pertinent matters they needed access to. Hell, the man would rather declare war than sleep with her.

*You're not being rational,* she tried to tell herself, but it was no use. The bad thoughts kept on coming. She was so tired.

She barely registered anything at her own engagement ball, which took place in a room with golden staircases, massive crystal chandeliers, and walls made of glass, all the better to reflect the throng of lavishly dressed aristocrats. People toasted to her and Kylo's union, marveled at the way the jewels of her tiara changed hues as they moved through the light, and generally simpered and cozied up to her as they calculated the benefits of forging a friendship with the future Queen Mother of the Hapes Consortium. At any other time, Rey would have been able to take it in stride, but, tonight, it was such a far cry from the warm affection she'd experienced amidst her friends on Stalsinek IV that it only added to the lead in her bones.

Kylo wasn't much help. He dutifully stayed by her side, accepting congratulations from the slew of well-wishers, but he didn't talk to her and he was careful not to touch her any more than was strictly necessary. At some point during the long, long evening, Rey's gaze drifted to Ysanne and Markus Sevanar across the room, chatting with their circle of acquaintances; Markus had a hand pressed to the small of his wife's back and she was leaning into him, both smiling gaily. They'd married for love, Janassa and Esli had said. Rey would never have that. She would never know what it would feel like to be kissed and to be embraced by someone who doted on her. The most she could hope for was a reluctant kind of friendship over the long term, but Kylo had already told her that he didn't want even that, hadn't he?

She was so tired.

The breaking point came when Ta'a Chume caught her eye and beckoned her over. Leaving Kylo to his own devices, Rey went to her grandmother and bent down so that the older woman could whisper in her ear.

"I have just been informed that Aleson Gray was seen at the public docks last night, escorting a hooded figure onto his ship," Ta'a Chume hissed. "Now is not the time, but tomorrow morning you and I are going to have words. I suppose I can't blame you for wanting to contact your friends, but I
expected you to be smarter about it."

Despite Leia's advice, Rey didn't argue or even attempt to stand up for herself. She simply did not have the strength for it. She nodded stiffly at Ta'a Chume and made her way back to Kylo—

— no, she kept walking—

* 

Since most eyes were on the engaged couple, heads began to turn as the Chume'da fled from the ballroom. The Emperor blinked, and then— without sparing a glance for anyone else— promptly chased after her in long, swift strides.

As the guests started whispering and speculating, Isolder excused himself from the conversation with Lord Feara and approached Ta'a Chume. "What did you do?" he demanded without preamble.

"I thought we agreed that he needs to treat her better," said Ta'a Chume. "Since your little speech didn't work, I had to employ more drastic measures."

Isolder stared sharply at his mother, his demeanor stiff with contempt. "If you made her cry—"

"It's for her own future happiness— and, in any case, she's been in dire need of catharsis for a while. It won't be in vain," Ta'a Chume replied sternly. "After all, what man is immune to a woman's tears?"

* 

Rey's guards had stationed themselves in the hallway leading to the residential wing. They made to block Kylo's path, but he shot them a withering glare. "This is the only way to my suite," he pointed out, and they begrudgingly let him pass. The Chume'doro were far enough from the courtyard to give Kylo pause, but the reason soon became apparent as he drew nearer to the garden. They'd given Rey privacy. He heard her sobs before he even saw her.

The cool radiance of the Hapan night silvered the dewy roses and glinted off the dark waterfall as
Kylo stepped down the stone path. Rey was sitting on the grass in a tangle of skirts, crying her heart out as she leaned against one of the agate benches, her expensive tiara haphazardly tossed to the ground. But it didn't stay there for long—as soon as she registered his presence, she flicked her wrist and telekinetically hurled it at him.

"What the hell?" The words left Kylo's mouth before he could stop them as he deflected the tiara with his own Force ability. It bounced off the grass with a soft thud. "What did I do?"

Rey laughed through her tears, but it was an ugly, bitter laugh. The sound stabbed at Kylo's conscience. "What didn't you do?"

"You're going to need to be a lot more specific," he dryly replied, only to regret it when she, against all odds, sobbed even harder.

"Stop it!" Rey tucked her knees up to her chest as much as the confines of the white gown would allow and buried her face in the cradle of her arms. "J—just stop it!" she stammered, her slim frame shaking. "Stop being mean to me—I don't know, I probably deserve it, but I can't take it anymore! Leave me alone!"

Part of Kylo wanted to do just that, but, before that part could give the rest of him the memo, he was already walking over to her, kneeling down beside her, putting an arm around her shoulders. It's all a trick, whispered that corner of his soul that would never be free of Snoke's perpetual influence. Compassion will be your downfall.

But there was another voice—Isolder's, from earlier that day, narrating a list of failures unbecoming of a man who was about to be a husband, summarizing all that Rey had gone through. Was it any wonder, then, that she'd left the palace in an attempt to center herself, and that she'd left the ball to weep after her betrothed had been an absolute prick to her the last few days? Kylo had no clue what Ta'a Chume had said to her but it was obvious that she'd been scolded, and that had been the last straw...

"Rey," Kylo murmured. He didn't recognize the sound of his own voice. It was too soft, too gentle.

She hesitantly lifted her head to meet his gaze. Her hazel eyes were glassy, her makeup-smudged features contorted in abject despair. Moonlight shone on the tears streaming down her face. She looked so vulnerable that self-loathing roiled within him, sudden and acrid and harsh. In that moment he was starkly reminded of how young she was. Too young to have lost a war, too young to bear the fate of an entire civilization, too young for him and his jaded, broken pieces.
Before he knew what he was doing, Kylo lifted a trembling hand to cup Rey's jaw. The pad of his thumb swept across her cheek in a futile attempt to wipe away the copious amount of wetness strewn there. It was the first time in years that he'd pressed his ungloved fingers to someone else's skin. He felt it all so keenly— the heat of her tears, the silkiness of her skin, the fragile structure of the bones beneath.

Rey took a deep, shuddering breath, her slender hands clutching at his sleeves. Just as he thought she was going to pull him closer, she pushed him away.

"Don't act like you care," she bit out, still crying. "It only makes me wish—" She hiccupsed, too overcome to finish the sentence, and then she wrapped her arms around herself and wept even more fiercely than before.

Kylo reached for her again— because, in all honesty, he had no idea what else to do— but, this time, she shied away, getting to her feet. For a fleeting instant she stood tall above him, draped in pearls and opals and moonlight, so beautiful and defiant through her tears that the sight of her tore at his heart.

And then she whirled around and stormed off to her room, leaving him alone in the garden, where he stayed for what seemed like ages, staring down at the bare palm that had touched her face.

Chapter End Notes

- Ion storm.
- Great Rim Route.
- Gallinore Reach.
- Puffer pig.

The Reef Fortress is EU, but its Hapan name and the name of its sea in this story are from Tolkien's legendarium because I'm a hack.

- Rainbow gem.

The term "Chume'da-smuggling" was coined by Priya365, the scene where Kylo and Rey work together to nix the traditional bedding ceremony was inspired by a comment from iliveinthemoon. Rey's ballgown is due to Rei of Sunshine's artistic vision, and the last scene was prompted by an ask from Kbourne2012. Thanks so much, friends!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

In all honesty, this update would have worked better as two separate installments but I didn't want to leave you guys hanging before I went abroad. If you'd like to preserve my original pacing, I suggest taking a breather once you get to the line break in the middle.

All my love to eyre-bones for the aesthetic, ronrines for the rendition of last chapter's garden scene, billysmind for drawing the wardrobe scene, and hime-jime for commissioning this art of the pre-banquet scene!

And, with that, I'm off to Siem Reap. I would dearly appreciate reviews to keep me company on my travels! Bye for now and thank you, as always, for all the support.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For a couple of days or so, the court was afeirc with the Emperor and the Chume'da's premature exit from their own engagement ball, as well as how she'd gone missing at breakfast prior to that. However, even the most stalwart of gossips soon turned their attention to the upcoming wedding. Like other major royal ceremonies, it would take place at the Starlight Tower in the heart of the capital city, and traffic in the area increased as it was spruced up and its perimeters were secured. In much the same manner, a veritable army of designers, event coordinators, and cleaning staff descended upon the Grand Ballroom of the Fountain Palace, where the reception would be held, to make sure that no speck of color clashed, no single ornament was out of place, and no inch of marble floor went unpolished.

Rey spent most of her time that week attending fittings for her gown when she and Kylo weren't being walked through each step of the ceremony. Their interactions were civil but awkward, since she was highly conscious of the fact that she'd broken down in front of him and he had, for whatever reason, tried to comfort her. In the days that followed, she could still feel the sensation of his hand touching her face, his large fingers warm and strong and yet impossibly gentle against her cheek.

She had expected him to use that night against her, to turn it to his advantage somehow. But that didn't happen— while he wasn't nice by any stretch of the imagination, he did seem to be going out of his way to avoid antagonizing her. She should have been grateful for this respite— instead, it grated on her nerves. Clearly, the only way to get this man to do what she wanted was to sob like a child and practically beg him to act like a decent human being! That didn't bode well for her marriage.

Marriage. Stars. She'd never even been kissed, had never so much as held anyone's hand when they weren't running away from TIE fighters, and now she was going to be Kylo Ren's wife. It was a horror show.
Two days before the wedding, a slew of First Order officers arrived in Ta'a Chume'Dan. They would act as the Empire's witnesses to the ceremony— Armitage Hux, Natasi Daala, Vilim Disra, Kosimo Westermal, Ephin Sarreti, Gilad Pellaeon, and several lower-ranking lieutenants, among them the man who had served Rey, Kylo, and Isolder the wine on the Heresiarch. High up in a tower room on the fifth floor, Rey couldn't stop her hackles from rising as she watched them disembark from their *Upsilon*-class shuttles. These people had been her enemies for three years, and her body's fight-or-flight response categorized them as such. A single bomb on the steps of the Per'Agthra was all it would take to wipe out half of the Empire's High Command. Hell, if Ta'a Chume gave her soldiers the order to fire right now—

"Too close," Rey muttered. She was hovering too close to the edge of what Luke had always warned her about. She hadn't felt the pull of the dark side this strongly in ages, and she chalked it up to her recent emotional turmoil as she forced herself to calm down. There were other ways to wage war. She'd learned that, hadn't she?

Rey continued watching as Kylo strode out to receive his officers. He acknowledged their crisp salutes with a nod and proceeded to talk to them, flanked by his knights while Daemora and a few other courtiers— who had been assigned the unenviable task of shadowing Kylo and attending to his needs for the duration of his stay— waited patiently by. In their dark, austerely tailored clothing, the First Order group stuck out like a sore thumb amidst the pale, ornate armor of the palace guards and the glitzy outfits of the Hapan nobles. There was a certain arrogance to them, and Rey's resentment deepened. For once, she wasn't thinking of the grave threat posed to the Resistance but rather of the fact that this land was *her* birthright. Where did Kylo and his lackeys get off, barging in like they already owned the place, like everything was theirs for the taking—

She would never know if fury had lit up her energy signature like a beacon or if Kylo had felt the weight of her stare in the way all warriors could tell they were being watched. Whatever the case, he broke off mid-sentence and sharply looked up.

Right at her.

Rey immediately backed away from the window, color flooding her cheeks. *Why did you do that?* she just as quickly chided herself. She should have held her ground— so *what* if he caught her staring? This was *her* turf, she could stare at anything she liked...

She had been embarrassed. That was the pure and simple truth of the matter. In that brief moment of eye contact with him, she'd remembered the garden, the moonlight, the callused pad of his thumb clumsily brushing away her tears. Her body had betrayed her then, almost giving in to the urge to melt into his arms before she thankfully regained her common sense.
Rey couldn't help but feel that she'd lost yet another round in this strange new battle with Kylo Ren. She had to find a way to level the playing field somehow.

Later that day, she saw her chance.

They gathered in the usual meeting room— Rey, Kylo, and the original negotiation panels, with Ta'a Chume presiding. Contrary to what she'd promised Rey during the engagement ball, the Queen Mother had not, in fact, cut into her regarding her escapade. It was as if she'd forgotten about it entirely. Rey wasn't in the mood to forgive the old woman, and so she'd been treating her with as much coldness as one could get away with around She Who Has No Equal.

They were discussing what would take place on the night before the wedding— namely, the exchange of tokens. In Hapan culture, this was meant to express the couple's regard for one another, and also— as Lairelosse had confided to Rey in private, with an irreverent twinkle in her eye— the high value of the gifts served as a final guarantee that no one would be jilted at the altar the next day. However, in this particular instance, with everything already locked down in an ironclad bilateral treaty, it would be a hollow gesture for formality's sake. Thus, neither panel was very interested in the outcome and Rey's gift for Kylo— a customized songsteel warblade— was settled upon after a few minutes of lukewarm deliberation.

"And now for His Majesty's gift for Her Grace," Daala said, only to fall silent, listening intently as Kylo muttered something in her ear. She raised an eyebrow in surprise before recovering her composure, smoothly announcing, "The Empire is pleased to offer the Jewel of Zenda, traditionally worn by the Queens of Naboo."

Well, of course you'd offer that, Rey thought sourly. Naboo had been one of the first Mid Rim worlds to fall. It's not like the locals need it anymore.

And then she realized...

Ta'a Chume, far quicker on the uptake, was already nodding. "We are aware of His Majesty's ties to such a precious gemstone, and we gratefully accept—"

"No," Rey said.

Everyone at the table stiffened in their seats. The expression on Kylo's face shifted from politely neutral to wary and alert. She held his gaze, unflinching. She'd already made up her mind what to ask
for on the way to this meeting, and she wasn't going to let herself be swayed by the unexpected albeit twisted sentimentality of him offering her the jewel that had once been worn by Padme Amidala.

"I have more pretty stones than I know what to do with." Rey's every word was clear and deliberate so as to be understood without question by everyone in the room, but she spoke only to Kylo, watching him as closely as if they were about to spar. "However, a blade for a blade is fair, isn't it? I want my lightsaber back."

Contrary to the outburst she was expecting, Kylo remained silent, his dark eyes flicking to Hux and Daala, who both looked perplexed. It was the redheaded general who broke the tense stillness, frowning at the Emperor. "A lightsaber?"

Rey's skin... crawled. There was no other word for it, this feeling of foreboding, like she had just exposed some great and terrible secret. For a moment Kylo's features seemed to crumple. Only for a moment, but long enough for her to see it— the fear.

What was going on?

"Chume'da." The Queen Mother's voice was serene but carried a hint of warning, her nails digging into the armrests. "The Emperor is already being very generous—"

"I've made my decision," Rey interrupted. Although she was caught off-guard by the varying First Order reactions to her terms, she stuck to the script she'd rehearsed in her head, using the memory of Leia's words to bolster her confidence. She was the Consortium heir and she would be the First Order Empress and she was finally, finally playing the game. "That lightsaber is mine by right. I won it from His Majesty in combat three years ago and he obtained it via dishonorable methods that involved the death of Hapan soldiers. If he is truly committed to this new peace, he will return it to me on the eve of our nuptials."

Wrath flared in the depths of Ta'a Chume's jade green eyes. More than the Queen Mother's desire to not rock the boat any further, she wasn't used to being openly defied in public. *What a disastrous couple of weeks it's been for you, yeah?* Rey gloated. *First Aleson, now me.* She'd boxed Ta'a Chume into a corner by bringing up Kylo's transgressions on Stalsinek IV, something that could not be waved away when other Hapans— particularly Beed Thane— were in the room.

*I might not be so bad at this after all,* Rey congratulated herself. *Thank you, Leia.* It wasn't like she needed the Skywalker blade when she had her own saberstaff, but this was a power play. A clear sign that she wasn't going to be a doormat.
Kylo seemed to realize that—and, what was more, accept it. Rey had been expecting a fight—perhaps she’d even wanted one—but, instead, he swallowed, and nodded. "Very well," he said softly. "It's yours."

★

Time passed too quickly for Rey's liking, and it was Lairelosse who came to her chambers on the night before the wedding to deliver the warblade that would be gifted to Kylo. It had been decided that the exchange would take place in the garden, so that the union could be blessed by the light of the seven moons.

"If I could have a moment alone with Her Grace," requested Lairelosse. Rey dismissed her ladies-in-waiting, and they retreated to the solar in a flurry of skirts.

The Ducha of Talcharaim carefully set the sheathed sword down on the bed before turning to face Rey, who was seated at the dressing table. "Chume'da," Lairelosse said, biting her lip in a moment of uncharacteristic hesitation, "do we need to have the talk?"

"What talk?" Rey asked, her brow knitting in puzzlement.

Lairelosse cocked her head to the side as if choosing her words with care. "Regarding what takes place in the bedroom—no, don't be embarrassed—" she hastened to add when Rey promptly turned as red as a tomato—"I just thought that you might not have had anyone to tell you these things, considering that you were separated from her late highness at a young age and you had to grow up in such adverse circumstances."

"I know what sex is," Rey said quickly, more than a little offended that Lairelosse would think she was that naive. "I mean, I've never personally...but I know what it is and it's not a big deal—"

The other woman blinked. "Then why are you blushing?"

_Because we're discussing, specifically, sex with Kylo Ren, of all people._ "I assure you, my lady, there is no need for the talk," Rey said, ignoring Lairelosse's question. "Besides, there's hardly any point. You and I are both aware that this will be a marriage in name alone."
"Your Grace..." Lairelosse was uneasy. "It might be too soon to bring this up since you are young and have not yet ascended, but I believe it's better if you're prepared as early as now for what will be asked of you in the years to come. Once you are Queen Mother, you will need to ensure the line of succession. That's simply the way things are. The longer you go without heirs, the more your reign will be put into jeopardy."

Rey had been aware of that, of course, but she'd pushed it to the very back of her mind. It was... too far off in the future. Too nebulous compared to the present reality of her situation. And there were so many possible outcomes of her decision to spy on the First Order. She could get found out, Kylo denouncing their marriage and waging war. The Resistance could triumph, the Empire crumbling long before Rey had to ascend. Kylo could die in battle. She could die in battle. There was no telling what would happen.

"Let's cross that bridge when we get there, shall we?" Rey pasted on a smile that she suspected appeared more determined than cheerful. "Right now, the Emperor and I have absolutely no intentions of sleeping with each other, and I intend to proceed on the assumption that that won't change."

To her utmost surprise, Lairelosse smirked. "I make it my business to observe, Your Grace. It's what one does at court. And the way His Majesty looks at you sometimes... Well, let's just say that I highly doubt his intentions and yours are in sync."

Rey firmly shook her head. "You are mistaken, Ducha. He hates me. To him I'll always be the scavenger who humiliated him on Starkiller Base and the Jedi apprentice he has clashed with on numerous occasions. He wants neither my love nor my friendship— he told me so himself."

And yet he held you when you cried, whispered her inner voice. He touched your face. He switched to water when his drinking made you uncomfortable and, before that, before the official engagement, he'd even started teasing you a little, hadn't he? There were times when you thought you'd almost made him smile. In the garden, in the Banquet Hall at dinner...

"Men never know what they want," Lairelosse declared. "They're awfully flighty creatures." She glanced at the chrono on the nightstand and sighed. "It's time for the exchange. Should Her Grace wish to broach this subject with me in the future, please do not hesitate. I would be most willing to answer any questions you might have."

Despite the rocky negotiations that had led to it taking place, the exchange went off without a hitch.
Ta'a Chume, Isolder, Lairelosse, Daemora, Hux, Daala, and the ladies-in-waiting served as witnesses, gathering around Kylo and Rey as they stood facing each other by the burbling pool. Since Megos, the All-Mother, had reached her zenith, the garden shone almost as white as pristine snow. It hurt Rey's eyes— and the First Order delegation themselves seemed to be squinting— but the full-blooded Hapans were more beautiful, more ethereal than they had ever been, their eyes iridescent like jewels, their skin lustrous, their features smooth and cold.

Rey felt— *unworthy.* She didn't look like them, she would never be a willowy, graceful thing spun from moonlight.

Kylo's eyes never strayed from her face. He handed her the lightsaber and her heart jumped as her fingers closed around the metal hilt that was still warm from his touch. The encased crystal's energy seeped into her pores, calling to her as it had on Takodana so long ago. It was with some reluctance that she gave the weapon to one of her ladies— Sayl— who then stepped aside so that Niobe could bring the Hapan warblade to Rey.

Songsteel was one of the rarest metals in the galaxy, extremely tedious to forge and shape and used only in the most exquisite of masterwork swords and staves. What Kylo was being given was a blade that had belonged to the Hapan Royal House for generations, the hilt newly inset with shards of ruby and onyx that formed a stylized depiction of the First Order's sixteen-rayed emblem. It was called Telemnar, the Sword of the Morning, and it felt impossibly light balanced flat on Rey's palms as she held it out to Kylo.

He wasted no time in unsheathing the blade from its handsome leather scabbard. It *sang* when he flourished it through empty air, gleaming like an elegantly curved stream of pale fire as the evening radiance brought out songsteel's luminescent properties. "I've heard that this particular metal is resistant to lightsabers," Kylo murmured, his carefully dry tone belying the silver reflected in dark eyes that had just the slightest bit widened in awe.

"Shall we put it to the test?" Rey found herself saying.

Kylo smirked at her in a way that made her pulse skip a beat, sharpened as his features were by the icy moonlight, the thin scar a roguish slant down one side of his angular face. "But you're wearing such a pretty gown," he said, nodding towards her honey-colored satyn robes with their long, billowing sleeves and the Sormahil fire gems embroidered on the square-cut bodice.

Rey snorted. "A fine warrior I'd be if I couldn't even fight in a dress." She stretched out her hand and the Skywalker blade shot out of Sayl's grasp— earning a startled shriek from the teenager— and back into Rey's palm. Her wrist sliced upwards in a flash of silk as she thumbed the emitter and a blaze of deep Adegan blue pierced the tranquility of the garden with a resonant hum as she brought it down over Kylo's head—
With the agile reflexes borne of years of training and honed on countless battlefields, Kylo angled his body away from Rey and blocked from the side, elbow bent in front of his chest, silver songsteel clashing against sapphire plasma in a cloud of sparks. Their eyes met over the interlocked blades and, oh, she had missed this, the sheer physicality of combat that was more instinctive to her than political maneuvering would ever be. And, judging from the warble of Kylo's Force signature—the amazement, the disbelief, the something that was almost hunger—he felt the same.

Hux cleared his throat, breaking the spell that had descended over the engaged couple. Glancing around, Rey noticed that their audience had taken several steps back while the Chume’doro and the Knights of Ren stationed discreetly at the edge of the garden had rushed forward, preparing to draw their weapons. Sayl, who had experienced the lightsaber being wrestled from her by an invisible current firsthand, was shaking. Even Ta’a Chume appeared vaguely unsettled.

"I'm not like any of you," Rey thought with a sudden vicious stab of pleasure that contrasted with the niggling inferiority she'd felt earlier. "I'm something else, and you fear me."

As one, she and Kylo moved away from each other—though, somehow, not as far away as they should have. She extinguished the Skywalker blade and he slid the Sword of the Morning back into its scabbard, and then he leaned in closer to say something meant for her ears alone.

"See you tomorrow," he rasped, his voice low and the Force burning all around them in the moonlight, feeding off the adrenaline lingering in their veins, "Jedi."

As the royal wedding would take place at sunset, the guests started arriving shortly after lunch. For the next few hours, the skies above Ta'a Chume'Dan swelled with all manner of luxurious ships bearing the insignias of noble families from every corner of the Hapes Cluster. There were the interlaced, geometric red-and-white frets plastering the hull of the sleek gray consular shuttle of the Ducher Surrel, whose technology-oriented homeworld, Charubah, manufactured the Guns of Command. There was the golden lion rampant of House Gisk, emblazoned on the fins of a cruiser model unique to the Nantuker system. On the sails of a majestic solar yacht was the black rose of the ruling family of Andalia, cast into shadow by the barge hovering above, its great prow bearing the eagle volant that had for thousands of years been the symbol of the Lords of Stormhold.

These ships and many others were directed onto the landing pads assembled around the Starlight Tower, a building made entirely of emerald glass—the Hapan variety that was as durable as transparisteel, if not more so—that jutted out like a thorny scepter from the skyline of Ta'a Chume'Dan. As each guest disembarked, bedecked in furs and feathers and jewels and silks, they were escorted down retractable winding staircases through the sparkling doorway and ushered to
their seats in the Hall of Ceremonies.

Meanwhile, the bride was in her chambers at the Fountain Palace, trying not to puke.

"I can't do this!" she all but yelled at Janassa, who to her credit didn't so much as flinch as she performed the delicate task of affixing tiny specks of diamonds to the tips of Rey's eyelashes. They weren't even her real lashes—she hadn't even known fake ones existed until her arrival at court. They were unnaturally long and thick, and she couldn'tkriffsing see.

"You're getting the wedding jitters, Chume'da, it's completely normal," Janassa assured her. "Why, my older brother climbed out the window on the morning of his nuptials. When Mother's guards apprehended him, he babbled some nonsense about embracing his true calling as a pirate—Your Grace, with all due respect, no," she added firmly when she noticed Rey side-eyeing her bedroom window in desperation.

"Is the Emperor still here?" Rey asked. "Maybe I can talk to him and we can turn to a life of piracy instead—"

Niobe giggled as she wove the curling iron through the loops of Rey's hair. "If elopement is more Her Grace's style—"

"What?" Bile rose up Rey's throat. "No. I didn't mean it like that."

Perhaps sensing that Rey wasn't in the mood for jokes, Niobe adopted a more solemn expression. "His Majesty has already left for the Tower. In any case, it's bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding."

"Considering that this whole affair is cursed from the start, that won't make much difference," Rey grumped.

* 

She was a mess of nerves and nausea by the time her ladies had finished pinning the tiara and veil to her hair. Rey was on her feet now, uncomfortable and overheated in her heavy gown. Janassa, Esli, Niobe, Vanya, and Sayl stepped back in order to appreciate the full picture, and they slowly broke into wide smiles.
"Oh, Chume'da, you look positively dazzling," Vanya gushed. "His Majesty is a lucky man."

Still unused to being the center of attention even after all this time, Rey fidgeted under their scrutiny. It was, however, nothing compared to Isolder's reaction— he was waiting for Rey in the solar, and he rose to his feet when he saw her, tears flooding his blue eyes.

"My child," was all the prince could manage to say at first, the words choked with emotion, and Rey could only stand there and feel awkward and weird as he fished out a linen kerchief from the pocket of his formal blue coat and dabbed at his cheeks. "Forgive me," he said at last. "It's just that... so much time was stolen from us, wasn't it? I never got to see you grow up. And now here you are, as beautiful as your mother was on the day I married her. If only she could see you now..." He trailed off, seeming for a moment as pained and bewildered as if the loss of his wife had hit like a blow once more.

"Perhaps she can," Rey said quietly. If there was one thing she had learned from being Luke Skywalker's apprentice— from meditating with holocrons and walking amongst ghostly ruins and centering herself in the precepts of the light side— it was that no one was ever truly gone, that nothing was ever truly lost.

There is no death, there is the Force.

Her own eyes were suspiciously wet. She was helpless in the face of all this love— what had been found and what had been taken away. She didn't know what to do with any of it. It took all of her willpower to prevent the tears from falling, because that would mean destroying Janassa's hard work.

"Yes, perhaps," Isolder said quietly. He pasted on a smile, although Rey could tell it was more for her benefit than something he actually felt like doing. "We should get a move on."

Royal weddings on Hapes Prime usually involved a grand procession from the Fountain Palace to the Starlight Tower, giving the common people an opportunity to gawk and speculate as they watched from the sidelines. The First Order hadn't been particularly keen on this idea, citing security concerns, and it was in this one aspect that the Consortium had willingly acquiesced. According to the Queen Mother's intelligence network, public reactions to the betrothal announcement had been mixed due to the same reasons that had initially divided the court; the last thing anyone needed at this point was an attempt on the Emperor's life as he paraded through the streets or some form of protest.
from the more patriotic Hapans. Better to get the ceremony over and done with as quickly as possible.

Thus, Rey was ferried to her wedding on a shuttle that reminded her of Coruscant's slender Eddicus-class atmospheric transports—in function and shape, at least. The Hapan version sported a translucent ivory hull and the fractal star of the Royal House emblazoned in gold, and, on the inside, plush ecru leather seats. It was this same shuttle that would carry her and Kylo back to the Fountain Palace as newlyweds.

Her ladies-in-waiting were markedly more excited than she was, pressing their noses to the viewports and waving at pedestrians below as the shuttle glided over Ta'a Chume'Dan. Rey, meanwhile, sat quietly, holding her bridal bouquet tightly in her lap. It was a gorgeous confection of lyris blossoms the color of sea glass, frothy snow-white commelinas, pale yellow starflowers, and sprays of tiny velanie buds that gave off a sweet, delicate scent, carefully arranged in a nest of shimmering gold mesh and sprinkled with diamonds and sapphires strung on lengths of thin silver chains.

Ta'a Chume had been the one who folded the small fortune into Rey's hands back at the Per'Agthra, before she went ahead on her own shuttle. "These are the same jewels from my own bouquet," she'd told her granddaughter. "I pass them on to you with the sincere wish that they will bring you luck. I did not love my consort, but it was a good marriage as far as these things go." She had paused, staring into Rey's eyes, before gruffly adding, "You are a far more beautiful bride than I ever was. Let us hope that you will one day be an even greater sovereign."

The ivory shuttle slowed down as it approached the Starlight Tower, the emerald glass facade blazing beneath the rays of the setting sun. Rey had to make a conscious effort to stop her shaking fingers from crushing the flower stems in their grasp.

*Here we go.*

Too many cameras, Kylo grumbled to himself as he waited for the ceremony to begin in a secluded alcove adjacent to the vast hall where it would take place. He'd furtively poked his head out earlier to take measure of the crowd, and behind the rows of guests were gathered representatives from what seemed like every single news outlet in the Hapes Cluster, armed with datapads and holocams either mounted on tripods or hovering remote-operated in the air.

The free press had been one of the first things to go when Kylo took power. There had been no small amount of vindictiveness on his part when he signed the decree that outlawed all media not
controlled by the state—he'd spent his younger years being picked apart as Leia Organa's only child and, later on, Darth Vader's grandson. Nowadays he issued proclamations in much the same manner as Ta'a Chume did—in the safety of his throne room on Coruscant, a single cam droid recording his every word.

Today, however, every eye would be fixed on him—not just within the borders of the Hapes Cluster but all over the galaxy at large, as they'd coordinated with Coruscant's main news station to receive transmissions from the Hapan broadcast. He wondered if, somewhere out there, the Resistance would be watching him marry their Jedi superweapon.

He wondered if Leia would see.

Kylo knew that he shouldn't even be thinking about that woman. General Organa was an enemy of the First Order, his unfinished business along with Skywalker and Dameron and the traitor and the rest of them. But it was hard to stop once he got started—memories poured in, alive in the fiery light streaming in through the glass walls.

"On Alderaan," Leia had told him once when he was very young, her expression wistful the way it always had been when she spoke of her long-lost homeworld, "when you wanted to propose to the one you loved, you'd take them somewhere with a nice view, some place that had meaning. You'd take both their hands in yours and look upon their face, and you'd tell them, The sun rises in your eyes."

"Is that how you asked Father to marry you?"

Leia had snorted. "He wishes! No, little dove, your father was the one who proposed to me while we were, as usual, in the middle of an argument. To this day, I sometimes wonder if he only popped the question to get me to shut up."

"I wish the two of you wouldn't fight so much."

There was a hiss of hydraulics as the door to the alcove slid open. Uneasiness crawled down Kylo's spine at the sight of Hux. While he could feasibly attempt to wipe the other man's and Daala's memories regarding the gift that Rey had asked for, it was too big a risk; the officers had minds like steel traps. It was a foregone conclusion that either one of them would tell the Regent about the lightsaber, and any botched attempt on Kylo's part to stop it was only going to add fuel to the fires of Snoke's wrath. Kylo would simply have to bear whatever punishment would be heaped upon him.
"Emperor Ren," Hux coolly stated, "your bride is here."

Located underneath the Tower's belfry, the Hall of Ceremonies required no mode of artificial illumination due to its glass walls that provided not just a sprawling panorama of the city below but also copious amounts of daylight. It was outfitted with a life support system similar to the ones found on spaceships in order to provide circulation and climate control without the need for open windows, and the room stayed pleasantly cool despite the hundreds of people occupying its gilded pews. More minimalist in design than the marble interiors of the Fountain Palace, the Hall nevertheless sported a breathtaking ceiling strewn with multicolored panels of stained glass that were arranged into flowing celestial shapes, scattering jewel-toned hues of cobalt, rose quartz, silver, and lilac across the floor.

But it was the altar on the raised glass platform that was the focal point. Perched atop twelve columns fashioned from pure alabas, an enormous clari-crystalline dragon nearly twenty feet in height stared down the length of the hall with emerald eyes. It was depicted as ready to lunge, its right forelimb slightly raised and its unfurled wings spread so wide that they extended almost to each side of the room. Ceiling-mounted banners with insignias streamed down the wall behind it— the red-and-black rays of the First Order, the Hapes Consortium's blue triangles fanning out from a field of gold, and the white-and-silver fractal star of the Royal House.

And Kylo was still thinking about Leia despite his best efforts, because he found himself wondering what would have happened if things had gone differently, if she had been here today and had a hand in the preparations. Would it be up there, too, the Crest of Alderaan? That upside-down triangle made of interlacing curves that was the emblem of the House of Organa? Or would Leia have let him journey into this new chapter of his life free from the chains of legacy?

At some point during the long planning sessions over the past week, Kylo had come to the conclusion that, as far as Hapan weddings were concerned, the groom and all the guests were mere accessories. It was really all about the bride, and only Rey and her handmaidens would walk down the aisle. A decorous yet tense silence fell over the assembled guests once the Emperor strode in from the alcove and took his place at the base of the platform, while the officiant— a petite, gray-haired woman clad in rich scarlet robes— waited at the top of the steps, right in front of the altar. She was Lasseya, one of the sages who had dedicated their whole lives to preserving the history and traditions of the Hapes Cluster and only ventured down from their mountain temples on occasions such as this.

Willing himself not to fidget, Kylo maintained a blank expression as he surveyed the crowd. His officers— smartly turned out in their dress uniforms— occupied the first few rows along with Ta'a Chume, Prince Isolder, and the sixty-three aristocrats representing each Consortium planet that officially comprised the Royal Court. Everyone looked positively grim, although Pellaeon and Westermal in particular were studying the surroundings with interest, as if calculating the immense riches that would soon be funneled into the Empire's coffers.
"I've seen happier faces at funerals," Kylo heard Lasseya remark to the two initiates who were assisting her, and he fervently—if silently—agreed.

And then the music started, a lilting, stately hymn courtesy of the orchestra up on the choir loft, and the doors on the opposite end of the Hall of Ceremonies slid open. Rey walked in, and, for several long moments, Kylo ceased to breathe.

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All the Knights of Ren were planetside and had been assigned to guard duty, with Boethiah and Jyggalag scouting the perimeter, Hircine and Clavicus stationed at the main entrance, and Meridia and Mephala patrolling the interior levels. The twins were desultorily conversing in the corridor that led to the Hall of Ceremonies when the Royal Guards suddenly snapped to attention, and Meridia trailed off mid-sentence as the vision swept past them, trailed by her ladies-in-waiting.

"Huh." Mephala craned her neck to track the new arrival's progress to the great doors. "Had no idea she'd look that good in white."

"Oh, is the gown white?" Meridia said flippantly. "Couldn't tell with all those jewels. I think the entire treasury's been sewn onto there. I'd be surprised if Lord Ren doesn't go blind."

*  

Kylo was dreaming. He had to be.

There was no way she was real.

The Consortium had spared no expense on their Chume'da's wedding gown. Spun from lustrous Dramassian shimmersilk the color of magnolia petals, the gold-trimmed bodice was a snug-fitting affair with a sweetheart neckline that bared Rey's elegant collarbones and the tops of her slim shoulders, with long, tapered sleeves and a V-shaped waist melting into a dramatic full skirt that probably qualified as a feat of architecture. It was layer upon layer of chiffon and organza lavishly embellished with diamonds set amidst constellations of gold and silver gemweb, the back half gently sloping down into a cathedral train that glided whisper-soft over floors made of Hapan glass. Her chestnut hair had been gathered into an updo of loose curls, adorned with a gold-and-diamond tiara from which streamed a veil made of the finest gossamer, shot through with more diamonds and more
gemweb to create the illusion of a starry sky. Clutching a jewel-encrusted bouquet of flowers that caught the rain of colors from the stained-glass ceiling, she floated down the aisle towards Kylo to the bright, airy strain of violins, the material of her veil so light that her every step made it fan out behind her as if stirred by a breeze. She was utterly exquisite in the fiery light of day’s end, heartbreakingly lovely in white, silver, and gold. She was the sun and the crescent moon and all the stars.

And she was going to be his wife.

Kylo paid no attention to the ladies-in-waiting who were walking behind her or to the appreciative murmurs rippling through the crowd. He no longer noticed the ceiling or the altar or the view of the skyline. All he saw was Rey.

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Shit, I'm going to trip. I'm going to trip.

The awful possibility echoed through Rey's mind as she embarked on her long, slow walk down the aisle. Once she started thinking it, she couldn't stop; it filled her head until she was sure that each next step would be the last before her golden heels slipped on the floor or her legs got tangled up in the yards and yards of shimmering fabric that comprised her skirts. She'd fall flat on her ass and the people that were currently staring at her in wonder would laugh... no, worse than them laughing, they'd feel sorry for her...

By some miracle, though, she managed to make it to the base of the platform without incident. Her nape prickling with the weight of hundreds of gazes, she numbly handed the bouquet to her nearest lady— she was too nervous to register who it was— and then she looked up at the man she was marrying.

Had someone told her a month ago that she would soon be finding Kylo Ren attractive, Rey would have laughed in their face, maybe even kicked them for good measure. But nowadays...

At the banquet, she'd chalked it up to the novelty of seeing him in a color that wasn't black. She wondered what excuse she could cling to this afternoon, because his high-collared, long-sleeved tunic— while embroidered with silver curlicues along the cuffs— was definitely black, as were his trousers and formal boots. As if to offset the relative plainness of his attire, he wore a livery collar of obsidian-hued Gerinian star-stones embedded in white gold, from the back of which hung a platinum-and-midnight brocade cape. His hair was— annoyingly perfect, all lush, artfully tousled dark waves and topped with a rather austere pale silver circlet inset with black enamel and wine-red...
rubies. From afar he looked too tall and forbidding, every inch the despotic king who had lain entire worlds to waste, but once she neared him the look on his face was oddly tender and solemn, the red-gold light of sunset warming his brown eyes.

Holding each other's gazes as the music played on, Kylo and Rey moved at the same time— he executed a courtly bow while she sank into a curtsy as far as her gown would permit. This part of the ceremony had been a source of contention between the two negotiating panels; in Hapan culture, the groom had to bow to the bride, but the Emperor of the First Order bowed to no one and the Chume'da curtsied only to the Queen Mother. Daemora had solved the issue by suggesting that both actions be conducted simultaneously as a sign of mutual respect, so that the couple could proceed to the altar as true equals.

Once they had righted themselves, Kylo held his arm out to Rey. She tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and, together, they ascended the platform's steps. A sigh rose from the crowd— Rey knew that at that moment her train and veil were spilling down the stairs like a river of white and gold, an aesthetic effect that had been carefully calculated by a battalion of dressmakers.

Due to the fact that she was negotiating a series of glass steps in high heels and a voluminous skirt, Rey held on to Kylo tighter than she would have liked. He seemed to instinctively understand what she needed, slowing his pace and keeping his arm steady to support her. She glanced at him, and his scarred profile was wry with faint amusement.

"Oh, you try going up the stairs in these infernal contraptions," she groused, by which she meant both her shoes and her gown.

"Honestly, I'd rather take my chances with the shoes," he murmured. "Your dress is so loaded down with diamonds that I'm surprised the floor hasn't cracked yet."

"Switch off." But she said it without any real ire, grateful for the brief moment of levity.

Once they reached the top of the platform and stood before the altar and the sage, they signed the contract that the initiates brought forward. It was a beautifully embossed document stating that, on this day, Kira Ka Djo of the Hapes Consortium was marrying Kylo Ren of the First Order. Rey had practiced writing her signature with the traditional white feather quill all week, and she was proud of herself for not mucking it up or smearing the gold ink on the cream-colored parchment. Of course, Kylo's signature was a shining example of masterclass calligraphy, and she wondered who had taught him how to write like that. Did political scions have penmanship tutors while they were growing up?
"I have not seen this type of script in decades," Lasseya remarked, perusing Kylo's signature with interest. For such a venerable old sage, she was unusually chatty. "And I thought I never would again. How wonderful to know that the ways of Alderaan have not been lost."

Kylo's jaw clenched but he said nothing. After raising the parchment to the light to ascertain that the ink had dried, Lasseya carefully rolled it up and secured it with a blue-and-gold ribbon. She then placed the scroll at the altar, between the dragon's claws.

Just like they had during countless rehearsals, Kylo and Rey turned to face each other, their hands reaching out across the space between them to, with some hesitation, clasp palms. The sage produced a red silk cord and looped it around the couple's wrists, to signify that fate had bound them together. The music came to a stop, and Lasseya lifted her arms to the celestial ceiling and intoned in a solemn voice that echoed through the room, "We are gathered here today to celebrate the union between two realms, which in itself signifies the dawn of a glorious new age for Hapes. With the blessing of Her Imperial Majesty Ta'a Chume, She Who Has No Equal, these two souls now pledge their troth..."

Perhaps Rey would have been more interested in the sage's words if she'd actually wanted to get married. Perhaps then this farce of a ceremony would have meaning. As it was, though, she soon found herself zoning out of the speech, distracted by the audience's close scrutiny and the feeling of Kylo's fingers laced through the gaps between hers. He had been sternly advised that wearing gloves was disrespectful to the significance of the wrist-binding, and so they were skin-to-skin. His hands all but dwarfed hers, his thick, blunt fingers saber-callused and yet somehow cradling hers so gently, like she was some fragile thing. She had never expected gentleness from this dour-faced, hulking specter of a man. She had never expected to deem him... not unattractive. She had never expected to find herself concentrating solely on him as the sage droned on, because his eyes were soft and dark and they made her forget the crowd and he centered her, here and now on this beautiful, treacherous planet, where he was the only one who had known her in the time before, where he was the only thing she could honestly say that she knew. They might have been thrust into new roles, but there was still a war's worth of thoughts and memories between them. None were what could be called good, but the fact remained that they were there.

Rey thought, then, of last night, of the clash of blades in the moonlight, of how alive she had felt. She knew Kylo was thinking about it, too — the way their bodies had fallen into that old, familiar rhythm, how the Force had sung. She could see that memory written all over his face as his fingers tightened reflexively around hers.

Lasseya made an arcane gesture over their joined hands. "These are the hands that will love you for all the years to come and comfort you in times of sorrow," she told the couple. "These are the hands that will work alongside yours to build an empire." The original wording is "to build a home." Perhaps it was only her imagination, but the sage seemed to smile to herself when she said that, as if she were carrying a great secret. "These are the hands that will fight for you and never let go. These are the hands that will hold your children and help you carry the weight of the world. Through thick and thin, these are the hands that will always reach for yours."
With that, Lasseya fell silent. Anxiety began to curl in the pit of Rey's stomach. It was almost time for her to speak, to say her vows.

Kylo went first, as custom dictated. Custom also allowed for the couple to write their own vows, but in the case of the Emperor and the Chume’da, this would probably have led to the ceremony being ruined by sarcasm and— on Rey's end in particular— a fair bit of cussing. So they stuck to the traditional script, the one that was reserved for royals.

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Kylo could only be thankful that his voice didn't crack as he recited the vows. There was a lump in his throat in the shape of the way he wished things could have been— how could there not be, when Rey looked like this now and when she had moved like that last night? How could he not wish that this was real?

Perhaps it wasn't even tied to Rey specifically, but just... the thought of having someone in general. The sage's blessing had shaken him to the core. These hands of his could never do any of the things Lasseya mentioned, not when they were so irrevocably stained in blood. He would never even be able to fulfill all the things that he was promising Rey, because Han Solo and Leia Organa were his only blueprint for what made a marriage and a family and look how that had turned out.

"Come home. We miss you."

He shouldn't have eschewed his gloves. He couldn't marshal his defenses when Rey's fingers were intertwined with his. He couldn't guard against sentiment when she was finally satiating the buried hunger for touch that he thought he had overcome long ago.

It was all going so, so wrong.

Kylo sped through the rest of the vows while trying not to make it obvious that he was in a rush to finish saying them. He told himself not to meet Rey's eyes, but it was impossible to look away. He was trapped within sunset and stained glass, holding the hands of his bride and gazing upon her face as he said words he wished he could mean.

And then it was Rey's turn.
"I t—take..." She faltered, trailed off, and closed her eyes briefly before trying again. "I take you my heart at the rising of the moon and the setting of the stars." Kylo wished she'd kept her eyes closed. The thing about Rey was that she'd always had an intense sort of gaze, and it made the vows that gradually emerged from her lips all the more fierce somehow, all the more poignant, even if she was merely echoing what he'd said to her scant moments ago. "Blood of my blood, bone of my bone, I would raise my armies in your defense, and I would stand at your back that the world might never overtake us." A dull pain stabbed at Kylo's chest. He knew they were just words— and not even original words, at that— but it had been so long since someone had last told him that he didn't have to fight alone. "I pledge to love you wholly and completely," Rey continued, in a voice that would have been a mere whisper if it hadn't been amplified for the benefit of the guests below, "without restraint, in times of good fortune and in times of trial, in light and in darkness, and in life and beyond, where we shall meet, remember, and love each other again."

Lasseya removed the cord from the couple's wrists and the initiates stepped forward once more, this time with the rings. Rey slipped Kylo's wedding band onto his finger, then stood there with a tremulously beating heart as he did the same to her. There was one last hurdle to overcome, and she wasn't sure if she could bring herself to do it when she was still recovering from the startling intensity of what had just transpired— of promising forever while gazing into someone else's eyes.

"I now pronounce you bonded for life," said Lasseya. "Chume'da, you may kiss your consort."

I can't, Rey thought, panic setting in. But she had to. She and Kylo might have talked their way out of having witnesses at the bedding ceremony, but there was simply no getting around the kiss. It had, since time immemorial, been the gesture that concluded the marriage rites. And if she didn't kiss him, it would cast doubt on the probability of consummation. The court would eat them alive.

Rey inched closer to Kylo, who now looked like he wanted nothing more than to run away. She was grateful for her heels for the first time since she'd put them on, because the added height meant she wouldn't have to tiptoe. However, it was still a bit of a ways up— why did he have to be so tall? She surged onto the balls of her feet, screwed her eyes shut, and—

It was supposed to be a chaste peck lasting no longer than a fraction of a second. She'd had it all planned out. However, what Rey hadn't counted on was that Kylo's lips would be so soft, and that the act of pressing her lips to his would elicit such a warm, pleasant spark of electricity at the point of contact. The sensation terrified and intrigued her all at once.

She also hadn't counted on Kylo encircling an arm around her waist and returning the kiss. When
she could no longer hold her position and lowered her feet back onto solid ground, he was the one who leaned down, their lips still connected, his arm keeping her tight against him.

It lasted too long. Or— it ended too soon. Rey didn't know. Her sense of self-preservation kicked in and she broke away first, her heart feeling like it was teetering on the edge of a cliff. Kylo blinked down at her, his plush lips just the slightest bit parted.

*That was my first kiss*, Rey thought dumbly. Her ears were ringing, and it took her an embarrassing amount of time to figure out that it was due to actual bells. The ones in the Starlight Tower's belfry had been activated, sending their brassy musical notes all across Ta'a Chume'Dan. The orchestra was playing again. The guests in the pews were standing up to properly herald the wedding exit. The sun was just about to dip below the horizon.

Kylo and Rey stared at each other in the shadow of the dragon altar. They were married.

Chapter End Notes

Kosimo Westermal.

Ephin Sarreti.

Gilad Pellaeon.

Many of you called it re: the exchange of tokens, but it was Decaf_Is_Evil who mentioned the Skywalker lightsaber and theauthorformallyknownashobbitbabe the keepsake from Padme in this context. It took all my self-control to not spill the beans when I replied to your comments lol ily guys!

Jewel of Zenda.

Songsteel.

Sormahil fire gem.

Charubah.

Nantuker system.

Andalia.

Eddicus-class planetary shuttle.

Lyris.

Commelina.

Starflower.
Velanie flower.

"The sun rises in your eyes" is the customary wedding proposal in Guy Gavriel Kay's *Fionavar Tapestry* universe.

Clari-crystalling.

Thanks to the nice Tumblr anon who suggested incorporating Alderaanian traditions, I hope my spin on it didn't disappoint you too much in this chapter and, don't worry, there will be references to the braids thing in the future ;)

Crest of Alderaan.

Huge thanks to Rei of Sunshine for helping me visualize Rey and Kylo's wedding outfits! She is very much responsible for Kylo's look, in particular, because I'm clueless when it comes to menswear.

Dramassian shimmersilk.

Gemweb.

Gerinian star-stone.

The bowing aspect of the ceremony was suggested by below_the_starry_clusters_bright, tuneskootch was the one who planted the idea of a sunset wedding, Kbourne2012 is responsible for the Red String of Fate (TM), and again_please reminded me of a Tumblr anon suggesting that Kylo feel super emo about Rey's vows to protect him, lol. The whole bit with Kylo and Rey unable to look away from each other during the vows was inspired by a comment from rainlily. And speaking of the vows, they were cobbled together from *Skyrim* dialogue and Celtic pledges that I found online.
Guys. I've watched *The Last Jedi* four times now and I'm still not entirely convinced that I'm not dreaming. This is what vindication feels like. I love you, Reylo Rian Johnson.

**MILD SPOILERS:** I can't believe it's canon that Kylo is Renperor and that the Resistance are rebel scum and that *these are the hands that will always reach for yours* and that they literally did *stand at your back that the world might never overtake us.* *cries*

Thank you to the talented artists who've made stuff for LWABOC since the last update — knightsofthestars, kayurka (who was also my sounding board for reception color motifs), bb-ey, callmereylotrash, and degouges. Thank you to the lovely readers who have left comments that I promise I'll catch up on this weekend. And thank you to everyone who has stuck with me these past two years of shipping Reylo. I am so happy to be reveling in the post-TLJ bliss with you all.

As always, I would love to know your thoughts on this chapter!

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It was raining on Stalsinek IV, a somnolent drizzle that spattered the leaves and added to the gloomy atmosphere in the Resistance camp, deep in the heart of the forest.

They were gathered around the holotable in the makeshift command center— Luke, Leia, Finn, Poe, Chewbacca, and the droids. The live broadcast of Kylo and Rey's wedding had just ended, the feed blinking out of existence on the image of the Emperor escorting his bride to the ivory shuttle waiting for them outside the Hall of Ceremonies, both looking pale and shaken but unarguably resplendent— him in black and silver, her in white and gold.

"That," Finn said after a long, awkward silence, "was weird."

"Weirdest goddamn thing I've ever seen," Poe fervently agreed. "And I've seen a lot in my time."

Finn grimaced. "She kissed him!"

Poe wrung his hands in dismay. "He kissed her back!"
"And what, precisely, did the two of you think happens at weddings?" Luke tried to joke, but it fell flat.

"General." C-3PO's gold-plated head tilted in concern. "Are you feeling quite all right?"

Leia was gripping the edges of the holotable as tightly as if this act was the only thing keeping her on her feet. She looked around the room slowly, giving the impression that she was only just now registering the presence of its other occupants. The expression on her face was too poignant to be joy and yet too tender to be sorrow.

It was Chewbacca who moved first, lumbering forward and then wrapping his sinewy arms around the General, patting her back in gentle, clumsy thumps. "Oh, get off me, Chewie, I'm fine," Leia grunted. But her face was hidden in his fur and a slight sniffle marked the end of her sentence, one that her comrades tactfully chose not to comment on.

Regaining her composure, Leia stepped back from the Wookie. "It's done, then," she said in brisk, purposeful tones. A soldier once more. "Until Rey finds the way to Snoke, our mission for the time being is twofold— first, we have to develop countermeasures for the Empire's sub-hyperspace technology and, second, we need to start putting together a list of allies that we can reach out to when the time is right. Allies we can trust to help us, and come when we call."

"Do we even have any of those left?" Finn asked. "The First Order's seized control of the entire galaxy."

"It's impossible to fully control the Outer Rim," said Luke. "If there are any lingering pockets of resistance, they will be scattered through there."

"All right, so we have to find them." Poe turned to Leia. "General, I can get a recon team out today."

"Easy there, Commander," Leia dryly interrupted. "I know you're getting stir-crazy but that's no call to act reckless. In case you've forgotten, we're surrounded by First Order dreadnoughts. Let's wait until they fall back to the Core, shall we? According to Rey, my son and his fleet will leave Hapes at some point during the next day cycle. We can make our move then but, before that, we have to call a meeting with the rest of the leadership."
"I hate meetings," Poe grumbled. "Too much arguing, not enough doing."

"Lots of thinking, though," Leia retorted. "We could always use more of that around here."

Rey’s ladies had detached the cathedral train before leaving her and Kylo alone in the shuttle's private compartment but, even without twelve feet of material dragging behind it, the skirt was still a massive, ballooning tent of a thing that made it necessary for Rey to occupy three seats in the small cabin. Kylo sat across from her, too tall and broad for the cramped space, his long legs all tangled up in the diamond-studded layers of fine silk streaming from her gown.

He couldn't help but look at her in such close quarters. Even though he tried to control himself, his gaze kept flickering back to her face as she stared out the viewport while the shuttle glided over the rooftops of Ta'a Chume'Dan. She shone in the gathering twilight, the tips of her lashes spiked with fragments of tiny diamonds that glittered against her smooth, dewy complexion. As beautiful as she was, Kylo missed the freckles that he knew for a fact were underneath all that makeup, dusted across the bridge of her nose and the tops of her cheeks.

His eyes drifted to her lips. They were painted a delicate, icy shade that was more peach than pink, and they had felt so incredibly soft pressed to his own. He shouldn't have returned her kiss but, back there in the chamber made of glass, standing before the dragon altar, it had been pure instinct to chase after her mouth, to hold her tight against him. It had felt... oddly blissful, like everything else had been blocked out for that brief moment in time and he was free-falling and Rey, in all her warmth and light, was the only thing anchoring him while simultaneously making his blood sing.

In an effort to forget his reaction to what had, relatively speaking, been such a chaste kiss, Kylo looked somewhere else. Unfortunately, he made the mistake of dropping his gaze from Rey's lips and that meant that the somewhere else was lower, past her chin, past the column of her throat, all the way down to the swell of her breasts, enticingly molded by the white-and-gold bodice. While this ensemble bared less cleavage than the blue one had, the sight was still tantalizing— perhaps even more so because of what the gown represented, that she was his and he was hers and all that implied.

*Force help me*, Kylo thought miserably, resisting the urge to put his head in his hands, *I'm attracted to my wife.*

"What are you doing?" Rey suddenly asked.
She'd caught him. She'd caught him ogling her chest.

Kylo quickly averted his gaze to the skyline beyond the viewport. "Nothing." His answer came out a bit too snappish and he regretted it almost immediately. He'd resolved to be nicer to her after that night in the garden—distant, but nicer. It was, he figured, the least he could do.

"I know you must think I look ridiculous in this getup," Rey huffed, "but it couldn't be helped. Just be glad I talked the couturier out of a twenty-foot train."

Kylo turned back to her, surprised at the extent by which she had misinterpreted his actions. Her posture was one of stiff, injured pride, but she was nervously toying with the embroidered star pattern on her gossamer veil. You don't look ridiculous, he wanted to tell her. You are the loveliest thing I've ever laid eyes on. Perhaps you always have been, ever since Takodana.

"Stop doing that," he said instead, impulsively reaching out to grab her wrist before she could inflict any serious damage to the beadwork.

Rey's hazel eyes widened at the contact. She shifted her wrist in his loose grip and somehow, somehow, her palm scraped along his and their fingers intertwined on her lap, amidst the diamonds and the gemweb, amidst all those elegant, swirling constellations. It was as natural as reflex, as hungry as second nature. It was a moment that carried as much fluid gravity as the time he met his officers on the steps of the Per'Agthra and felt her eyes on him and looked up.

Let go, Kylo's common sense screamed at him, but instead—instead—

His fingertips traced the edges of the bony curvature of Rey's knuckles. His thumb moved in haphazard circles, skimming the mound of her palm. Her hand was not an aristocrat's hand—there were calluses that had lingered, on fingers that were thin yet strong. It was all fascinating to him, the texture of her skin, the ridges of uncharted territory. All the while he was staring into her eyes, mesmerized by how, in this light, on this near-night, her Hapan blood shone through in the splinters of gold that flecked her darkened irises.

"How did you talk the dressmaker out of the twenty-foot train?" he blurted out. Because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

Rey blinked. It was as if some spell had been broken by the sound of his voice, by his inane question. And then those tempting lips of hers lifted at the corners in the slightest suggestion of a
challenging smile. "I threatened to declare war on Hapes, of course," she quipped, throwing his own words back at him.

Caught off-guard by her joke, Kylo felt his own mouth twitch upwards. It was little more than a half-smirk, but it was the closest he'd come to outright grinning since he'd teased her on the night of the banquet. "Clever."

She lowered her lashes, peeking out at him through fringes of diamonds glimmering like moondust. "Original, too."

It was the beginnings of laughter, this strange thing that thrummed within his chest. It was dangerous, almost frightening. Before he could decide whether to give vent to it or suppress it altogether, the shuttle gently sloped into a downwards trajectory, signaling their approach on the Fountain Palace.

Kylo let go of Rey's hand, settling back against the ecru leather cushions. He was, overall, relieved that the moment of camaraderie had passed, even as part of him felt vaguely bereft.

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As soon as Rey disembarked at the royal hangar, her ladies clustered around her to begin the delicate process of removing the veil from her tiara. While they did this, she was still holding on to the hand that Kylo had extended to help her out of the shuttle. Perhaps it should have worried her that they couldn't seem to let go of each other every time their fingers interlaced, but she was distracted— and more than slightly amused— by the long-suffering expression on his pale face as Janassa, Esli, Niobe, Vanya, and Sayl squealed and tittered and gossiped about various wedding guests. These girls were Hapan nobility— female nobility, at that— and thus they weren't particularly inclined to act deferential in Kylo's presence. It must have irked him, used as he was to the bowing and scraping of his subordinates in the First Order hierarchy.

Entering the Grand Ballroom on Kylo's arm, Rey saw that it had been transformed into a wonderland of sunset colors, as if the sky that had graced her wedding had been used to gild the vast hall. A dozen enormous bronze chandeliers hung from the ceiling, bearing amethyst banners etched with the golden fractal star and what seemed like millions of tiny lights. More than a hundred round tables were bedecked in lush purple cloth, burgundy napkins, ruby-encrusted vermeil flatware, and floral arrangements of cream and dusky pink. On the dais at the end of the ballroom was another table decorated in much the same manner, rectangular in shape and set for two and perfectly positioned to be the focus of curious stares.

All the better to be gawked at, Rey thought sourly, but the truth was that the guests didn't even wait
until she and Kylo were seated to do *that*. All conversation and music ceased and people stood up and every eye swiveled to them as soon as they appeared in the doorway.

"It is my privilege to introduce," said Daemora AlGray, her voice artificially amplified to echo through the hall, "Her Grace Kira Ka Djo, *Chume'da* of the Hapes Consortium, and her consort, His Majesty Kylo Ren of the First Order. Long may they reign."

The last part struck Rey as odd. She wasn't Queen Mother yet—

*No,* she realized, a chill shooting down her spine, *but I am Empress.*

There was movement all throughout the Grand Ballroom. The lords and ladies of Hapes were sinking into bows and curtsies, the First Order officers saluting. It occurred to Rey that Daemora had phrased her announcement to produce a certain effect— the Consortium appeared less grim upon being reminded that one of their own would now rule the galaxy at the Emperor's side.

The music started up again as the royal couple walked into the ballroom, crossing the dance floor to reach Ta'a Chume and Isolder's table. Rey was about to curtsy to the Queen Mother out of habit but Isolder caught her eye, stopping her with a slight shake of his head. The Empress curtsied to no one — *that* would take some getting used to.

"Emperor Ren," Ta'a Chume drawled. "Welcome to the family."

"Thank you, *Ereneda.*" Kylo's tone was courteous but Rey could feel the muscles of his arm tense in her grasp, through the silk of his tunic. "The honor is mine."

Isolder stuck out his hand, which Kylo— after some hesitation— shook with his free one. "Take care of my daughter," said the Hapan prince, fixing him with a level stare.

"I will," the younger man replied in a voice that was, curiously enough, softer than when he had addressed Ta'a Chume. And slightly strained at the edges.

Isolder turned to Rey and kissed her on the forehead. It was such a tender gesture that a lump formed in her throat, but it was over much too soon and then she had to face Ta'a Chume, who merely offered her a brisk nod.
"It was a marvelous wedding, Empress." Something about the way the Queen Mother called Rey by that title indicated that she was aware of the power shift, but her face was an imperturbable mask, concealing her thoughts entirely.

Now that the exchange of greetings was over and done with, there remained one more custom standing between Rey and dinner. Kylo escorted her onto the middle of the dance floor as the lights dimmed.

"They have taught you how to dance, yes?" he murmured in her ear.

Perhaps it was her frayed nerves, but the fact that he had posed his question mere seconds before they were expected to waltz elicited a startled giggle from her. "What a time to ask!"

The line of his mouth relaxed. For a moment, she thought he was actually going to smile. "Just checking."

Facing each other in the center of the ballroom, beneath the twinkling lights of a bronze chandelier as big as certain shuttle classes, Kylo bowed and Rey curtsied, and then they assumed the closed position— his right hand on the small of her back, her left hand curled on the jut of his broad shoulder, their other hands clasped together at chest height. The orchestra started up the music once more and they fell into motions that Rey had started learning months ago— she'd needed dance lessons because balls were part and parcel of court life, but she would never in a million years have been prepared for her first official dance being the literal first dance at her own wedding.

It did not go as smoothly as she'd hoped.

"Rey." Kylo sounded annoyed. "You're supposed to let me lead."

"What are you talking about?" she demanded, utterly bewildered. "I'm the one who leads."

"No—" He broke off as understanding dawned on his face. "Very well. Apparently they do things differently in the Hapes Cluster."

As their dance progressed, she could tell that he was making a concerted effort to adapt. However,
old forms were hard to break. "You're still not letting me lead," she said through gritted teeth. It was less a dance and more a tug-of-war.

Kylo scowled but obediently readjusted his stance, forcing himself to turn pliable in her hands. That was the moment everything changed.

"Glad they figured that out," an unimpressed Ta'a Chume remarked to her son as the couple on the dance floor overcame their initial awkwardness and fell into the graceful, sweeping rhythm of the music.

Isolder was laughing silently, palm cupped over his mouth. "They wouldn't let each other lead!" His blue eyes crinkled at the corners. "This marriage is going to be interesting."

Ta'a Chume's lips pursed. "Before the circumstances forced my hand, I had hoped for someone more malleable for Kira. I suppose I shall have to settle for someone who cares for her."

"Do you truly think he does, Queen Mother?" asked Isolder, a hint of doubt creeping into his tone.

Ta'a Chume smirked. "And here I thought your powers of observation had been much improved as of late." She gestured imperiously at the couple. "Look at him, Isolder."

Isolder looked. The Emperor was holding his bride as close to him as her wide skirts would allow. In the silvery lighting, his dark eyes bore into hers. Her gown caught the radiance of the chandeliers, and the illusion was such that the swirling panels of gold were reflected on his face, which was soft with a reluctant, pained sort of reverence.

Rey for her part seemed equally entranced. She was gazing up at Kylo, her eyes wide beneath diamond-tipped lashes, her lips just the slightest bit parted. He twirled her around, the silk of her skirts blossoming over the marble floor, and, when she came back to him, her left hand didn't return to its place at his shoulder but, instead, clasped the back of his neck, the curve of her arm bringing his face closer down to hers. They moved together like water and moonlight.

"I must counsel that girl to keep a level head." Ta'a Chume appeared far less pleased about the possibility of Rey having feelings for Kylo than vice versa. "Things are complicated enough as it is."
The food looked delicious. It was too bad that Kylo could hardly taste any of it.

He felt like a zoo animal as he sat at the head table with Rey. The Hapans were too well-bred to make their scrutiny obvious, but even the subtlest looks and the most furtive of whispers could not escape the net of the Force. He picked at each dish brought out by a never-ending parade of server droids and took sparing sips from each vintage that was served to complement the various courses.

Beside him, Rey was faring no better, unenthusiastically prodding at her lamb fillet with a bejeweled fork. Rubies embedded in the flatware, diamonds on eyelashes, sapphires strewn through the bridal bouquet... Kylo was willing to bet that even Canto Bight's most ostentatious patrons would have yelped, "Oh, I say, hold on!" at this show of excess.

There was a rustle of silk as Rey tried to cross her legs and failed, thanks no doubt to the voluminous inner layers of her skirts that must have tangled between her legs. Kylo shied away from such a heady visual because he knew that dwelling on that particular image would be his ruin. She huffed, annoyed, and resorted once more to taking out her frustrations on the slice of lamb on her plate, hacking at it with a viciousness ill-suited to her formalwear and their elegant surroundings.

"That thing's dead enough, surely," Kylo drawled.

Rey's eyes remained glued to her plate. She'd been avoiding his gaze ever since the end of their dance, and he could hardly blame her. Something had passed between them, some smoldering, electric charge. Heat lanced through his abdomen at the recollection of the way they had sailed across the floor, her curves pressed to his frame and their bodies responding to each other in a pulsating tempo that flowed as effortlessly as when they sparred. They hadn't even heard the music come to an end—it had taken a smattering of polite applause from the guests to jolt them out of their reverie, to stop swaying against each other.

And now they were sitting side by side, being plied with aromatic, artistically-plated food and unable to enjoy any of it because of the scrutiny from an entire ballroom's worth of people. Kylo wanted to duck his head, shield his face from view somehow, retreat to somewhere private and never emerge again. Was whatever hermit hole Skywalker had crawled into still available?

Rey was too agitated to respond to Kylo's quip about the lamb. Her silence rattled him further, and compounding their mutual dilemma was the awareness that they had to be on their best behavior in
order to sell the idea that this alliance was truly something they both wanted. But it was impossible to paste on false smiles and chat casually as if nothing were wrong.

Kylo's knee started jiggling under the table. Out of pure nerves. The chandelier lights were in his eyes, an uncomfortable glare that made him vaguely anxious, and then there were the ceaseless stares and whispers that reminded him too much of being Leia Organa’s son.

He felt a slight pressure on his knee and glanced down. Rey's hand was settled atop his kneecap, her wedding band sparkling around her ring finger. She still wouldn't look at him and her touch was perhaps too firm to be considered gentle, but it calmed him nevertheless. He yearned so badly to close his hand over hers, to feel her bare skin again...

Stop giving in to your weakness, hissed whatever logical part of his brain was left to him. How do you think this story will end? It's a marriage of convenience and nothing more. Your goal is to secure the Empire's foothold in Hapes and find what remains of the Resistance. You must not let yourself be turned from your true purpose.

It wasn't long before Lairelosse Yliri approached the head table, all sophisticated curtsy and pleasant smile and copper robes. "Your Grace, Your Majesty," she said in a low voice, "it's time to make your exit."

Unseen by anyone else beneath the table, Rey's fingers suddenly dug into Kylo's thigh. He could feel the warp of nervousness emanating from her Force signature. They were to leave the Grand Ballroom and retire to her chambers for the consummation. Granted, it had already been agreed upon that they wouldn't actually do anything, but still...

As if on cue, Ta'a Chume rose to her feet, effectively putting a stop to all conversation. "Honored guests," she said, holding a glass of wine in her hand, "I thank you for celebrating this historic night with us. Through this union, we have engendered a new age of peace and prosperity for the Hapes Cluster and the First Order Empire. Please join me in a toast to the newlyweds as they embark on the next chapter of their lives together."

Rey thought she was holding up pretty well, all things considered. She had managed to leave the reception with poise, had even flashed Kylo a small smile before they were escorted to their respective suites for a change of clothes. Away from the hubbub, finally out of sight from prying eyes, with her hair down and her torturous shoes and false lashes removed at long last, she was feeling more optimistic about getting through the rest of her wedding night with no more added
stress.

All that changed when Esli marched out of the walk-in closet, bearing Rey's change of clothes.

"I am not wearing that."

"But, Chume'da, it's tradition—" Janassa started to plead but Rey cut her off.

"Look at that thing!" She gestured in dismay at the—well, it was hardly even a dress. It was hardly even a scarf, by her standards. True, it had long sleeves and it trailed past her ankles, but that didn't matter when it was made of material so sheer that she could see through it, with only stylized appliqués strategically positioned to cover her... her bits. "Who in their right mind would—" She faltered, at a complete and utter loss for words.

"It's lingerie, Chume'da, " Niobe hastened to explain.

"I don't care what it's called," Rey savagely declared. "I'm not putting it on—"

Her ladies-in-waiting looked disconcerted. She glared at each of them in turn, daring them to argue.

The standoff was disrupted by the sound of chimes. Kylo had arrived and was waiting outside her solar.

"Your Grace," Vanya said, "the Emperor's here. These are the only sleep clothes we prepared. There's no more time."

Rey should have put up a fight. But the girls wouldn't understand because, as far as they were concerned, what would follow was a legitimate bedding ceremony. She didn't need gossip contradicting that spreading through the court. And she doubted Kylo would appreciate being made to stand outside her door for the amount of time it would take to search her wardrobe for a less revealing ensemble. Her only other option was to sleep in her wedding gown, and she was definitely not keen on that.

"Fine," she sighed, her shoulders sagging in defeat.
Her ladies worked quickly to extricate her from the gown, arrange her hair into a simple braid, and spritz perfume onto her pulse points. The chimes sounded again just as the flimsy excuse for a dress was being slipped over her head.

Sayl broke out into a wicked grin. "Someone's impatient."

Rey groaned inwardly. *Give me strength.*

At last, the girls bobbed their curtsies and stole out of the room, dimming the lights as they went. Rey was left alone in a kneeling position in the middle of the canopy bed, her hands folded in her lap and her heart hammering in her chest as she waited to receive her husband.

Chapter End Notes

The dance scene is dedicated to iliveinthemoon and Kbourne2012 (who has been campaigning for it *most ardently* since the very beginning).

There will be a more detailed description of Rey's lingerie next chapter... from Kylo's point of view >:))
This speedy update brought to you by how absolutely inspired I was by the amazing response to the last chapter! You guys are fabulous. I'm posting this from the airport while waiting for my flight home, and I promise I'll catch up with all your comments over the holidays. In the meantime, I hope you'll enjoy this installment and that you'll let me know your thoughts. Season's greetings! Love, Thea <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The door to the Chume'da's solar slid open, revealing the grinning faces of Rey's ladies. Yes, the infernal teenagers were actually grinning, the effect not dissimilar to a school of dazzlingly pretty, bejeweled sharks.

"Her Grace is ready for you, Your Majesty," Janassa saucily quipped before she and her compatriots burst into unabashed giggles, taking their leave in a flurry of rustling skirts.

Left alone in the solar, Kylo breathed out an irritated sigh at the girls' antics. He slowly made his way to Rey's closed bedroom door, some part of him still unwilling to believe that this was nothing more than a ridiculous fever-dream. The original plan had been for Rey to exit the ballroom first, as custom dictated, and for Kylo to be escorted to her chambers by the appointed witnesses after some time had passed. However, Lairelosse had pointed out that the bridegroom's continued presence among the Hapan nobles might rekindle questions as to why there would be no witnesses in the first place—better to just duck out of the guests' sight as soon as possible while they were all in their cups.

Standing outside Rey's bedroom, Kylo realized that the change in plans had resulted in a certain weighty intimacy that overlaid this moment, the air crackling with expectation. Of course, he vastly preferred being alone with Rey for an entire night to having sex with her while other people watched— the mere idea made his skin crawl— but, now that it was truly happening, he rather doubted his ability to control himself or at least to make sure that his personal feelings stayed hidden.

Because the plain and simple truth of the matter was that, even before all this, even before he had seen what she looked like with her face exquisitely made-up and wearing dresses that showed off her alluring curves, Kylo Ren had dreamed of the girl. At some point during the war, in the lengthy intervals between their sparse but intense confrontations, he had started wondering what she would be like in bed, if she would channel all the blazing hatred in her eyes into another kind of passion entirely. He had fantasized more than once about making her scream— not in the heat of battle, but with his kisses and caresses. These were sick and shameful desires that he took care to hide from Snoke, although he feared that his master had been starting to get suspicious before Coruscant fell.
A few weeks after encountering Rey on Stalsinek IV, Kylo had visited a brothel for the first time in his life— one of the discreet, expensive places favored by First Order officers. This had been around the time he'd started meditating with the Skywalker blade and it had begun tugging at the splinter of light lodged inside him. It was his desperation to extinguish that light that had led him to try accessing the dark side via carnal pleasure— or, at least, that had been one of the reasons. The other was that he had been so pent-up, so frustrated— so unable to concentrate— due to his thoughts of Rey. He'd had no qualms wholeheartedly blaming her for this lapse in discipline and loathing her more and more for it, even as the courtesan he chose had resembled her in small ways— coltish, more pretty than classically beautiful, brown-haired and doe-eyed. She had been Kylo's first, and he had sought out similar-looking women here and there whenever the need once again grew too great. It hadn't happened very often— when all was said and done, there had still been a war to win— and he'd learned to take it in stride. Practicality, biology, and all that.

But things were different now. It was his wedding night, and his bride was Rey and she was waiting for him.

Steeling himself, Kylo knocked on the bedroom door. It opened as if of its own accord— Rey had used the Force to grant him entrance.

Her chambers were disconcertingly feminine to him, with delicate pastels and lush dreamsilk panels hung on the king-sized canopy bed. The curtains had been drawn against the brilliant Hapan night but the shadows were edged in gold by glow-panels cleverly concealed along the walls, providing Kylo with enough light to see the woman on the mattress.

His breath hitched in his throat. Rey was dressed in a nightgown sewn from the sheerest, flimsiest mesh fabric that Kylo had ever seen. Every inch of the long-sleeved bodice clung to her slim torso, accentuating her narrow waist and the slight flare of her hips, and, stars, it was like she was wearing nothing, her sun-kissed skin clearly visible through the transparent material, obscured only in some places by an intricate patchwork of embroidered lace. Powder-blue everlilies dripping from leafy celadon vines curled along her wrists and her ribcage and down her thighs, connecting four larger appliqué pieces— stylized, spread-winged Corosian phoenixes, pale pink in color, stitched over her breasts and the spurs of her hips as if in some valiant, last-ditch attempt at modesty.

Rey's face had been scrubbed free of makeup and her chestnut hair gathered into a loose braid draped over one shoulder, trailing past her right breast. She was kneeling on the bed, her hands clasped together in her lap. She looked like a goddess and like an offering all at once. She looked—

— very, very grumpy—
"Do not," she snarled at him, "say anything." Her face was flushed pink due to embarrassment, but it only added to the gorgeous sight so appealingly arranged before him.

"Okay," was all Kylo managed to force out. He cautiously stepped further into the room and her gaze flickered over his white linen shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and loose black trousers. He wondered what kind of man she saw, suddenly more self-conscious than ever of his features—the nose that was too prominent, the mouth that was too wide, the graceless asymmetry of his cheekbones and chin and jaw.

Desperate to do something—anything—that didn't involve gawking at her, he glanced around her chambers in a futile search for the couch he'd be sleeping on. There was a chaise lounge, but it was a slender, flimsy thing that would barely accommodate three-quarters of his height and half his width. The floor it is, then, he thought with resignation. "Shall I just grab the extra blanket, then?"

"W... what?" Rey breathed out, as if in a daze.

Kylo turned to her. She was staring at him from the bed, and he experienced a moment of déjà vu—the night of the banquet, the altercation in his room, her hands on his chest, how she'd forgotten what he'd asked. The flicker of hope he'd felt that perhaps she was attracted to him, too. "I see that the Hapan court is training her well," Snoke had sneered, convincing Kylo that Rey was trying to manipulate him.

But that didn't seem to fit with the other aspects of Rey's behavior that Kylo had witnessed thus far. On the shuttle earlier, she'd had no idea that he was looking at her breasts, and just now she had given every indication of being mortified by her lingerie. These were not the actions of the burgeoning seductress that Snoke had made her out to be.

"Sorry," Rey mumbled with a tiny shake of her head, as if she were attempting to clear it. "I'm—tired."

"Extra blanket?" Kylo ventured once more.

"About that." She fidgeted, looking down at her lap. "I sort of... forgot to take care of our sleeping arrangements. I've been so busy lately with all the meetings and rehearsals and my lessons and it just—slipped my mind."

"That's all right," he found himself saying. Him, the man who a few days ago on the Heresiarch had
railed at an admiral for submitting a shoddily written, incomplete report. What was happening?

Rey bit her lip, which only served to fuel Kylo's already overactive imagination. "We can share the bed," she told him. "It's not a big deal."

_I beg to differ_, he wanted to say— perhaps even to _snarl_— but at that precise moment she moved, unfolding herself from her kneeling pose and scooting off to one side of the mattress, leaning back against the gilded headboard. He was treated to the stretch of her long, long legs encased in the sheer panels of her nightgown's A-line skirt, with their toned calves and dainty ankles, and all protest fled from his mind.

Feeling very far away from his body, as if he were helplessly trapped in one of his torturous dreams, Kylo joined Rey on the bed, mimicking her position. His shoulder jostled hers, a static charge sparking at the point of contact, and he quickly widened the space between them, the mattress bobbing at the shift in weight.

At first, he thought this new position was better because her distractingly lovely face wasn't in his line of sight. Much to his chagrin, he soon realized that he had an _unparalleled_ view down her legs. They were slender and they went on for _miles_ beneath the scattered lace dusting of leaves and everlilies, and how often had he imagined what these legs would look like when bared, and how those thighs would feel wrapped around him—

Kylo had already been half-hard from the moment he walked into the room and saw Rey. Now he was well on his way to a full-blown erection.

Great.

Thinking fast, he all but lunged for the edges of the duvet that had been folded halfway across the mattress, drawing it up over his groin. _Small talk_, he thought in a burst of panic, he had to make small talk before she could dwell on what possible reasons he might have for covering himself so abruptly. "You mentioned you were busy with lessons? Of what sort?"

"Politics." Rey hesitated, and then shrugged. "The Queen Mother's brand of politics, anyway."

_She answered your question and now you have to keep it going_, Kylo told himself. It didn't matter that this hardly seemed like the right time and place to discuss governance, both of them sitting up in bed with him in his shirtsleeves and her in a _transparent_ nightgown, their gazes determinedly trained
straight ahead, refusing to collide. "You disagree with Ta'a Chume's methods? They're efficient."

"Well, of course you would see nothing wrong with one person being in control of everything," Rey muttered.

Despite Kylo's uncomfortable situation regarding matters down south, her barb still rankled. "As opposed to a group of people squabbling among themselves and never getting anything done?" he challenged. "Democracy is a thing of the past. Order is the way forward. You need to understand that, not just because you are my Empress but also because someday you will be Queen Mother."

"I will not rule through fear," Rey said, quiet yet fierce. "You and Ta'a Chume hold people's lives in your hands. It already backfired on her once and, mark my words, you will suffer the same fate if you're not careful—"

"And I suppose you're the epitome of caution, are you?" Kylo sneered, even though some part of him all but howled in frustration at how things could have gone so wrong in the space of a few words, his inconvenient arousal giving way to wrath. "You sit there and issue what may be construed as threats— you who were once rebel scum. Don't think I've forgotten."

Rey turned to face him, which meant that he instinctively turned to face her as well. "You're the one threatening me right now," she pointed out, not with anger or apprehension but just a calm statement of a fact.

The tactic was far more effective at defusing Kylo's temper than he was prepared for. It wasn't that the fight immediately went out of him— more like that the dark thing living in his head retracted its claws and slunk off, still wary but no longer raring to attack. The way Rey looked now, all shadow-soft, reminded him of the night in the garden, of her rare moment of vulnerability that had brought him to his knees— and, besides, he'd sworn to take care of her, hadn't he? He'd promised her father. Kylo was many things but he was not usually one to go back on his word.

"Let's talk about something else," he found himself saying.

Rey nodded. Slowly. "All right."

The meeting with Resistance High Command had not gone over well. Conducted on the Ninka, Vice
Admiral Amilyn Holdo's *Free Virgillia*-class Bunkbuberuster corvette cloaked in the depths of the Corsair Outback, it had devolved into a mess of accusations and long-buried grievances finally seeing the light of day. Leia had powered through with her usual capable, no-nonsense grit, steering them into a consensus, and now she and her delegation were on their way back to Stalsinek IV on the same Slayn & Korpil transport ship they'd been living in for the past several months.

Aware that her brother's opinion would carry weight, especially among the Rebel Alliance veterans, Leia had managed to talk Luke into accompanying her instead of spending the entire day meditating at the white temple as usual. The Skywalker twins sat together beside the viewport, watching the stars go by. They were both reflecting on a proposal that one of the more hotheaded officers had put forward and had garnered traction among like-minded comrades— to attack the Emperor's flagship before it could leave the Hapes Cluster. Leia had wisely decided not to say anything, counting on Holdo to remind them that it was too early to show their hand, that thanks to sub-hyperspace technology the rest of the First Order fleet would be upon them before they could blink, that the true threat was Snoke, that the Resistance's survival depended on the Consortium's goodwill and it would be foolish to put that to the test by blowing up the *Chume'ida*'s new husband.

"*How do we know the Hapans won't betray us?*" someone had cried.

That was when Leia had stepped in. "*Because of Rey,*" she'd said. "*The Queen Mother won't risk losing her heir. Before we launch an offensive— any sort of offensive— we have to wait for Rey to get us to Snoke.*"

Luke was now regarding his sister solemnly. "I know what you're thinking," he told her. "Or, rather, what you're hoping for— that Ben can still be turned."

"That would certainly make things easier," Leia sighed. "I won't lie— after what I saw at that wedding, I'm certainly hoping Rey can be a... positive influence."

"I've started hoping that, too," Luke admitted, "although part of me feels it's unfair to put the burden on her when *I* was the one who failed him."

"*We both* failed him," Leia said, clasping her brother's hand. "It might not be too late to make amends. I need to know, however— what is the reason you haven't told Rey the truth about what happened the night your training temple was destroyed?"

Luke was silent for a while, gazing upon constellations as he struggled to find words. "An apprentice must have confidence in their master," he said at last. "I did not wish to break her trust. But lately I've been thinking that, by withholding such critical information, I am unworthy of that trust in the first
Leia squeezed his hand. "When you came clean to me, I was so furious—"

"Oh, believe me, I know," Luke interrupted, rubbing the side of his bearded jaw where his sister had punched him two years ago. "This twinges something fierce when it rains."

"But I also realized," Leia continued, "that I was at fault, too, for sending Ben away because I feared his darkness as much as you did and for not telling him the truth about his grandfather. Too many mistakes, Luke. That stops now. Tell Rey what happened."

"I will."

The silence between the siblings was not broken again until they were almost to planetfall, Stalsinek IV gleaming beneath them in a swirl of blues and greens. Luke suddenly let out a tiny chuckle, causing Leia to raise a quizzical eyebrow at him.

"The look on Ben's face after Rey pulled away from their kiss," the Jedi Master explained, blue eyes sparkling with mirth. "Like someone had hit him with a stun blaster." He shook his head with rueful affection, with a fondness that the all the years and all the sins had never quite managed to diminish. "Ah, that kid..."

The portable holoprojector that Kylo had summoned onto the bed hummed in Rey's lap, beaming a diagram of an old training simulation pulled from Republic archives— X-wings, cruisers, TIE fighters, and bombers were locked in combat as the larger silhouettes of two EF76 Nebulon-B escort frigates looked on. Every once in a while, the frigate that belonged to the Galactic Empire— the Warspite— would vanish into hyperspace and reappear seconds later, unloading more fighters on the other side of the transfer to besiege the other frigate, the Rebel Alliance's primary medical ship known as the Redemption.

Since this was a Republic simulation, the A.I. for the Imperial fighters was restricted to a preprogrammed initial run sequence. Kylo and Rey had made the decision to put political baggage aside for the moment and were now figuring out ways for the Alliance side to emerge victorious from the scenario.
"See, look there," Kylo was saying, "if the defending X-wings move to intercept the first wave of TIE fighters, they're rendered out of position for the second one. The best strategy is for the Rebel fleet to concentrate their fire on the bombers, while at the same time evading the fighters."

"But that leaves an opening for the Warspite to move further in-system and join the attack," Rey argued, wrestling the controls from him. "What you do is send a single X-wing to confront the first wave while the others remain as close support for the transfer. This forces the Warspite to launch subsequent waves from a distance instead of putting herself at risk." As she spoke, the blinking diagrams played out her strategy, red X's marking the destroyed TIE complement.

"You do realize," said Kylo, "that this means a lone X-wing will have to deal with two fighters and three bombers all at once before turning around to confront the next wave from a different direction." As if on cue, the aforementioned lone X-wing exploded into smithereens, hopelessly overwhelmed.

"All other strategies we've tried so far have been disastrous," Rey pointed out. "This one lasted the longest." And, indeed, they'd been at it for almost an hour now, after the awkward, desultory conversation that had started with Kylo blurting out, "How are you settling in at court?" had somehow turned into her rambling about how it had been much, much easier to navigate flight simulations on Jakku than to even begin to understand what was going on through a Hapan noble's mind.

"Fair point." Kylo leaned forward, almost into her lap, as he restarted the scenario. A shock of dark hair fell across his pale forehead and Rey tried to quell the tremor in her heart while she watched him study the holoscreen, its bluish light casting his earnest features into sharp relief. "Perhaps if the lone X-wing pilot initially engages with laser cannons—" A couple of TIE fighters winked out of existence—"and then adds to the cruiser's proton torpedo barrage before the bombers can get into launch range—"

"Watch out for that next wave," Rey warned.

"Yeah, I see it," Kylo mumbled, swinging the X-wing around.

Rey blinked at him. Yeah did not seem like it would be the sort of word that was in his dictionary. He picked off another Imperial bomber, a trace of a cocksure smirk playing at the corners of his lips, and for a moment— for one painful, breathtaking moment— she was reminded of Han.

SIMULATION COMPLETE, the A.I. triumphantly announced as the path to the hyperlane was cleared and the Rebel fleet made the jump.
Kylo sat back against the headboard, looking both surprised and pleased with himself, his expression affording Rey a glimpse of the boy he must once have been. She switched off the holoprojector and levitated it onto a side table in one corner of the room, and then she was shifting on the mattress, angling the upper half of her body towards him. Earlier, she hadn't registered his question about the extra blanket because she'd been too busy staring at the sinews of his forearms, exposed to her for the first time by his rolled-up sleeves. Now, however, it was his face that she was focusing on— the plaintive dark eyes, the sensual lips, the scar running down his cheek.

"Why did you do it?" she whispered, because she wanted so badly to understand, because she couldn't reconcile her memories of the monster with the man in her bed. "Why did you kill your father?"

A mask of cold fury slammed over his features. He made as if to turn away from her or to scramble off the sheets, but her hand clamped around his bare wrist and he stilled as if frozen in place.

"No," Rey said, a little more forcefully this time. "We are talking about this. Han loved you and you murdered him and I need to know why. What did he ever do to make you hate him so much—"

"I didn't hate him." Kylo sounded like he was almost ashamed of that fact. As if not being able to hate his father was a failure on his part. "I told you back in that garrison— to gain strength, I had to gain victory over the self. Han Solo was my ultimate test. To prove my commitment to creating peace and order for the good of the galaxy—"

"You mean your commitment to Snoke!" Rey bit out. "He made you kill Han and now you're, what, his puppet on a string? Emperor in name alone?"

It was apparent that she'd struck a nerve— Kylo inched his face closer to hers, teeth bared in a snarl. "I'm not the only one who married the enemy at the behest of a superior, Chume'da."

"I did this to save my people! From you, from the First Order, from—" Rey broke off as the implications of his retort sank in. "So it was Snoke who told you to marry me." Her mind raced with what that could possibly mean. What did the Supreme Leader want from her? Did he suspect that she knew where the Resistance was? They'd never been safe in the first place but were they in even graver peril now?

Kylo looked more irate than she'd ever seen him before, practically trembling at having let such sensitive information slip. But he didn't cruelly shake off her grip on his arm like she'd expected and
braced herself for. "We're done talking about this."

"You are my consort," she bristled. "You don't get to order me around."

"You are my Empress," he shot back. "You answer to me!"

"As long as we are in Hapes, where husbands obey their wives, it's my word that's your law!" Stars, she was angry as well, the currents of the Force shivering and warping at the corners, the dreamsilk canopy over the bed rippling in an invisible breeze. "How sad for you," she goaded, "to have two masters."

"Shut up." He had gotten so far into her personal space that their noses were almost touching. "Shut up, or—"

"Or what?" she shouted. "What will you do, Emperor Ren?"

Kylo lunged forward, the gleam in his dark eyes so feral, so dangerous, that the notion flickered through Rey's mind that he was going straight for her jugular.

But, instead, he kissed her.

It was nothing like the chaste peck she'd given him at the altar or the swift, gentle way he'd reciprocated that she'd thought about on and off as the night had dragged on. This was violent, almost brutal, his mouth slanting over hers with a heated ferocity that she couldn't help but respond to with the instincts borne of an entire life spent giving as good as she got. Her right hand was somehow still clinging to his wrist, but her left whipped up to slap him— or, at least, that was what she had intended to do.

Instead, her palm met the side of his face without any real vehemence, her fingers curling at his clean-shaven jaw. His own hands dropped to her shoulders, his large thumbs pressing indents along her clavicle as his tongue licked at the seam of her lips. It was another kind of instinct— one that had nothing to do with battle— that made her open her mouth to him. A low, primal sound rumbled in his throat as he greedily pushed forward.

It was not a sweet kiss. But, then again, Rey would have been foolish to think Kylo Ren capable of sweetness. She felt like she was burning up, her heartbeat a wild thing, her stomach in free-fall— no,
she was falling, her spine was sliding from the headboard to the mattress like every inch of her had dissolved into a molten blur of heat and light. He followed her down, their lips still connected, his enormous frame covering hers on the bed as he straddled her waist between his legs and she looped her arms around his neck.

Rey had never expected kissing to be like this. She'd seen couples locked in a passionate embrace before, of course, but no one ever told her how it would feel to have someone else's tongue tangle with hers, to have someone else's teeth scrape at her bottom lip, to have a pair of hands other than her own wander down her sternum, fumbling and exploring. Some tiny part of her brain was busily trying to figure out how the hell an incendiary argument could have ended with Kylo's tongue down her throat, but all attempt at rationality soon vanished amidst the clamor of sensations as he cupped her right breast and ground his hardness against her belly, all the while still kissing her as if he were channeling every last bit of frustration left over from the war and the past couple of weeks.

She gasped into his mouth when the pad of his thumb began stroking her breast through the lace. He muttered a curse against her lips when her nipple pebbled under his touch, his voice so gravelly that the mere unintelligible sound of it added to the growing wetness between her legs. More, Rey thought recklessly, pleadingly, raking her nails down his back while her other hand buried clumsy fingers into his dark locks, touch me some more, touch me everywhere, let me know how it feels, let me have this, I want, I need—

Kylo broke the kiss, dragging his lips from her mouth to the slope of her neck as he continued to tease her nipple with his thumb, almost to the point of pain. Rey's eyes fluttered open— when had she closed them?— and, somehow, the sight of the dreamsilk tapestry above her, with its golden stars and crescent moons, jolted her back to reality. Made her aware of the world again.

She couldn't do this.

They couldn't do this.

It would only end in ruin.

"Stop." She pushed at his shoulder. "Ren, stop."

Kylo lifted his mouth from her neck. At first, he looked bewildered— hurt, almost— and then the common sense that had overtaken her must have returned to him, too, because he rolled off of her, quick as a flash, and scrambled back as far away from her as was possible without actually falling off the bed.
For her part, Rey all but dove beneath the covers, pulling them up almost to her chin, staring at him as he stared back, his chest heaving, his lips wet and swollen, his hair sticking up at odd angles from where she'd run her fingers through. What felt like every nerve ending in her body buzzed and throbbed, feverish, unsatisfied, and she crossed her legs in a futile attempt to alleviate the ache between them. Her thoughts were a jumble, scattered and disjointed. The man she had just made out with was a monster, a murderer, an unwilling political ally whom she would someday betray, the husband who loathed her and whom she was supposed to loathe in turn.

It was all too much to process. Her lips still burned with the memory of his kiss.

"I changed my mind." It was a miracle how steady her voice was, how it didn't falter in the slightest. Rey supposed she should be grateful for small mercies. "You're sleeping on the floor."

Chapter End Notes

The Ninka.

Slayn & Korpil.

Redemption scenario.
Chapter Notes

Ringing in 2018 with a new chapter! Yayyy.

Some notes before we begin:

I realize that Ben and Luke's backstory as explained in TLJ is very polarizing. I loved it but I understand that there are some who don't. I will build on what the existing canon gave us instead of creating my own elaborate catalyst for Ben's fall a la Sword of the Jedi, the reason being that it is not the focus of this tropey arranged marriage AU. While I'll do my best to fill in some gaps and make it more satisfying and palatable for everyone, I must ask my lovely readers to please direct all complaints about Luke's canon arc to Disney :))

Secondly, TLJ made me stan harder than ever for awkward virgin Kylo Ren, but bear in mind that this fic starts a year after the events of TFA, whereas TLJ picks up immediately after. Your mileage may vary, of course, but, given that amount of time without a Force bond, I personally don't find it very hard to imagine that Kylo would be confused and frustrated enough to attempt to satiate his desire for the Enemy (TM) with other people. In any case, the fact that Rey is not his first will be a plot point in this fic, one that I'd planned long before the second movie dropped.

This chapter contains major, major spoilers for Episode VIII: The Last Jedi. If you haven't seen it yet, turn back now or forever hold your peace.

Thank you for being part of my 2017, friends. Happy new year!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In stark contrast to the grandeur of the reception, the customary post-wedding breakfast was a more intimate affair, attended only by the sixty-three members of the Consortium legislature, the six representatives of First Order High Command, the Chume'eda's ladies-in-waiting, and the royal family themselves. It was held in the east wing of the Fountain Palace, ensuring that copious amounts of newly-risen sun illuminated the pristine white tablecloths like snowbanks heaped with silverware and crystal and all manner of delicacies.

Lairelosse was in her element, charming the unsuspecting military officers and filing away data they weren't even aware they were letting slip that could be used as ammunition later on. She knew, even if no one else did, that Ta'a Chume would make her move when the time was right— when that happened, Hapes needed to be holding all the cards.

Of course, Lairelosse could never claim to fully keep track of what was going on through her sovereign's head. There was every chance that the Queen Mother would decide that this alliance with the Empire would prove beneficial for the Consortium in the long run. Still, it didn't hurt to be
"Ducha Yliri." Daemora kept her voice low so as not to be overheard by their companions. "Something seems different about our newlyweds. Would you agree?"

Lairelosse's topaz gaze flickered to the head of the table, where Kylo and Rey sat with Ta'a Chume and Isolder. While the Queen Mother and the prince seemed to be engaged in the usual chitchat that was appropriate for social events such as this, the Emperor and the Chume'da were both silent as they sat side by side, with dark circles under their eyes. Every once in a while, they would look at each other and then hurriedly look away, cheeks pink and postures stiff.

"No," Daemora breathed out in unabashed delight. "They didn't!" She cocked her head, appearing both titillated and scandalized. "Did they?"

"My lady, I do not wish to speculate on our Chume'da's personal affairs," Lairelosse said firmly. She had a feeling she already knew the answer, though. Her value to the Queen Mother lay in how adept she was at reading people, and the way Kylo looked at Rey spoke volumes. Annoyance, yearning, bewilderment, and even a fair bit of crankiness—yes, the man was in the throes of sexual frustration.

And—unless Lairelosse missed her guess—so was Rey.

"They look good together, though," Daemora said, almost wistfully. "Don't you think?"

Lairelosse tossed the older woman a fond yet exasperated smile. "Ducha AlGray, you are an incorrigible romantic. I'd rein that in, if I were you."

*I doubt there will be any happy endings here.*

As Rey and her entourage escorted him and his knights to the hangar bay, Kylo ran his fingers down the side of his neck, using the Force to smooth away the crick that had developed there during the night. *I can't believe you made me sleep on the floor,* he thought darkly, slanting a surreptitious glare at his wife. It wasn't that he hadn't gotten what he deserved for feeling her up, but he'd had a rough night's sleep and wasn't inclined to be charitable.
Today she was wearing a buttery yellow dress with a portrait neckline and billowing sleeves cuffed at the wrist. It was conservative, but that hardly mattered when he already knew what her body looked like and how perfect it felt underneath his.Score one for the Hapans and damn it all to hell. He'd let his emotions get the better of him. It was, objectively speaking, a good thing that she'd slammed on the brakes before they reached the point of no return but, lying on the floor with pillows hastily grabbed from the chaise lounge, he'd had the worst case of blue balls in galactic history, twisting and turning on the duvet she'd shoved into his arms before kicking him out of her bed.

And even then, part of him had been worried that she was feeling cold in such skimpy attire. It hadn't been long at all before he'd tossed the duvet back onto the bed, ignoring her faint cry of protest.

With Kylo's grumpiness came the same old black thoughts. If Rey's original plan had been to seduce him, then she despised him so much that she'd been unable to go through with it. He tried not to let it wound him too badly—they were both playing the game, after all—but it was hard going. Her hair had still been in its braid when she'd shaken him awake so he could go back to his room to prepare for the breakfast, but now it hung loose past her shoulders, framing her pretty face in a halo of neat curls. In her yellow dress, she looked like a sunbeam, like everything pure and wholesome and good that he was sickeningly aware that he had no right to.

In the hangar bay, his shuttle's ramp was already extended and waiting for him to board, as if even the Upsilon-class herself couldn't wait to leave this accursed sector. Kylo and Rey came to a stop and faced each other again, conscious of everyone's gazes on them as always.

"I will see you on Coruscant in three days, my lady." He couldn't resist needling her with the reminder that she was now his lady, that they were bound by law.

Rey's hazel eyes flashed. "I shall wait on tenterhooks for our happy reunion, my lord," she all but snapped, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Kylo didn't look back as he ascended his shuttle's ramp. It was a small victory, but one that he would have to content himself with for now.

Luke was meditating at the white temple when Rey arrived on Stalsinek IV piloting the Miy'til starfighter she'd managed to liberate from the hangars. It had been in the dead of night that she'd left Hapes Prime; it was beneath the sun of high noon that she tracked her master's energy signature to the nexus point.
The lower half of his body folded into a cross-legged position, palms turned upwards on his bent knees, Luke hovered several inches off the ground, the silver fountain rippling behind him. Rey hesitated only for the briefest of moments before she mirrored his pose, closed her eyes, and let the Force spill through her veins, tapping into the web of life that spiraled from the sap in the trees to the beating hearts of forest creatures to her own luminous, pulsating soul, everything tangled up in the vergence's endless, concentric streams of raw power. Soon she felt herself rise, too, joining her master in the air, fallen leaves and stray twigs whirling around them.

"Do you remember," Luke asked, "how you found me?"

He didn't say it out loud. They were occupying some shivering, liminal space in the Force—a room with no walls, a house made of mist, a cave that held only truth. It was all of that, and more.

"You were a broken man," Rey said. "You had lost faith in yourself, in all that you once believed. You told me it was time for the Jedi to end."

"Some part of me still thinks that, you know," Luke admitted. There was no place for lies. Not here. "But I eventually decided to train you because..."

A smile tugged at the corners of Rey's lips. "Because I was persistent? Annoying?"

Luke chuckled. "That, too. But mostly because Artoo showed me something that reminded me of how it all began."

_Years ago, you served my father in the Clone Wars._ The hologram of a young Leia Organa, draped in white, flickered in the darkness of Rey's closed eyes, a static-tinged communique that had degraded over time. _Now he begs you to help him in the struggle against the Empire. I regret that I am unable to present my father's request to you in person but my ship has fallen under attack— This is our most desperate hour— Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi, you're my only hope—_

"One look at your sister was all it took for you to rejoin the fight," Rey mused, "even though you had come to the island to die."

"I carried every death with me," said Luke. "Not just my apprentices, but even before that— my master, my fellow rebels... everyone who sacrificed their lives to restore the same Republic that I,
through my own failures, ended up destroying."

Rey shook her head. "I told you then, as I tell you now, it was Kylo Ren who failed you. *He* was the one who turned on you and razed your temple to the ground."

"And that," Luke sighed, "was my fault. Walk with me."

And she did. She widened her connection to the Force and joined her master on the pathways of memory.

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*Luke Skywalker is troubled. His nephew has grown even more sullen and withdrawn as of late, splinters of the dark side manifesting during training sessions and in the odd, irrational bursts of anger that have increased in frequency as time passed. Luke cannot talk to Han about it, because Han has been giving him and Leia a staggering combination of attitude and radio silence since the enforced separation from his son, and neither can he talk to Leia, busy as she is with combating the rising threat of the First Order.*

*But he can no longer let things lie. Ben almost killed a fellow apprentice today, while sparring, bringing his lightsaber down on his disarmed opponent only to be blasted backwards by Luke's hasty telekinetic push. There had been no remorse in the young man's eyes, only something as fiery as embers, as hungry as the wolf.*

"Even from an early age, Ben was strong in the Force," Luke told Rey. "Stronger than I could ever hope to be. I knew that. What I didn't realize until it was too late was that I was ill-equipped to deal with such raw power. But I was Luke Skywalker, wasn't I?" He flashed her a self-deprecating smirk. "As far as the galaxy was concerned, I'd never failed anyone before. I let it go to my head— this version of me that people had built up in their minds. And in my hubris I thought that I could anchor Ben's strength in the light, that my guidance would be enough to curb the darkness rising inside him. But I was wrong."

*A boy sleeps. A man looks into his heart and sees evil so all-consuming that it terrifies him. A green lightsaber is ignited, piercing the shadows of the lonely little hut.*

"He would have brought about the end of everything I loved," Luke solemnly replied. "The visions I saw were so visceral, so full of horror, that in the heat of the moment I forgot that I loved him, too. Because I was too weak to govern my fear, I opened myself up to the dark side."

The man lowers his blade, his weathered features contorted in sorrow and self-loathing. But it is too late. The boy is awake, peering over his shoulder at his would-be assailant with frightened eyes.

The man starts to shake his head, lips forming the shape of his nephew's name—

"This is how it all began," said Luke.

— Blue light meets green—

"This is how I created Kylo Ren."

— The world collapses—

"It will always be my greatest shame."

* 

The strangler figs that had overtaken the temple trembled at the root, pebbles and loose forest debris rising into the air on the crests of the Force, surrounding the two figures enveloped in the floating meditation trance like a maelstrom. This was all Rey's doing, her inner turmoil lashing out at whatever was within reach. "Y—you tried to kill him," she choked, there in that realm beyond space and time, even as her physical form remained statue-still and unspeaking amidst the temple grounds. She thought of how the boy in Luke's memories had looked like the one she'd glimpsed when Kylo beat the flight simulation, and also during those rare moments when he had almost smiled. Green light falling on the face of a frightened young apprentice whose master had betrayed him— it had become her memory now, too.

It ate at her heart.
"Why did you keep this from me?" she demanded, the Force echoing with her rage.

In the in-between place, Luke bowed his head. "I did not think you were ready for the truth. When you came to me on Ahch-To, you were the Resistance's best hope for defeating the First Order. You needed to learn all that I could teach you—and learn it fast. It wasn't until I arrived on this planet that I realized the error of my ways. The energy of this temple is... different. Do you feel it?"

"Now is hardly the time for another lecture!" Rey snapped.

"You asked me a question. I am trying to answer it as best as I can."

Clamping down on her impatience, Rey made herself concentrate on the power streaming from the fountain, on how it filtered through the woods in ways that she belatedly noticed she couldn't really understand. "There is light but there is also darkness. Only..." She frowned. "It's not quite either of that. It's more—balanced?"

"Exactly," said Luke. "There exists something here that is much older than the Winged Goddess. In the process of reflecting upon its nature, I was able to look more fully inside myself—as if doors within me were being unlocked by this new perspective. At last I understood that I was merely repeating history by denying your right to critical information—as Obi-Wan once denied mine. I think perhaps..." Luke heaved a sigh, sounding for a moment very far away. "Perhaps it was painful for him to relive, just like it is for me now. Should a Jedi be above grief? I no longer know..."

"We are supposed to be above fear," Rey hissed. "We are supposed to be above striking in cold blood. We are supposed to give people second chances. But you—you never gave Ben Solo a chance at all!" Her energy signature spiked with accusation. "You failed him by thinking his choice was made, and in doing so you brought about the same future that you sought to prevent!"

"And that," Luke grated out, "is the trap of the dark side. You start out thinking you're doing it for the greater good, but in the end you think only of yourself. In the end, all you will ever have is yourself."

"Hang the dark side! The Force has nothing to do with this! This is about family, and you were his family and you gave up on him—" And that was the heart of the matter as to why she was so affected, wasn't it? For so long she'd clung to the hope that someone would come for her on Jakku, for so long she'd battled the crippling dread that she'd been forgotten, abandoned...
"That ends now," Luke declared. "That's why I'm telling you the truth now. Leia said it herself— too many mistakes have been made, and it's time to start rectifying them. I regret having to place another burden on your shoulders, Rey, you're already doing so much... but you are the only one who has access to Ben. You can find the light that lingers and call it forth."

"How?" Rey cried. "He hates me."

Luke was silent for a while. And then, "Do you hate him?"

"I..." She should have said yes. She wanted to say yes. But given this new information on Kylo's past and all that had happened between them lately—

Nope. She was not going to think about last night. Not here, where his uncle— her master— could see.

Gritting her teeth, Rey wrenched herself out of the meditation trance. She and Luke gently sank back to earth, their eyes fluttering open to regard each other with the cautious, weighty awareness that things between them might never be the same again.

*

Master and apprentice did not speak at all on their way to the Resistance hideout, where Finn welcomed Rey with open arms, Poe grinning at her over the other man's shoulder. But it was a grin that lacked its usual cheer— was instead turned sardonic, almost, by some dark humor.

"Nice of you to visit us commoners, Your Empressness," Poe quipped, prompting Rey to roll her eyes at him as she extricated herself from Finn's hug.

"I can't believe you're married." Finn sounded exactly as disgusted as the situation called for but he was obviously trying to put up a stalwart front so as not to upset her further. "We watched the broadcast— pretty flashy stuff. Rey, I don't know how to tell you this, but—" He adopted a hushed tone of mock seriousness— "your family's, like, really, really loaded."

"I hadn't noticed," she snorted, the heaviness in her soul lifting somewhat. Stars, she was so grateful for Finn. Becoming Chume' da had been the only way to save him and everyone else, and she'd do it all over again in a heartbeat.
Poe hugged her as well, clapping her companionably on the back, but when they pulled away from each other his gaze lingered on her wedding band with something akin to distaste.

"We do what we must," Rey told him quietly.

"Seems to me we all could've done without the smooching," Poe replied in kind, and then shrugged. "Sorry, I'm on edge from being cooped up in this quadrant. That changes today, though, yeah? The First Order's gone sidling back to the Core Worlds?" At Rey's nod, he pumped his fist in the air, a live-wire once more. "Excellent. Gotta prep the recon team, then. We're off to the Outer Rim to look for any remaining allies."

"Be careful," Rey warned. She remembered something Laireslosse had mentioned earlier, a tidbit that the other woman had finagled from one of Kylo's admirals during breakfast. "There's a resistance on Artorias, in the Myto sector. You could start there."

"On it," Poe said, already rushing off, leaving Finn to take Rey to Leia. Luke did not go with them.

*

Nothing in Rey's twenty-two years of existence— which had already been eventful and far from easy— could have prepared her for this moment, for being left alone in a ship's cabin with the woman who was her mother-in-law. Rey was all too aware that Leia was technically her commanding officer and as such a serious, professional facade was required, but she felt only the keenest embarrassment as she struggled to meet the General's searching gaze. *I married your son, I kissed him, I let him touch me*— the thoughts played through her mind in a constant loop to the point that she was seized by the paranoia that they were written all over her face.

It was Leia who closed the distance between them, tucking Rey's hair behind her ear in a maternal gesture. "Just one bun today."

Rey nodded. She'd been in a hurry to leave the Per'Agthra, with no time to bother constructing her preferred hairstyle.

"Luke told you what really happened?"
Again, Rey nodded. She still couldn't bring herself to speak.

"If I'd had my way, you would have been appraised of everything a whole lot sooner. But it was my brother's story to tell." Leia retrieved a datapad from her desk and tilted up the screen for Rey's perusal. "As this is mine."

It was a picture of a younger Han Solo stretched out on a bunk in the Millennium Falcon, laughing as he lifted a plump toddler with chubby cheeks and a shock of dark curls into the air above his chest. The child was smiling as well, his own little hands reaching for Han's vest as if he wanted to be brought closer, his eyes peering down at his father with such adoration that it took Rey's breath away.

"I didn't hate him," Kylo had said— had sworn, almost, a crack in his deep voice and some long-buried hurt shadowing his features.

"He was the sweetest, most loving boy," Leia told Rey. "Too smart for his own good, perhaps, with a rebellious streak a mile wide, but always so very sorry after he got scolded... Han and I were too busy to spend as much time with him as we should have and it tore at my heart, how hungry he was for our affection whenever we were around. I'd promise myself that I'd be a more hands-on parent, but there was forever one more Senate meeting, one more diplomatic visit... I thought I'd have time to make things right, one day." Leia stared pensively at the photograph before returning the datapad to its original place on her desk. "It all took a turn for the worse when Ben came into his powers. He'd always been able to do small things before— levitating his toys, knowing his father had arrived the instant the Falcon made planetfall— but now his Force sensitivity began manifesting on a far greater scale, and with it came the nightmares. Han and I would sometimes wake up thinking there was an earthquake but it was just Ben, screaming and making the foundations tremble in his sleep. Before long, the bright, happy child that I knew was gone, replaced by this gloomy teenager prone to random, malevolent outbursts. Han said it was growing pains, but a rift developed between him and Ben at around this time, too. They started butting heads more often than not and I just... I didn't know what to do. When Luke offered to train him in the ways of the Jedi, I shipped him off despite my own misgivings."

"General..." Rey shifted uncomfortably when Leia paused to gather breath. "I don't— look, I know Snoke was the one who manipulated your son, and what Master Luke did was so horrible that I'm not sure I can ever look at him the same way again, but Ren has also done horrible things. Even if the circumstances weren't of his own making— even if you blame yourself— he's still accountable."

"I don't deny that at all," said Leia. "I'm not telling you any of this to excuse his actions. But you need to understand what kind of man you married, how he came to be what he is today. And in doing so—" She lifted her chin in determination, her eyes like steel, and for a moment Rey was reminded all too vividly of Ta'a Chume— "perhaps we can finally gain some sort of tactical advantage over Snoke. Now, will you listen to the rest of my story?"
An oddly hollow feeling curled electric-sharp tendrils in the pit of Rey's stomach. All of this seemed wrong, somehow, like she was going behind Kylo's back.

*Isn't that what you've been doing from the very start?* she chided herself. *Why should you let it bother you now?*

She pushed this sudden, bewildering attack of conscience to the back of her mind as she met Leia's gaze and nodded resolutely. "All right," Rey said. "I'm listening."

*After the meeting with Leia, Rey went off to help Poe and his squadron map the uncharted hyperlane that she discovered two years ago, which would enable the Resistance pilots to sneak in and out of the Hapes Cluster, and then Finn escorted her back to her ship, the two of them chatting animatedly as they disappeared into the undergrowth.*

The sun was just about to set when some instinct made Luke and Leia raise their heads to watch a *Miy'til* starfighter break through the treeline in the distance and punch up into the black. The Skywalker twins did not speak for a while, both of them silently going over the respective conversations that they'd had with Rey.

"Leia," Luke finally murmured, "I'm sorry." It wasn't the first time that he'd apologized since their reunion, but they both knew it would be the last. Now that the past had been examined in unflinching detail, they could lay it to rest and look towards the future.

"I know." Leia rested her head on her brother's shoulder, a bittersweet smile on her face. "I know you are."

**Chapter End Notes**

The conversation between Lairelosse and Daemora at the beginning is dedicated to Somaybelikeno, who called it xD
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to everyone for the continued feedback and support, and special shout-out to kayurka for this exquisite art of the not-so-happy couple, augh for this lovely Chume'da!Rey, and kilimiria for this breathtaking edit. My heart is so full right now, you're all amazing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was wearing his mask when they met again, high up on one of the landing pads that extended from the Citadel's control tower in long, wide strips. Underneath a gray sky overcast with the promise of impending thunderstorms, a cold, vigorous breeze stung Rey's eyes and rustled her skirts as she walked down the ramp of the Express-class ambassadorial shuttle that had ferried the Hapan delegation from the Dragon Queen, Ta'a Chume's personal flagship, to the Imperial City on Coruscant.

It used to be called Republic City back when the Republic still existed, but Rey hardly recognized it now. The austere, industrial skyline stretched out hundreds of meters below her feet was nothing like the vivid ecumenopolis she remembered; there were more weapons factories and security checkpoints, less parks and communications towers, and a total lack of airspeeder pilots attempting to circumvent traffic rules—instead, every single repulsorlift vehicle moved at a brisk, orderly pace along the skylanes. And above it all loomed the Emperor's Citadel, an imposing military-grade fortress carved from polished black laminasteel that was all smooth surfaces and sharp, clean lines assembled with a certain harsh grace.

"Haven't been here five minutes and I'm already depressed," Janassa muttered to the other ladies-in-waiting as they trailed after Rey.

The Chume' da herself was inclined to agree. However, Kylo demanded all of her attention as he stood a few feet away in the same armor he had worn when she first laid eyes on him in the Takodana forest—so long ago now, it seemed. She had no idea what he was thinking behind his expressionless obsidian helm, the hood of his cowl pulled up as it rippled in the breeze, but she could feel the heat of his stare through the silver-lined visor.

His intense scrutiny probably had to do with the fact that she was draped in First Order colors, as befitted the occasion. Red lace bedecked the upper half of Rey's torso in a carefully sculpted arrangement of asymmetric neckline, wrist-length illusion sleeves, and empire waist, slashed down the side by a knife's edge glint of black silk that flowed into a stiff overskirt with a short yet elaborately ribboned train. As the wind picked up, the gown's hem fluttered around her ankles, revealing more layers of red fabric that bloomed like pools of blood amidst a backdrop of starless
"You are going to be crowned Empress," Lairilosse had told Rey before she left Hapes. "You might as well look the part."

Even though Rey could sense Ta'a Chume and Isolder disembarking from the shuttle behind her, Kylo didn't so much as acknowledge them. Instead, he stepped closer to her until she was forced to look up at him.

"Chume'da," he rasped.

It had been ages since Rey last heard the low static purr of that artificially modulated voice. It sent a chill down her spine, but she refused to be bested this early on. "Emperor," she replied, using dignity as a shield the way her father's people did with such skill.

Kylo tilted his head up for a brief moment, lazily perusing the sky. "You brought your warships," he remarked, acting for all the world as if he could see the Hapan Battle Dragon with its Nova-class escorts hovering in the black above Coruscant, even though he would already have been briefed on their presence by homeworld security. "Perhaps I should take offense."

"You're the one meeting me in full battle regalia," Rey pointed out.

"I was training with my knights. You arrived earlier than expected." He glanced at the two other royals over the top of her head. "Ereneda. Prince Isolder. Welcome."

"What are we, chopped liver?" Janassa said under her breath, and Rey had to fight back a snort.

Kylo turned on his heel and the stormtroopers who had been hanging back followed suit and began marching into the Citadel. The Emperor strode forward and then stopped short, as if he'd almost forgotten something. Trailing after him, Rey paused in her tracks as well, confused.

"Walk with your husband, Your Grace," said Ta'a Chume.

Oh. Right.
Embarrassed, Rey hurried over to Kylo's side, tucking her hand into the crook of his elbow that he held out to her. He smelled like smoke and leather, and she couldn't help glancing at him from time to time as they entered the dark hallways of his fortress. He looked menacing in his skeletal black armor but the effect was softened, somewhat, by all that she had learned of his past from the people who had known and loved him—and betrayed him, in their own fashions. That was what Leia had done as well, hadn't she, by concealing the truth that his grandfather was Darth Vader?

"I did it to protect him," the General had said. "In the end, though, he found out in the most horrible of ways—via scandalous headlines, just like everyone else. That was when I truly lost my son."

There was a small, nasty part of Rey that insisted Kylo was a lost cause, that there was no saving someone who had killed his own father and been complicit in genocide. But another part of her remembered the little hints of humanity he'd shown over the past month—the terror on his face as the blaster bolts hurtled towards her, the switch from alcohol to water, how he'd held her in his arms as she cried, and even the way he'd given back her duvet after she made him sleep on the floor. Granted, he'd practically hurled it at her, but now, in the light of Leia's recollections about the kind of child he'd been, Rey wondered if he hadn't wanted her to be cold. Or something.

Naturally, this train of thought led to what else had occurred on their wedding night.

She'd decided to adopt a more or less pragmatic view of the matter. Hadn't Lairelosse said that hate was just another kind of passion? Kylo and Rey had been arguing, their tempers running high, and he'd kissed her to shut her up. If they'd gotten carried away, well, it was only because she'd been wearing next to nothing and he was the first man she'd ever kissed. She'd been curious, he'd been a typical male, and that was that.

_He called you beautiful_, whispered some mischievous inner voice, _that night in his room, against the wardrobe—_

"You are attempting to cut off my circulation, Your Grace?" Kylo's metallic rumble broke through her reverie, causing Rey to nearly leap out of her skin.

"Sorry." She loosened the constricting grip she'd apparently been trapping his arm in for the past...however many minutes.

He said nothing in response but, from the way the visor of his mask was angled, it was obvious that he was looking at her. Was he thinking about their wedding night as well? It was the ghost that
walked with them, the invisible string pulled taut between their respective awareness of each other.

In the end, the Hapan delegation was escorted to a small antechamber where they would pass the time until the coronation ceremony began. There was a table laden with wine and an assortment of finger sandwiches, cold cuts, and cheeses, and Kylo tersely invited Rey, Ta'a Chume, Isolder, the ladies-in-waiting, and the Chume'doro to help themselves before he disappeared to make his own preparations.

Niobe took a delicate bite from an already delicate sandwich. "It's horrid," she declared, wrinkling her nose. "The bread is stale, the dressing is bland, the greens are wilted."

Vanya was quick to agree. "It will be up to Her Grace to introduce the finer points of royal cuisine to the Emperor's court."

Rey blinked at the girls, her cheeks bulging around her third sandwich. They stared at her and she shrugged as she swallowed and reached for the platter of cold cuts without the slightest hint of remorse. Food was food, after all.

She eventually had to stop eating because Ta'a Chume beckoned her over to the window, which displayed a sprawling view of Coruscant. "The city covers the whole planet, then?" asked the Queen Mother.

Rey nodded. "You've never been here? Even in the days of the Old Republic?"

"I have never before left the Hapes Cluster," Ta'a Chume said like it was a point of pride—which it probably was, for her. "So far, I am not impressed by what I find. A most shabby domain." She extended a slim arm dripping with silk and gemstones to indicate several spots with one stiletto-coned finger. "You will need some fountains there, there, and there. A promenade connecting the various districts would not go amiss—perhaps with marble arches and flowering trees."

"I don't think beauty ranks very high on the First Order's list of priorities."

"It should. The masses appreciate a bit of flair. This world is the heart of your empire, yes? You need to keep its inhabitants happy, and to do that, you need to make it livable."

"It's not really my empire—" Rey started to protest, but Ta'a Chume cut her off with an impatient
"There's no use thinking like that anymore, Kira. The chips have fallen into place. No one knows what the future holds, but for now—" the Queen Mother gestured to the skyline outside the window once more, this time sweeping her hand as if to encompass it in its entirety—"the Emperor is yours, his galaxy is yours, his *power* is yours. It's time for you to rule."

"You're awfully enthusiastic, *Ereneda.*" Rey narrowed her eyes at the older woman. "This is no longer about making the best of a bad situation, is it? You *like* the idea of having a granddaughter on the First Order throne!"

"And why shouldn't I?" countered Ta'a Chume. "What matriarch would object to her family gaining more influence, more prestige?"

*This will not last forever. The First Order will fall,* Rey wanted to argue, but in that moment Ta'a Chume folded her hands together, her right forefinger tapping on the curve of her left-hand knuckles with painstaking deliberation.

Rey froze. She recognized the warning gesture for what it was. Keeping her eyes on her grandmother, she extended her Force perception, scanning the antechamber for tech with the same innate ability that had made her so uncannily skilled with machines even as a child, back when Luke Skywalker had been just another myth. It wasn't long before she detected the buzzing presence of surveillance equipment nestled in various nooks and crannies, hidden from plain sight.

The room was bugged.

How had Ta'a Chume known...?

"*Na paid ke, vovina,*" the Queen Mother said in Hapan. *It always is, my darling.* Only, it didn't exactly translate to "my darling"—*vovina* was the word for "dragon," but, when used among the royal family to refer to one another, it served the same purpose as a term of endearment. *My darling, my dragon.*

It belatedly dawned on Rey that Ta'a Chume might have sought to lull whoever was listening into a false sense of complacency by making them think that the Hapans were content to revel in their newfound position and to occupy themselves with superficial, harmless matters such as redecorating—instead of, say, hiding the last chunk of the Resistance fleet within their borders.
Don't you ever get tired, Rey wished she could ask her grandmother, off always being two steps ahead of everyone else? She couldn't imagine what it was like to have to live that way. If this was the future in store for her, she wasn't so certain she could handle it. But it was definitely, definitely time to start taking notes.

* 

Her Grace Kira Ka Djo of the Hapes Consortium was crowned Empress of the First Order as a light rain fell from the skies above Coruscant. Sheltered from the drizzle by the roof that hung over the main balcony of the Citadel, from which streamed the Empire's red-and-black banners, she knelt before her husband, the layered skirts and ribboned train of her gown splaying across the polished laminasteel in swirls of blood and midnight.

Her crown had been hammered out of Gorothite platinum and studded with Naboo night pearls and nova rubies from the planet Sarka. Downright plain by Hapan standards, but it was a powerful symbol of the First Order's total conquest of the Mid Rim. It was a slender thing, the circular band dwarfed in Kylo's gloved hands as he placed it on Rey's head with everyone watching— from First Order High Command and the Consortium representatives up on the balcony with them to the legions of officers and stormtroopers spread throughout the vast courtyard, raindrops spattering on dress uniforms and white armor.

Kylo had removed his mask for the occasion but he was still clad in black— no surprises there, Rey thought, perhaps less waspishly than she normally would have. The only spots of color were the gold brocade on his formal tunic and the red gems on the same crown he'd worn to their wedding, set atop the waves of his dark hair. He'd swapped out his usual leather gloves for silk, the material smooth and cool as his fingers curled feather-light against the sides of her head.

"Will you solemnly promise and swear to govern the peoples of the Empire of the First Order in accordance with our laws and customs?" he asked her softly, his eyes never leaving her face.

"I swear," Rey told him. The First Order had transmitted the script to Hapes yesterday and there had been such a furor among the royal advisors— at least, until Ta'a Chume had stepped in and reminded them that the Emperor hadn't contested the Hapan marriage vows. He'd played his part and now it was time for the Chume'da to play hers.

"Will you swear to execute rationality and justice in all your judgments, and to maintain and preserve inviolably the dominion of the Empire in all your actions?"
"I swear," Rey repeated.

"Will you swear your fealty to my crown and your obedience to my will for as long as you are within the borders of my realm?"

This was the part she didn't like. "I swear." She couldn't help the vaguely belligerent note that crept into her tone, or how she came this close to rolling her eyes. Obedience to him— as if!

The line of his mouth curved upwards in a faint smirk. For a moment he looked younger than his years, darkly handsome like his father. Something painful and bittersweet tugged at Rey's heart as she remembered the holo that Leia had shown her.

Kylo's voice lowered even further when he segued into the last lines of the oath. "Will you stay by my side?" he asked, framed by black laminasteel contours and rain and sixteen-rayed insignias blowing in the wind. "Will you stand with me against my enemies and help me build my empire?"

The Force sighed all around them, a silver melody weaving through the patter of the rain.

"I will," Rey said.

He released the crown on her head, his hands drifting down her face and his silk-clad fingers brushing against her cheeks. Fleeting, gentle, most probably accidental touches, but her pulse sped up all the same.

Kylo took Rey's hand and helped her to her feet, leading her to a spot just behind the rails of the balcony, where they could both look out over the assembled troops.

Hux stepped forward as well, his wintry features even more pinched than usual in the gray light. "Long live the Emperor and the Empress!" His nasal voice resounded through the courtyard. "Long may they reign!"

As one, the military forces snapped their heels and raised their fists in salute. Later, Rey would tell herself that it was only the atmosphere of the ceremony that had gotten to her, but everything about this moment seemed fraught with meaning and tension, as if it carried with it the grim pall of destiny.
Backless.

The gown was kriffing backless.

As he and Rey stood around nursing champagne and accepting congratulations and plaudits from various high-ranking guests in the Citadel's function hall, Kylo tried his best to ignore the fact that the back of her gown dipped so low that three more inches would have exposed what appeared to be a fascinatingly pert derrière. It was bad enough that the mere sight of her wearing First Order colors did strange things to his system, filling him with a dark, possessive heat; now, every time he blinked, he saw the graceful curve of her spine in the space behind his eyes, like it had been seared into his memory. He wanted to press his lips to that smooth expanse of creamy golden skin between her shoulder-blades, perhaps while his hands reached around to cup her breasts. It haunted his dreams at night, how her nipple had hardened at his touch, how she had gasped into his mouth...

Kylo shifted uncomfortably under the pretext of taking another sip of champagne. *I am not going to get an erection in the middle of a crowded function hall.*

"My grandmother seems to be enjoying herself," Rey commented from beside him.

Well, if anything could put a damper on Kylo's arousal, it was the mention of Ta'a Chume. He followed Rey's gaze to where the Queen Mother was holding court amidst a throng of sector governors. "They're building diplomatic relations," he surmised, "in the hopes of facilitating the lucrative flow of commerce."

"You mean your governors are sucking up to her so she'll give them a good price on the Cluster's exports and a lower import tax rate for their own products," Rey said blithely.

Kylo glanced down at her, the corner of his mouth twitching upwards in a brief, reluctant half-smile. Her candor was a breath of fresh air in this kind of environment— and oddly charming. "Not only that," he admitted. "Each sector is vying for that much-coveted first direct trading route to Hapes."

"The Core Worlds get dibs, surely?"

"Perhaps not. A robust galactic economy would necessitate diverting focus from the center instead of
leaving other regions out in the cold. That was one of the problems with the Republic— the majority of businesses dealings benefited a mere handful of systems, while others languished.

For a moment he was afraid that she was going to tear into him for even daring to mention the Republic that he'd destroyed. Instead, she nodded— not in agreement, but a polite, thoughtful nod that indicated she'd listened to him and would take his views into consideration.

Kylo was suddenly deeply suspicious as to why Rey was being so amiable. He'd spent their three days apart bracing himself for the worst, but here she was acting like nothing out of the ordinary had happened on their wedding night.

"Back on Jakku, they'd rant about Core Worlders, the older people," she ventured after a while. "Some were laborers working the cargo routes or criminals, just passing through, but others were settlers who'd thrown in their lot with us junk rats because there were no other options. They'd been fired from mines and factories owned by Coruscanti or Corellians, or work had dried up on their homeworlds because of the monopolies on various industries held by planets closer to the center. So, yeah, there's that," she concluded with a helpless little shrug, and despite her opulent dress and the silver crown perched on her head, Kylo was reminded of the scavenger he'd met in the forest three years ago— almost four now— clad in rags and rough-skinned and sinewy-thin from a hard life.

"Things are going to change," he vowed. "You'll see. We'll make it better."

"'We'?” she echoed.

He nodded, his earnestness surpassing his common sense like it always did because, despite all his bluster to the contrary, he'd never gotten into the habit of learning from his mistakes. "You're my Empress now. You'll rule by my side."

Rey's hazel eyes widened slightly and in them Kylo saw a certain tentative fascination, as if she were tempted to give in to the future that he was offering. The ambient noises of the function hall melted away and it was only just the two of them on the verge of— something. Something new that called to mind the concept of promise, and horizon.

"Emperor Ren."

His brow furrowing in annoyance, Kylo grudgingly tore his gaze away from his wife. "What is it?" he all but snarled at Hux.
Hux quirked an eyebrow at his surly tone. "You have an urgent communiqué from Regent Snoke."

Rey watched Kylo leave the hall. Was she just overly tired, or was it really disappointment, this sinking sensation? Why should she be disappointed that he'd gone to answer Snoke's summons instead of continuing the discussion with her? He'd left so quickly, sparing her only one hesitant glance before walking away...

"Apologies for interrupting, Chume'da," Hux said, not sounding apologetic at all. "Regent Snoke doesn't like to be kept waiting, you see."

"I understand, General," Rey said, narrowing her eyes at the odious man. And because she couldn't resist getting the dig in— "However, it occurs to me that you're using the wrong address. We are on First Order soil, are we not?"

"Of course," Hux replied without missing a beat, "Your Majesty."

He placed enough emphasis on the title so as to hint at sarcasm, but not quite enough that she could call him out on it. Rey's instincts warned her that Hux would be a problem in the long run; however, that wasn't anything she hadn't already known.

It was Isolder who came to her rescue, smoothly taking her arm and leading her away from Hux. "Goodness, what was Ren thinking, leaving you in the lurch like that," her father grumbled. "The least he could have done was escort you to me and your grandmother first. I suppose you must introduce social graces to his court in addition to better cuisine."

Rey spent the rest of the evening taking her cues from Ta'a Chume and Isolder, making courteous small talk and listening, always listening, to what people said between the lines. She kept glancing at the main doorway, but Kylo did not return.

Chapter End Notes

Skylane.
Laminasteel.

I used a non-canon source in constructing what the Queen Mother says to Rey in Hapan.

Platinum from Goroth Prime.

Nova ruby from Sarka.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

I myself am shook that I was able to update so quickly, but the response to this fic inspires me like no other. Thank you, everyone! I will try to catch up on last chapter's comments soon.

For this installment, please mind the archive warnings. This is the Ben Solo pain train, but hopefully you'll like how it ends. As always, feedback would be very much appreciated!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The TIE silencer was the first and so far the only active-duty starfighter of its kind, a Sienar-Jaemus Fleet Systems prototype noted for its speed and ferocity in battle. It had also been recently outfitted with one of the new sub-hyperspace drives; thus, Kylo's journey from the Core to the Unknown Regions lasted mere seconds when it would normally have taken six days at lightspeed.

Snoke did not like to be at the center of the action, Kylo had come to realize. His master preferred pulling strings from the shadows at the edge of the charted galaxy. *He's a coward*, opined a small, traitorous voice in his head that he hastily stifled as the silencer hurtled through glittering space on the whine of twin ion engines. He needed to be in a stable frame of mind when he walked into the Supreme Leader's presence.

*There is no more Supreme Leader*, the voice insisted, fainter but still present like the aftershock of a migraine. *Snoke handed that to you on a silver platter because he thinks you won't turn it to your advantage. The old order is gone. There is only the Emperor.*

*And the Empress.*

Thinking about Rey was *definitely* the worst thing he could do upon meeting with Snoke. Kylo took a deep breath, centering himself. To his great shame, this was one of the times Luke Skywalker's teachings came in handy, the ancient mantra helping to focus his mind—*There is no emotion, there is peace.* It was a crutch, one he'd secretly been relying on more and more this past year despite knowing that it hindered his connection to the dark side.

But, for now, it served its purpose.
Kylo docked at the *Supremacy* and took the turbolift to Snoke's throne room. Through the visor of his helm, he surveyed the Elite Praetorian Guards standing as still as statues in red laminate armor. There were eight of them, none Force-sensitive but all deadly fighters wielding lightsaber-resistant melee weapons. They flanked the throne from which Snoke observed Kylo's approach with pale, beady eyes.

In life, the regent was not as physically imposing as the gargantuan holograms through which he communicated with his legions across long distances. He was a humanoid of spindly proportions, with wrinkled, doughy skin and features distorted by past injuries—a ruptured cheek, a misshapen jaw, a scar running down the middle of his forehead. When Ben Solo had fled the blood-soaked ruins of the Jedi training temple on a stolen ship with the apprentices who would one day be known as Clavicus, Malacath, Boethiah, Meridia, and Mephala Ren, following the lure of Snoke's call to the brightest clutch of stars in the Unknown Regions, he had been taken aback by the stark contrast between the Supreme Leader's human-like size and the grandly omnipresent voice that had been in his head for so long. However, he'd quickly learned that it was Snoke's power in the Force that was to be reckoned with.

Kylo sank down to one knee before his master and waited for him to speak. He had no illusions as to why he'd been summoned out of the blue—he'd been expecting it since Rey asked him for the Skywalker blade in front of Hux.

"Take off your mask," Snoke ordered in a quiet, menacing tone.

Kylo silently complied, setting his helm on the floor by his feet.

"Do you remember when you came to me after the destruction of Starkiller Base? Do you remember what I said?"

"You told me I was unbalanced," Kylo woodenly replied. "You told me I had too much of Han Solo's heart in me."

"Perhaps you still do," Snoke growled. "I gave you the benefit of the doubt then because a sizable portion of the Resistance managed to escape the siege on D'Qar and I needed you back on the front lines. Now I am thinking that may have been a mistake." When Kylo said nothing, Snoke continued, "Not very talkative today, my young emperor? Perhaps you think you can still keep secrets from me?"

"No, master."
Snoke's paper-thin lips curled into a sneer. "It is a pity you did not see fit to divulge the information that you had recovered your grandfather's blade. I would have instructed you on how to properly commune with it, to further augment your powers with the darkness. Such a rare, precious gift, now needlessly squandered. Oh, what you could have become..." He trailed off, sounding weary and disappointed like a teacher whose student had failed, but with a mocking edge. "I won't ask why you hid something so important from me. I already know the reason. It all goes back to your father's weakness that you inherited, that I myself have been remiss in snuffing out. That ends tonight."

Snoke did not so much as get up from his throne. Instead, he merely crooked his fingers and, for Kylo, the pain began, a debilitating, bone-searing pain painted in Force lightning.

"You want to be like Vader, boy?" Snoke roared over the cries that tore loose from Kylo's throat as he crumpled to the floor in both mental and physical agony, currents of white heat scorching his veins, invisible whips of energy lashing at his back. "Then learn how to take pain like Vader."

And yet there was a part of Kylo where it seemed like this was all happening from far away. Some tiny part of him was out of his body, wrapped in the light, sheltered somewhere that felt safe.

_Snoke lies._

It was a phantom voice, the one that he'd caught echoes of when he held Darth Vader's old lightsaber in his hands and meditated with the encased crystal that thrummed within it like a beating heart.

_That blade would never have brought you to full darkness. It was more mine than it was Vader's._

Tears of sheer terror sprung to Kylo's eyes. He panicked and thrashed about, making the pain worse. Snoke would see this like he saw everything else, Snoke would punish him even more for it—

_He won't. I swear to you that he won't._

_How can you be sure?_ Kylo asked with the last vestiges of rational thought left to him, lightning and talons surging through his body in never-ending waves as he screamed and whimpered like a child, there on the cold floor of the throne room. He was imagining this voice, this other presence. He had to be. His mind was seeking refuge in false constructs, anything to distract from the torment.
For a moment it felt like someone had passed a hand over his brow. A cool, gentle touch in the midst of his master's cruel instruction. The light flickered inside him, small and secret and never completely vanishing. It helped him endure.

The afterparty had come and gone, most of the guests had departed, and the Citadel was sinking into night rhythms, glow-panels being extinguished in offices and living quarters and stormtrooper patrols changing shift. A black RA-7 protocol droid had shown Ta'a Chume and Isolder to their chambers, and now it was leading Rey and her ladies to the suite of rooms specially prepared for the Empress.

While the girls were much better than Rey at stifling their yawns and concealing the droop in their steps, everyone was obviously tired from the long day. However, they all stiffened, as one, at the sight of two masked figures blocking their path.

"Leave us, RA-7," purred Mephala. "We'll escort Her Majesty to her royal boudoir."

The droid hesitated. "The Emperor instructed me before he left—" it started to whir in its mechanical voice, but Meridia slashed out an arm, telekinetically slamming the hapless protocol unit into a nearby wall.

"There's really no need for that," Rey snapped. "You can go, RA-7." She placed herself between the knights and her ladies-in-waiting as the droid scurried away. Unbeknown to everyone else, her saberstaff was holstered at her thigh and she was suddenly glad she'd taken such a precaution, even if she'd have to rip her fine skirts to get to it.

"Well?" Rey calmly challenged when the twins didn't move or speak for several long seconds— just watched her with the air of two particularly snide cats watching a mouse. "Weren't you going to take me to my suite?"

"You're certainly having a grand time lording it over us," hissed Mephala. "Meanwhile, our master suffers because of you."

A chill shot down Rey's spine. "What are you talking about?"
Instead of replying right away, the darksiders turned and began walking, leaving Rey no choice but to follow them. She signaled her ladies to keep back a few paces in case the knights lost control as they were wont to do—they were furious, she could sense it now, all the prickling embers in the Force.

"The day you negotiated the exchange of tokens," Meridia grimly supplied. "You asked Lord Ren for his grandfather's lightsaber."

"So what if I did?"

"Snoke didn't know about it," said Mephala.

Perhaps as part of their intimidation tactics, the twins had carefully cultivated a habit of taking turns in a conversation as if they were the same person. While that was enough to make anyone's head spin, Rey usually drew on the light side to prevent from being rattled. Tonight, however...

Tonight, dread spilled through her in a cold, slow wash. It started from her heart and pushed up her throat at the same time that it sunk like a stone to the pit of her stomach. Where was Kylo? What was happening to him?

"Snoke didn't know," Meridia echoed her twin sister as they came to a stop outside a set of black doors, "but either Hux or Daala must have snitched because that's the only reason he would have called Lord Ren away in the middle of such an important event."

"Snoke doesn't like it when Lord Ren is disloyal," Mephala continued, "and I'm sure you're aware of how unforgiving darksiders can be."

"All of us," Meridia added, and this time Rey could hear the malicious smile in her voice.

"What's fair is fair, Empress," crooned Mephala. "We can't touch you but maybe one of your simpering little dolls—" Quick as a flash, she rounded on the silent, wide-eyed ladies, her hand darting into the folds of her cloak to unwind the slicewire from her utility belt.

Rey sprang into action, moving faster than Mephala for the sole reason that she had to. She lifted the
other woman off the floor with the Force and then did the same to Meridia, who had also been in the process of reaching for her own weapon. "Get inside!" she barked at her retinue, her narrowed eyes never leaving the suspended figures as they struggled for breath and kicked uselessly in the air. It wasn't until the doors slid shut behind Janassa, Esli, Niobe, Vanya, and Sayl that Rey exerted even more pressure on the twins' windpipes, her rage at them and her shocking worry for Kylo coalescing into something fiery and harsh that fueled the maelstrom of energy emanating from her fingertips.

"You dare threaten the innocent," she grated out, hardly recognizing the ugly, guttural patina that had slicked over her own voice. "You dare threaten allies granted safe passage—"

Inexplicably, Mephala started laughing. It was strained as she fought against Rey's Force grip but it was laughter nonetheless. "See?" she croaked to her sister. "I told you it was her. Told you she had dark in her. Skywalker never could've done it."

Rey's arms dropped back to her sides. The twins fell to the floor with the movement, both of them taking deep gulps of air through their masks as they struggled to their feet. Although she was wondering what it was she was supposed to have done that Luke couldn't, the prudent course was to disengage before she completely gave in her tumultuous emotions. She hadn't used the Force like that in a while— she hadn't realized how starved she'd been for it, for the wildness, the raw feeling.

She backed away from the twins and entered her suite. Right before the doors closed, she heard Meridia snarl, "Enjoy the rest of your evening, Your Majesty."

*

Esli was crying as she sat on one of the beds in the dormitory-style room that had been prepared for the ladies-in-waiting. Sayl and Vanya were hovering on either side of her, rubbing her back and offering silk kerchiefs for her to blow her nose on. The poor girl shook from head to toe— in an old life, Rey might have possibly been bewildered or even annoyed by all this carrying on, but she knew that Esli had led a sheltered life, and she was only seventeen. To come from that sort of background, to be that young, and to be threatened with such violence must be hard to bear.

Janassa, for her part, was indignant. "This is preposterous, Chume'da!" she railed. "The First Order and the Consortium have an accord— the Emperor's lackeys simply cannot be allowed to get away with this!"

"The knights aren't First Order," Rey muttered. "They answer to Ren alone. But I'll talk to him. It won't happen again, I swear, or I'll kill them myself."
"Those women are crazy, Your Grace," said Niobe. "Absolutely frothing at the mouth. And they are the Emperor's bodyguards?"

"That's darksiders for you. They like to sow fear and chaos. Makes them happy." Rey sighed, willing her own temper to cool. She had to be the calm one in this situation so as to avoid stirring up further panic among her retinue. "Get some rest. You've all earned it. No one's coming through those doors tonight. You have my word." She was going to sleep with her lightsaber clutched in her hand, just in case.

Brushing off her ladies' offers to help her out of her coronation gown, Rey went to her own private bedroom. Just before she left, she heard Janassa telling Esli, "Chin up! We are the Empress' handmaidens now. If we are to help her play the game, we have to be strong."

"I— I'll try," Esli sniffed.

Poor girls.

The Empress' chambers were done up in the same gloomy blacks and grays that permeated the rest of the Citadel. Rey was not particularly surprised, but she was pleased to discover that she had a balcony and— after opening the small side door across from her bed— a spacious 'fresher, with a vanity top fashioned from Gallian firestone and, in addition to the shower stall, a crystalline granite bathtub big enough for two.

Come to think of it, there were two sinks as well, embedded into the firestone paneling in front of the mirror.

And another door, opposite from the one through which Rey had entered.

"No way," she said out loud.

The door was sealed with an electronic combination but she managed to pick the lock's circuitry with one of the glittering metallic pins that had been keeping her elegant chignon in place all evening. As a section of loosened hair tumbled down her shoulders, she stepped into a bedroom that was as austerely furnished as hers and was, very obviously, Kylo's.
It smelled like him.

Rey had never developed the habit of associating certain scents with certain people. On Jakku, everyone had smelled like the desert, sweaty and sun-baked, and Resistance members used the same standard-issue soap and shampoo. Among the Hapan court, the mix of various exotic perfumes and scented oils was too confusing to try and make sense of— was downright cloying on occasion, to the point that Rey would sometimes sneeze in a crowded hall.

Kylo, though, was different. She just hadn't realized how much until she walked into a room she'd never been in before and instantly knew it was his because of the scents that hung in the air. There was, first and foremost, the warm fragrance of sweet myrrh that formed the base notes of his cologne, mingled with the sandalwood spice of his aftershave and a hint of honey and olives from his pomade. Underscoring all of these, also, was the slightly acidic tang of caf, the earthiness of leather, and whiffs of parchment and ink.

Her gaze fell to the desk pushed up against the far wall. Moonlight streamed in through the glass panels of the door leading out to the balcony, glinting off a calligraphy set similar to the one that had been on a young Ben Solo's table the night his uncle almost killed him in his sleep.

Rey knew that she should leave, but curiosity made her stay where she was, studying every detail of the room in an attempt to gather more information about the man she had married. And that was why she was still standing there when the main doors opened and Kylo stumbled in from the hallway, the glow-panels illuminating their surroundings in soft golden light.

She turned her head and their eyes met, widening in sync with their lips parting in surprise. He had changed into plain black garb and she barely had time to register his pained expression before his shoulders sagged and his body dipped forward in the beginnings of a slow, terrible collapse.

Rey hurried over to him, bracing him in her arms before he could hit the floor. "You're injured!"

"Your powers of observation are—" Kylo's sentence cut off into a sharp hiss as he pressed one gloved hand over his ribs, as if they'd been broken.

It took some effort in her gown and high heels, but Rey was finally able to haul him onto the bed. His face was pale against the black sheets— too pale, a worrying gray at the edges— and his tunic was soaked through with— with blood or sweat, she couldn't tell—
Rey didn't ask what happened. Meridia and Mephala had already told her, hadn't they? She wrestled Kylo's tunic off of him, her heart clenching in sympathy as he grunted with each abrupt, jolting movement. Now he was bare from the waist up, save for his gloves and arm-guards, but she couldn't afford to be embarrassed— all of her attention was taken up by the burns, bruises, and lacerations marring his skin like some gruesome star chart.

Kylo grabbed her wrist before she could place it over his chest to begin the long process of healing. "Leave it," he told her through clenched teeth, his eyes fluttering shut. "I can take care of myself."

"You're in no condition to use the Force," Rey argued.

"I can manage—"

"No, you can't!"

He flinched like a kicked puppy at her harsh, raised voice. What had Snoke done to his spirit to make him this vulnerable? Thoroughly chastened now, Rey cradled his scarred cheek with her free hand. "Let me help you," she pleaded, more softly this time.

"Rey." Kylo whispered her name, the shape of it rough and strained in his mouth. He leaned into her touch as if it was something he couldn't help doing, and she thought of the boy in the holo, Han and Leia's sweet, affectionate child. "You shouldn't be here."

"But I am, anyway." Rey sat down beside his sprawled form, careful to avoid bumping against the mottled purple blooms over his ribs. "And you're not getting rid of me that easily."

He opened his eyes and suddenly she was staring into the liquid dark brown of them, burnished by the room's golden light. Snoke had left his face untouched, but it was that part of him that showed the damage most clearly. Kylo looked lost and anguished and scared, perspiration dotting his brow. It was several long moments before he spoke again— she could see various decisions playing out across his conflicted features and, above it all, the desperate desire for comfort. For relief from his suffering.

"My back's worse off," he finally admitted.

Rey bit her tongue to stop from scolding him for taking his sweet time telling her. She helped him
roll over onto his stomach, and then she had to stifle a gasp at the sight. He had been repeatedly whipped by what seemed like tendrils of both thorn and flame, the striated wounds jagged at the edges and criss-crossing down his spine, weeping drops of scarlet on singed skin. How had he survived this? How could anyone have survived this? What kind of master would subject their apprentices to this kind of punishment?

Later, Rey thought. She could ask questions later. For now, she had to concentrate on the daunting task at hand.

* *

The next hour passed mostly in silence, in stillness, in golden light, punctuated by the radiant hum of the Force as it flowed from her fingertips and into the open pathways of his ruined flesh. She was far from the best at this— every once in a while, he would wince when she prodded too clumsily or bent energy the wrong way— and, try as she might, she couldn't suppress the nagging guilt that hovered at the borders of her consciousness like a toothache. Of course this wasn't her fault— she hadn't known that he'd kept the Skywalker blade a secret from Snoke— but it was difficult to not feel like she'd done this to him, because the plain and simple truth of the matter was that she'd set into motion the chain of events that had led to him being tortured.

I will try to be kinder, Rey vowed to herself as she sewed up Kylo's wounds and smoothed away his bruised and burned skin with the Force. Stars help me, I will be kind.

He seemed dazed when she turned him over again, probably a side effect of the healing skill, with all its anesthetic properties, being administered to him in such copious amounts. His relaxed limbs were as heavy as lead, staggeringly uncooperative, and it took her quite a bit of effort to reposition him on the bed and remove his gloves and arm-guards. The section of her hair that had been dislodged when she removed one of her pins spilled down onto his chest as she bent over him to work on his frontal injuries, and she nearly jumped off the mattress in shock when he reached out to twirl the loose strands around his large fingers.

"I always used to wonder what you'd look like with your hair down," Kylo murmured.

"What are you going on about?" Rey murmured right back, too focused on mending the cracks in his ribs. "You're delirious."

"I must be," he sighed, a wistful catch in his voice. "For one thing, I think you're really here."
That made her pause and peer up at him. His eyes were at half-mast, his jaw almost slack. Had she gone overboard with the energy she’d used to dull his pain, or was this unavoidable in all patients put in the healing trance for a considerable length of time? Deciding that there was nothing that could be done about it now, she resumed her work, ignoring the fact that he was basically playing with her hair at this point.

It took another hour before the last of Kylo's wounds disappeared, sutured by light. Exhaling in relief, Rey stood up and went to the 'fresher, soaking a couple of towels in hot water so that she could wipe away the blood on his skin. Kylo had tensed up again by the time she returned, staring at the ceiling. When the mattress dipped beneath her weight, his gaze slanted hesitantly towards her, abject terror written all over his face.

"I thought you left," he said.

And in Rey's memories, Leia was sorrowfully shaking her head. "I never should have sent him away. He must have felt so alone, like he didn't have anyone to turn to. He was only a child."

"I just went to grab these," Rey assured Kylo, holding up the towels for his benefit. She mopped up the blood on his chest and ribs, and then coaxed him into turning on his side so that she could clean up his back as well, even though his black sheets had soaked up most of it.

When she was done, she made to rise to her feet to toss the used towels into the hamper for the laundry droids to take care of in the morning— but Kylo seized her elbow, despair surging from his Force signature in waves, and pulled her to him. The towels fell to the floor and Rey let out an indignant squeak as she found herself lying on top of his bare chest, her nose inches from his. He wrapped one arm around her, the hand that wasn't clutching her elbow settling over her lower back, exposed by the cut of her gown. His warm fingers trailed static charges along her spine. She hadn't realized she was so sensitive there.

"Don't leave me again," he rasped hoarsely. "I don't care if you're really here or not— just don't go."

Rey stared into the hollow desolation in his eyes, the utter defeat. She knew this loneliness. She understood it in the marrow of her bones. "I'm here, Ben," she whispered. How strange it was to call him that in gentleness, in an attempt to soothe instead of goad. "I'm here."

He looked like he didn't believe her, and it pierced her heart. She wondered if this was a common occurrence, him crawling back to his chambers after Snoke's punishments and nursing his injuries while he dreamed of not being alone. Rey suddenly wanted nothing more than to assure Kylo of her presence, to let him know in no uncertain terms that she was real and that he had someone who was
on his side for once, and she could think of only one way to do that.

She took a deep breath, for courage, and then she closed her eyes and pressed her lips to his.

He didn't move.

_Am I doing it wrong?_ Rey asked herself in a burst of panic. After several seconds, she lifted her head to peer cautiously down at him. His eyes were closed, his breathing even, the line of his mouth relaxed.

He was asleep.

"You're an asshole, Your Majesty," Rey said out loud. But her words were devoid of ire as they echoed through the quiet room, and her touch was gentle as she brushed Kylo's dark hair away from his forehead.

Chapter End Notes

_Sienar-Jaemus Fleet Systems._

_RA-7 protocol droid._

_Gallian firestone._
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

You guys continue to be the most amazing readers ever! I'll catch up on everyone's comments as soon as I can!

Kayurka has blessed us with another gorgeous art, whutothewhut has made these pretty moodboards, sortingoutmypriorities has done an awesome manip, and a very talented someone who wishes to remain anonymous wrote this fantastic interlude that takes place in the aftermath of Chapter 23.

Thank you so, so much. I love you all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One standard month later

"Emperor Ren."

Kylo looked up from the holomap of the Chopani sector that he and First Order High Command were poring over, frowning at the lieutenant who had just entered the conference room.

"I gave strict orders that I was not to be disturbed," he snapped at Mitaka. There were rumors of X-wing sightings in the Outer Rim, and he'd scheduled his entire afternoon to be spent determining the best way to investigate.

"Yes, Your Majesty. Apologies, Your Majesty." There was a slight tremble in Mitaka's voice as he saluted but otherwise refrained from dissolving into a puddle of nerves. Was the little lieutenant finally growing a backbone? "However, you instructed us to treat all messages from or pertaining to Hapes as a communication of first priority regardless of the situation. The Empress is on the line, Sir."

To their credit, most of High Command remained impassive— even if they seemed very, very preoccupied with the holomap all of a sudden— although that was definitely a sneer on Hux's pale, pointed face. "Have the comm routed to my chambers," Kylo told Mitaka. To the others, he said, "When I return, I expect a full briefing on the logistics that trawling the Void of Chopani for the Resistance fleet will involve."
He left the room at a brisk pace, telling himself that he was simply in a hurry to get back to business. In a way, this was true because he didn't wish to give Hux— slimy, ladder-climbing snitch that he was— the opportunity to hold court for a second longer than was necessary, but part of Kylo was also eager to hear from Rey.

No, not eager... Curious. Yes, that was it. He was curious. He wondered what she wanted. That was all. Nothing more.

Upon entering his suite, Kylo's gaze fell upon the neat pile of books on his desk, where he'd carefully tucked away the note he found beside his pillow the morning after Snoke meted out punishment a month ago. Kylo had woken up to freshly-changed sheets and the faintest whisper of lingering pain, with hazy memories of being taken care of by Rey and pulling her into his arms as unconsciousness claimed him. Despite the suspicious absence of injuries, he'd been ready to write the whole thing off as the feverish dream of a pitiful man wracked by agony— at least, until he saw the note.

My lord, Rey had scrawled in clumsy High Galactic, the writing alphabet that she would undoubtedly have been given a crash course in as a royal, I must return to Hapes as scheduled but I thought it best not to wake you. Seeing as you hardly stirred when the housekeeping droid and I changed your sheets, you need to have your rest. This sentence was followed by a few black smudges, as if she'd been unsure what to write next and the ink had dribbled while she hesitated. I apologize for helping myself to your calligraphy supplies. Take care. She'd started to sign it with her birth name, as she must have been used to doing, before meticulously crossing that out and writing Rey instead.

Kylo had read her note over and over again until it felt like he'd memorized every line of her atrocious penmanship. He'd thought about comming her as the days turned into weeks, but he had no idea what to say.

That didn't matter now. She was comming him.

There was a blip of static to signal an incoming transmission, and then Rey's face appeared on the vidscreen.

"Hey," she said.

Kylo would drown forever in those luminescent hazel eyes if he wasn't careful, so he chose to focus on her surroundings, which were unfamiliar to him. "Where are you?" he asked.
She arched a brow at his rudeness but didn't comment on it. "Alqualonde," she replied instead. "That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about. I— we are hosting a party."

He blinked. "We are?"

"This is your place of residence, too, so naturally you are hosting the party with me." There was something different about Rey that he couldn't quite put his finger on. Her demeanor was more firm and matter-of-fact, more like her grandmother's, but her face when she looked at him was— softer. It could very well be that she pitied him after seeing the sorry state he was in last month, and he wanted to lash out at her for that, but she was speaking again. "It's the Marauders' Masquerade, one of the three largest annual Consortium balls. In this case, it will also double as a housewarming."

"I have been appraised of Alqualonde's size, Chume'da. It can easily fit ten houses."

She rolled her eyes. "A castle-warming, then, Emperor. It will be held this coming Zhellday. Will you be here?"

Kylo smirked. Or, at least, he tried to. But instead of his usual caustic twitch of lips that conveyed disdain, his mouth felt like it was curving in a gentler, more teasing manner. "Seeing as I'm apparently the host, I can hardly fail to show up."

"Just as long as we are in accord." Rey paused, a bit of her calm assurance dissipating as she seemed to wrangle with some mysterious internal conflict. "If you would like to head over earlier," she said at last, "you're more than welcome. You could bring your things."

*Miss me already?* Kylo held his tongue from wisecracking. He probably should transfer a few personal effects to the Reef Fortress, as Ta'a Chume had suggested back during the engagement period. He had no plans to settle on Hapes but the idea of a vacation home was starting to carry a certain appeal that it had previously lacked. Besides, he could hardly refuse Rey after she'd taken care of him, although he did wonder what her reasons were for being willing to spend more time with him than was necessary.

"The court is starting to make noises about how tragic it is that you and I are estranged so soon after our wedding," she said, as if reading his mind.

Right. Of course this was about politics. Before he could muster some flippant reply, however, she
added, "And I thought it might be good for you to get away for a while, Ben."

He stilled. He hadn't dreamed it, then, that she'd called him by his birth name on that night. *I'm here, Ben.* It wasn't pity that he was seeing in her eyes— it was *compassion,* the same thing he had felt for her when she burst into his life like a whirlwind and he saw the loneliness hidden away in the gaps of her soul. She was offering him respite— from the Citadel, from Snoke.

"I have some business to wrap up," Kylo heard himself say, "but I will be able to join you at the Reef Fortress tomorrow."

"I do have one condition," Rey countered. "The last time I was on Coruscant, Meridia and Mephala attempted to inflict bodily harm on the handmaidens. They are not welcome here. I hope you understand."

"They're my knights," he reminded her archly.

"Yes, and they threatened my ladies," she retorted, a spark of her usual temper flaring into existence. "So, unless you want to fight about this—"

"I don't," Kylo snapped.

"I don't, either," Rey said just as irritably, before he saw her take a quick, calming breath on the screen. "You can bring whoever you want— stars know we have the space— but not them."

He recognized her conciliatory offer for what it was. He tried to see it from her point of view as well. Meridia and Mephala were the most unpredictable out of all his knights, and Rey was simply doing what was in her power to keep her people safe. "Fine," he said grudgingly. "I won't bring the twins, and I'll also have a talk with them about their behavior. I will see you tomorrow?" It came out as a question, because after this brief spat he rather doubted that Rey still wanted him to head to Alqualonde several days before the masquerade.

To his surprise, she nodded. "Thank you, Ben."

That name again. He should admonish her. He should put up more of a fight. Instead, he only returned her nod, managing to school his expression into a semblance of impassiveness until her image disappeared and the screen faded to black.
That went more smoothly than expected, Rey thought after ending the comm. As she had discussed with Luke and Leia at a Stalsinek IV rendezvous the other week, the objective was to get Kylo away from the First Order—and, consequently, from Snoke’s sphere of influence—as often as possible, for as long as possible. The Marauders’ Masquerade provided a perfect opportunity.

I’m doing the right thing, Rey assured herself. It all felt a bit... underhanded, like the time she was briefed on Kylo’s past. It bothered her for reasons she couldn’t exactly pinpoint. However, the circumstances had forced them to resort to these measures. There had been nothing more terrible than the rage on Leia Organa’s face when Rey told her what Snoke had done. "How can Ben still be loyal to that monster?" the General had cried.

And it was Luke who had answered, "Because he feels like he has nothing left."

It would be up to Rey, then, to latch on to the frayed threads of light in Kylo Ren’s soul and to pull at them—either gently or with a good, hard tug—until the Empire of the First Order came crashing down.

Consulting her datapad, she found—much to her pleasure—that she had nothing scheduled for the rest of the day. She’d spent most of the past month shadowing Ta’a Chume as the latter went about the business of ruling. She liked the mediations well enough—it was the highest form of entertainment to watch feuding nobles struggle not to lose their tempers in front of the Queen Mother—but if she had to sit through another five-hour-long discussion on tax reform she was going to burn the Fountain Palace to the ground.

When she wasn't at said palace, Rey was busy learning the ropes of managing the Reef Fortress' staff or accompanying her father on his visits to the heart of the settlements. Ta'a Chume kept the aristocrats in line but it was Isolder who kept a finger on the people's pulse, taking note of their dissatisfactions and doing what he could to help. The prince was well-loved throughout the Consortium worlds while the Queen Mother was deified and the Chume'da was—well—

Rey could sense the common folk’s apprehension around her. They treated her with all the respect and awe due to She Who Will Come After, and the older ones who had celebrated her birth would often shed more than a few tears upon meeting the long-lost heir, but, when it came right down to it, she was still something of an unknown quantity. A foreigner, who hadn't been raised according to their ways, and a half-blood at that. Not to mention that she could also use the Force, which they had been taught to fear.
Then there was the fact that her consort was a foreigner as well. To Rey's surprise, though, people seemed to be split on this—a good number of them lit up when they congratulated her on her wedding. They'd watched the broadcast and they'd found it shudderingly romantic, especially when the tall, dark-haired Emperor had leaned down to keep kissing his bride before the dragon altar. Rey understood now why the whole affair had been so absurdly lavish—the masses appreciated a bit of beauty and spectacle. *Keeps them happy,* Ta'a Chume had told her as much on Coruscant.

The good thing about having one's own domain was the freedom to come and go as one pleased. The Resistance cells had moved around again, Leia and company were no longer on Stalsinek IV, but Rey decided it was high time to attempt another chat with the Goddess. She'd tried before, on several occasions, but the deity had not elected to manifest. "*This is a wilder, more unpredictable aspect of the Daughter,*" Luke had surmised. "*The witches of Dathomir are not a cruel people but the goddess that they worship is... harder. More elemental.*"

Of course, that had been back when she and Luke were still on good terms.

Rey changed out of her day gown and into leggings, tunic, vest, and boots, clipping her saberstaff to her utility belt. She stole out of the royal suite and down the winding corridors of Alqualonde, the foundations of which were carved from Hapan basalt, dark and glittering as opposed to the Per’Agthra's smooth, white marble. Her Chume’doro were stationed at the castle's ingress points—there was no need for them to be breathing down her neck at this isolated fortress in the middle of the sea, after all, and she'd proven in many a sparring session that she was more than capable of defending herself—and her ladies-in-waiting were going about their usual routines, which these days tended to involve a lot of bickering with the household staff as the date of the masquerade drew nearer.

While Alqualonde's main dock was located outside the castle, there was a landing grid on one of the rooftops big enough for *Kalessin,* the customized *Miy’il* starfighter that Isolder had gifted to Rey when she moved out of the Fountain Palace. "*So that you won't have to commandeer any more ships from our unsuspecting navy,*" he'd said in a tone of mock sternness, a twinkle in his blue eyes. Rey had been so overcome with gratitude that she'd thrown her arms around him in a tight hug, a gesture which was as alien to the Hapan court as it had been to the embittered scavengers of Jakku. But, for her, it conveyed happiness in someone else's presence. Finn had taught her that.

*Kalessin* was larger than a normal *Miy’il* starfighter but possessed of the same graceful lines and deadly weaponry—with a few extra missiles and a state-of-the-art stealth package. He also flew like a dream. Rey missed the *Falcon,* which had reverted to Chewbacca's command, but this was a worthy substitute.

A few hours later, she was on Stalsinek IV, slogging through the bushes and the bramble as she
followed the trail of the nexus point's siren-song.

But someone was already there. Rey broke into the clearing and saw Antares Elerron of the Mist Patrol standing in the temple's courtyard. She felt his surprise at the sight of her ripple through the currents of the Force that were always more vibrant here than anywhere else on the rainforest world.

He recovered with admirable speed, snapping off a sharp salute. "Your Grace." He hesitated, and then corrected himself. "Your Majesty."

Rey waved off the unspoken apology. "I was your Chume'da long before I was Empress."

"And before that, you were my prisoner," he said ruefully. "I—"

"It's all right," Rey hastened to assure him. It was because of this man that she had been reunited with her father, after all. "You were doing your duty. But what are you doing here?"

Elerron gestured vaguely in the direction of the silver fountain. "Your mother, the Lady Teneniel, visited this place frequently, Chume'da. I sometimes come here to remember, and to mourn."

"Oh," Rey said, a bit awkwardly. She hadn't known that Elerron and Teneniel had been close.

He must have seen the bewilderment on her face and guessed the reason for it, because he continued, "Her late highness was very lonely at court. She detested politics and had no patience for... all the formalities and maneuvering. I was one of her few confidantes."

This only served to confuse Rey further. "You were often at court, then, Captain?" And then she recalled something Isolder had mentioned offhand in the garrison's interrogation chamber two, almost three years ago— "Antares is a good man, a fine soldier, if a bit still smarting from his demotion."

Elerron flashed a thin, humorless smile. "I am now a captain in the border regiments. I used to be the general in command of the ground forces on Hapes Prime. It was my task to prevent Kalen's rebels from gaining a foothold in the city of Ta'a Chume'Dan, and I failed."

Rey's brow creased. "But the rebels were eventually defeated, weren't they?"
"Through your father's doing, not mine," said Elerron. "I made many tactical mistakes that necessitated the Queen Mother's retreat from the capital— and yours. In a roundabout way, it was because of my inadequacies that you were lost to us for so long. I can only be thankful that Ta'a Chume deigned to show mercy."

There was something hollow in the way he said that last bit, something not quite sincere behind his eyes— not treacherous, but bitter. Rey couldn't bring herself to fault him for it. I will not rule through fear, she found herself thinking, the same words she had vowed to Kylo on the night of their wedding. I will not punish those who are loyal to me.

"But I am intruding," Elerron said at last, now appearing deeply conscious that he might have divulged too much information. "I shall take my leave."

Rey cringed. She was the one who had barged in on him. It never failed to make her uncomfortable when people went out of their way to accommodate her just because she ranked higher than them. "Captain, there's no need—"

"I insist. You are Teneniel's daughter. You have more right to this place than I do." Elerron saluted again and walked away. Just before he disappeared into the undergrowth, however, he looked back at her and said in a somber tone of voice, "Your Grace, I have sworn my life, service, and fealty to the Dragon Throne, but I would be no friend of Lady Teneniel's if I didn't tell you that there was no love lost between her and Ta'a Chume. The Queen Mother was most displeased by Lady Teneniel's refusal to be named Chume'da, and Lady Teneniel in turn did not wish for you to be declared as such before you were old enough to choose for yourself. So— take that as you will."

Before Rey could decide whether that had been a warning or simply a statement, Elerron was gone.

Unsettled by the conversation with the Hapan captain, it took Rey longer than usual to center herself as she assumed the meditation pose in the courtyard. Her father had occasionally dropped hints that the relationship between Ta'a Chume and Teneniel Djo hadn't been all smooth sailing, but Rey wondered at the extent of it. Isolder was probably loath to discuss such a thing, but someone else might be willing to provide more information. Lairelosse, perhaps, or even the gossipy ladies-in-waiting...

One problem at a time, Rey sternly reminded herself. You came here for a reason.
She was eventually able to push earthly concerns out of her mind and touch the Force, which welcomed her with ease. Now she was back in the blackness, that liminal space, untangling the energy streams with a combination of training and instinct, and after a few more minutes—or perhaps it was seconds, or hours, in this place where time was fluid—a pair of snowy wings unfolded, filling the void.

"Just you?" The Goddess sounded more amused than snide, more curious than vengeful, even if she seemed to be all of those things. "Where is your handsome, wild-eyed vandal? Have you killed him?"

"No." Rey swallowed. "I married him."

The Goddess did not laugh, but her lips curved upwards. "I suppose that works, too."

"When we first spoke, you told me that the threads of destiny were coming together," Rey said. "What is my destiny?"

"Always so impatient. Always asking the wrong questions." A whisper-soft sigh. "If I tell you, would it truly be your own? Some things must be earned." A rustle of feathers. "But, perhaps, a taste... for when you lose your hope..."

There was a throne, unlike any that Rey had ever seen before. It could have been white but, then again, moonlight always turned all colors into ghosts of themselves. And it was moonlight, wasn't it, those faint silvery skeins running through the shadows—

No, Rey realized. It's the Force. The Force the way I see it in my mind's eye. It flowed from the throne and reached out to her in rivers of energy both light and dark, flickering like the beams of a broken holoprojector. Pulsing like a heartbeat. For a moment, she caught a glimpse—a vague impression—of serenity in the midst of chaos, of purpose in the midst of freedom.

For a moment, she understood.

And then it was all gone, slipping from her grasp like water, and she was looking upon the Goddess' face once more.
"What did you see?"

"A throne," Rey whispered. "And... balance. Like what is contained here in the temple but—stronger, somehow. More encompassing."

"What else?"

"That was all."

"Then that means you're not yet ready."

"How do I become ready?"

"By learning. By unlocking that ocean in your mind. The one I told you about when we first spoke."

"Teach me, then."

The Goddess shook her head. "You will find no more answers here, so far from the bones of your ancestors. To go forward, you must look back on where your power comes from."

"Dathomir," Rey breathed. "Right? I have to go to Dathomir."

The Goddess smiled, benevolent and forbidding all at once. "Yes. They're waiting for you."

Rey knew that she couldn't just up and leave. A trip to the Outer Rim would require careful planning, not to mention that she'd have to stay there for a while. It had taken her weeks to master the basics and a smattering of intermediate techniques on Ahch-To; hopefully, she wouldn't have to waste time banging on the witches' doors until they decided to train her, like she'd done with Luke. She'd start making her preparations after the masquerade. Not only would she need to convince Ta'a Chume to let her go, but she'd have to coordinate with the Resistance, ensure their safety while she was off training.
On her silent journey back to Hapes Prime, Rey mentally went over her conversation with the Goddess. *That works, too*, the deity had said after learning of her marriage to Kylo Ren. What was *that* supposed to mean, especially coming from the same being who had mused that Kylo and Rey would bring ruin upon each other?

Rey remembered what had happened in Kylo's room on the night of her coronation as empress. His arms wrapped around her body, his palm resting on her bare spine. Despite the scandalous position and her fussy attire, she *had* dozed off here and there, cocooned by his warmth, her cheek pillowed on his hard chest, rousing only to readjust a cramped leg or an aching neck. It hadn't been all that uncomfortable— in fact, it had been almost *pleasant*, especially when he'd moved his head just so, his lips brushing against her temple. It hadn't felt like ruin at all.

Now, what had occurred on their wedding night— *that* was a different story. There had been a fire building inside her, so steady and fierce that she'd been afraid she was going to burn up from within. How could one person be capable of eliciting such a vast range of emotions from her? How could she feel such intense dislike for him one minute and such equally intense... whatever it was... the next?

Stars, she was being twisted into knots. Something told her that the next few days with him, in the remote castle on the sea, would be— *eventful*, to say the least.

Bristling with spired towers, pointed arches, and flying buttresses, the charcoal-hued basalt facade of Alqualonde rose from its craggy island on the ink-black waters of the Evernight. As the *Upsilon-*class approached, Kylo noted the large silver-and-white *Miy'til* starfighter docked on a square-shaped landing pad that had been carved into an eastern rooftop, as well as several light craft on an external grid protruding out over the sea, where several figures had gathered to welcome him and his retinue.

Not that he'd brought a lot of people to begin with— aside from the shuttle crew, he was accompanied only by Mitaka, Boethiah, and Hircine. Some of his officers had protested this lack of security, but Kylo was more interested in those who *hadn't*. After all, if he died, there was going to be a rather lucrative position up for grabs. He would take into his confidence only those whose commitment outweighed their ambition, and find a way to neutralize the rest.

Disembarking from the shuttle, Kylo found that Rey was conspicuously absent. He was *not* hurt, he told himself. He was... offended. Yes. This was a grave breach of protocol.
A man dressed in the scarlet-and-azure livery of the royal staff stepped forward and bowed, which was the signal for the rest of the welcoming party to do the same. He was middle-aged and oddly gangly for a Hapan, and Kylo was reminded, ludicrously enough, of C-3PO. "Welcome to the Reef Fortress, Emperor Ren. I am Zan, the castle steward, and it is my honor to be at your service. Her Grace is occupied, so if I may escort His Majesty to his chambers—"

"You may escort me to her, instead," Kylo told him, rather more forcefully than he cared to admit.

Zan paled. "Emperor Ren, the Chume'da is resolving a delicate matter in the kitchens—"

"So take me to the kitchens."

Zan opened his mouth to argue, but Kylo's stern glare was an effective deterrent. "At once, Your Majesty," he said instead. "Please follow me."

The welcoming party split up at Kylo's behest, some going with Boethiah and Hircine to help them get settled in, others staying behind at the dock while Mitaka oversaw the unloading of a week's worth of luggage. It was Zan alone who accompanied Kylo to the kitchens in the south wing.

Alqualonde's halls were narrow, its conical glow-panels shedding amber light that brought out the sparkling mineral veins running through the stone walls. The tapestries here were woven mostly in shades of wine, plum, and cobalt, while the paintings depicted storm-tossed seascapes and all manner of mythical beasts lurking beneath the waves. Kylo thought about someone as vivid—as alive—as Rey dwelling in the midst of all this oppressive grandeur, and he felt a pang of guilt. Should he be around more often? But he had his own empire to see to and, besides, it wasn't as if her mood would be improved by his presence. Something dark and ugly inside him emitted a mocking snicker at how he had the gall to believe otherwise.

"Here we are, then," Zan announced, a set of motion-activated doors sliding open at their approach.

Whatever Kylo had been expecting when he walked into the kitchens, it was definitely not the sight of his Empress covered in thick, sticky pink liquid as she stood in front of a nanowave stove, her eyes squeezed shut as two similarly-drenched ladies-in-waiting dabbed at her with hand towels while a gaggle of kitchen staff hung back, looking absolutely terrified.

"Oh, honestly, it's fine," Rey was attempting to soothe them, blindly gesturing in their direction, "it's all my fault, I'm the one who suggested the recipe, who knew quinberries would be so volatile—"
Kylo clapped a hand over his mouth in order to suppress the chuckle threatening to burst from his throat. She was so ridiculous, batter plastering her loose chestnut hair to her forehead, dripping from her chin, trickling down the front of her jacket-style bodice and onto the folds of her skirts, both pieces adorned with gold sequins that were now spattered with the light pink goo.

Although Rey's eyes were closed, she was the first to register his presence, no doubt sensing it in the Force. "Ben," she gasped, freezing in place.

Something in Kylo's chest began to thaw— an arctic tightness that he hadn't even realized had been there in the first place, having lived with it for so long. He slowly made his way over to her, grabbing a fresh hand towel from a nearby table. Vanya and Sayl immediately stepped back from their Chume'da, somehow managing to curtsy to him in the same seamless movement. Rey was in no position to open her eyes but she must have heard his footsteps, for she seemed to stiffen, holding her breath as he drew near.

"Dabbling in the culinary arts now, are we?" he murmured, using the towel to gently wipe batter from her face.

"Don't start," she grumbled. "We're testing dessert options for the masquerade. The cake mix exploded just as I was informed that you'd arrived."

Kylo frowned as a new possibility occurred to him. "You were not scalded—"

"Not at all, we'd barely fired up the stove."

By now, he'd patted the skin around her eyes clean, as well as the bridge of her nose. Her lashes fluttered tentatively, and then hazel irises were peering up at him from a face still smeared with pink batter at the sides. Some of her foundation had rubbed off as well and her freckles were visible, fainter now that she no longer stayed out in the sun as much, but lovely still.

"Hi," Rey said, sounding just the slightest bit breathless.

Kylo's heart skipped a beat, all the stress and isolation he'd felt over the past month melting away as he stared down at his wife. "Hello."
The **Void** of **Chopani**.

**Marauders' Masquerade**.

**Zhellday**.

**Throne of Balance**. (This link is a bit spoilery so click at your own risk!)

**Nanowave stove**.

**Quinberry**.

Iliveinthemoon called Hux an "odious little ladder climbing creep" last chapter and that inspired the insult in this one, lol. Mitaka now has valet duties thanks to Billysmind. And datswatutink was right on the money about Rey being gone in the morning but leaving a sign of her presence ;)

Rey's dress in this installment is based off this [Said Kobeisy](https://afonhafren.tumblr.com) linked to me by afonhafren on Tumblr.

Regarding the name of Rey's starfighter, Kalessin is a dragon from the Earthsea novels by Ursula K. Le Guin, who passed away on January 22. This is my little tribute to the woman who got me interested in speculative fiction as a child and was one of my earliest formative writing influences. "True voyage is return." <3
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to myknightofren, nightblossoms-and-spinebarrels, reylostarwarstrash, jackpotgirl, benisolo, aprillka, uurca, and beautyunderneath1 for these gorgeous edits and art!

The chapter count has been extended to 35 but, in all honesty, we might hit 40 because this fic has taken on a life of its own beyond my original plans for it. This is due, in part, to everyone's amazing feedback that continues to nurture my imagination. I'm still woefully behind on a lot of comments but I will get to them ASAP.

Thoughts on this update would be dearly appreciated. Happy Valentine's Day, y'all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In hindsight, Rey really should have left the cooking to the kitchen staff.

But the culinary arts, as Kylo had so drolly quipped, were a source of endless fascination. On Jakku, Rey had mixed polystarch and water with her fingers and wolfed down the dense, gritty result; here on Hapes Prime, eggs were cracked into pans and seasoned and heated on nanowave stoves to produce delicately flavored omelets, raw meats were soaked in marinades and encrusted with herbs and popped into gassers to undergo some mysterious chemical reaction that turned them into juicy roasts, things were sautéed and and blanched and deglazed and parbaked and fried. And while the kitchens of the Fountain Palace were technically not off-limits, the staff there tended to panic at the possible consequences of Ta'a Chume finding out that her heir apparent was slumming it. Alqualonde, however, was Rey's castle, and so she cheerfully bullied the head chef and the line cooks into letting her assist whenever she could.

The quinberry cake had been her idea. They'd warned her that the batter would need careful mixing as it was gently warmed to neutralize the fruit's explosive properties before it was subjected to the high temperature of the gasser, but she'd been confident in her abilities. And it had been going fine— until Zan popped his head into the kitchen to announce that the Emperor's shuttle was approaching the island. Rey's pulse had accelerated and a jolt of nervous excitement had shot through her system, reverberating through the Force and rattling the saucepan. Before she knew it, everything had gone— well— pink.

It had been ages since she last lost control of her emotions like that, and it was all Kylo's fault. She couldn't bring herself to be annoyed with him, however, not when he'd so helpfully cleaned her up, not when the expression on his face had been so soft when he returned her greeting. It was strange to see him again in person after a month had passed; as she led him to the royal suite, her gaze constantly flickered over to him like she was drinking in the sight, a tiny part of her curious as to whether he'd changed in some way during their time apart. That was a silly thing to wonder, wasn't
He kept looking at her, too. Their eyes met, again and again and again, as they traversed Alqualonde's corridors and took the turbolift to the suite, which occupied an entire wing of the castle. Rey had dismissed her ladies and the steward, so it was just her and Kylo— which was a good thing because, by the time they stepped into the bedroom area and the doors had slid shut behind them, they had given up all pretense and were openly staring at each other.

"Well, this is your room," Rey said in a brisk, no-nonsense tone that rang hollow. "Our room, actually. Sorry about that. If you're uncomfortable—"

Kylo shook his head. "If you—"

"No," Rey quickly interrupted him, "it's all right. The bed... the bed's big enough."

They both looked at the object in question. The mattress could easily accommodate five people, and it was furnished with a mountain of plump eiderdown pillows, wine-colored silk sheets, and damask hangings trimmed in gold. Rey tried to suppress her blush upon seeing it— how many nights had she lain there all by herself, her mind inevitably wandering to the kisses that she and Kylo had shared and the feeling of his body pressed against hers and the way his hand had fumbled at her breast, before she stubbornly willed those memories away by channeling the light side of the Force—

"I'm not to sleep on the floor, then?" he asked wryly, quirking an eyebrow at her.

Her embarrassment faded, replaced by the infinitely more sobering emotion of guilt. Given what she now knew of his past, it had been the height of cruelty to banish him as she had. I'm on your side, she wished she could tell him, I want to be on your side, this is your home, this is safe harbor from your master, no one will harm you here. But what came out instead was the first sentence that she could string together in her flustered headspace— "You're always welcome in this bed."

It was only when Kylo drew a sharp intake of breath that Rey was struck by the double meaning of that statement. Right. She had to get out of here, clear her mind before she made an even bigger fool out of herself. Fortunately, her pink-stained gown presented an opportunity to do so.

"I should change," Rey said, fleeing into the walk-in closet before Kylo could say anything.
Without her ladies to help, Rey shimmied out of the dress as carefully as she could and stepped into the adjacent refresher unit so that the sonic could cleanse the batter residue from her skin. There was a far grander ‘fresher in the suite, with hot-water showers and a bathtub to rival the one on Coruscant; this stall was for quick emergency changes, although Rey wondered if any Hapan royal before her had ever had to deal with exploding cake mix.

Afterwards, she selected the least complicated-looking gown from the row of day dresses hanging from the racks. It was a cap-sleeved number with a bodice that faded from deep sapphire to blue-gray, liberally embellished with metallic gold leaves and belted at the waist with a pale satin ribbon, from which stems of sapphire lilies and more golden leaves trailed down the flared panels of a gauzy skirt the color of an autumn sky.

Standing in front of the full-length mirror, Rey gathered her hair into a bun secured with opal-studded pins. She did not have her ladies’ deft hand and the effect was somewhat messy, but she decided— after her third attempt— that it would have to do for now. "Why do you care so much, anyway?" she muttered to her reflection, a little irritated that she was putting far more thought into her appearance than she would have if a certain someone hadn't been waiting.

Exiting the walk-in closet, she found Kylo sitting tentatively on the edge of the mattress. He'd thrown open the balcony doors and the smell of the sea wafted into the room, as well as the sound of the rushing waves. "Rey," he said in a quiet, uncertain voice, his dark gaze pulling her in with such magnetic intensity that she moved towards him without being fully aware of her actions. He spoke again only when she was near enough to touch, his broad, black-clad shoulders hunched but his pale, narrow face tilted up so that he could meet her eyes. "I haven't thanked you yet for— for that night— in the Citadel—" He stumbled through the sentence, at an uncharacteristic loss for words. "I hope that your departure was not overly delayed by my— my indisposition—"

"I didn't want to leave," Rey admitted, surprising him, surprising herself. You, her foolish mind inwardly supplied. I didn't want to leave you. "But people would have asked questions. I—"

I hate the thought of you waking up alone after what you endured. She started to apologize, but Kylo shook his head, his gloved hands abruptly flying to her hips as if he could no longer stop himself from holding on to some part of her.

It was so oddly automatic, the way her arms wound around his neck when he pulled her close. It was instinct. It was like her body had been made to always touch his, whether in bedrooms or on battlefields.

"You have nothing to apologize for," Kylo fiercely insisted. "What you did— that was more than anyone else ever—" He stopped, features strained, fingers digging indents into the wispy material of her skirt.
"I know everything," Rey had to bite her lip to keep from blurring out. "I understand. For nearly all my life, I was alone, too. But Kylo already knew that last bit, didn't he? He'd seen it in her mind back on Starkiller Base. Back when she had thought him a monster and called him as much.

"Snoke can't keep doing this to you," she said bluntly, one hand creeping up his nape to bury shaking fingers in the silky waves of his sable hair. "You can't let him. You were half-dead when you came back that night—"

"It was my own fault," Kylo mumbled. "It was my own weakness."

"No, it wasn't." The words came out too harsh and so, to compensate, she carded her fingers through his hair as gently as she could. He made a strangled noise in the back of his throat before leaning forward, hiding his face in her midriff. "Meridia and Mephala told me why Snoke punished you. It's not weakness to want to keep something safe, and yours. He was wrong to torture you for it."

"Pain is instructive." Kylo's voice, though muffled against the fabric of her gown, was clipped and blank. As if he were repeating something that he'd never had any choice but to believe.

"There are other ways to learn!" Rey argued.

"Not when it comes to the dark side—"

"Then maybe you should forget the dark side—"

His hands tightened on her hips in warning. "You speak of treason."

"T—treason?" she sputtered. "Against whom? Ben, you are the Emperor." This was her chance. She'd found her opening and she was going to follow through with it, come what may. Pulling back, she cupped his scarred cheek, forcing him to look up at her once more. "You are the Emperor," she repeated in deliberate tones, the epiphany dawning on her as well, unfolding with the roar of the sea below as it dashed against the island's rocks, "and I am the Empress, and that means we have no more masters."

A shudder rippled through his powerful frame. The gaze that he aimed at her was awed and tensed but not particularly startled, and she realized with a shocking thrill that she wasn't telling him anything he hadn't already thought about. "Look, to say you and I got off on the wrong foot is an
understatement,” she continued, "but things are going to change—you said so yourself, on the night of my coronation. You said we can make it all better, and I'm taking you up on that. We can work together. I'll stand with you." At your back, they'd vowed before the dragon altar, that the world might never overtake us, and remembering that now caused something secret and rich and electric to bloom in the pit of her stomach, spiking her veins with adrenaline. "I... we can be friends, Ben."

Perhaps if they'd been different people, an offer of friendship would have been a pitiful way to conclude such a speech. But it was not an offer that Rey made lightly. She was letting Kylo know, on her own terms, that he didn't have to be alone.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he wrapped his fingers around the wrist of her hand that was cupping his cheek. The rough, warm texture of the leather glove made her shiver in her heightened state. His eyes darkened. "I don't want to be just your friend, Chume'da."

Oh.

There was no doubt as to what he meant, not when he was looking at her like this, his full lips centimeters away from grazing the mound of her palm. There was nothing artful or seductive about the confession—he said it like it pained him, like he already knew, or feared, that it was a lost cause.

It would be so easy to lean down and kiss him, like she'd done that night in his room. But there was a voice in her head—perhaps it was Ta'a Chume's, perhaps it was Lairelosse's, speaking with all the elegant cunning of the Hapes Consortium, telling her that men were laughably pliable once one figured out what they wanted and that, if she played her cards right, she could make the Emperor of the First Order bow. Because of that voice, because she'd already thought those things, there was no turning back. If she entered into any sort of relationship with Kylo that went beyond the formalities of the political alliance, she would never be able to shake the implication that she was using him.

I can't do that. Not to Ben.

Rey stayed silent for far too long, frozen by conflict and indecision. Kylo relinquished his grip on her wrist; for a fleeting second, he looked panicked, and then humiliated, but she must have been imagining things because his tone was flinty when he spoke, his features arranging themselves into the sullen composure that he adopted at meetings of state. "I understand your reservations. I only felt that, given what happened on our wedding night, it would be futile to continue denying that there appears to be some sort of attraction between us. However, if we were to act on it, I would not expect... anything else from you. This is not a proposition," he was quick to clarify, "merely a—possibility. For the future."
Rey had no idea whether she should be relieved that he wasn't pressuring her, offended that he thought she would tumble so casually into bed with him, flattered that she apparently had some charms to call her own, or hurt that he had countered her offer of friendship with an offer of sex. It didn't seem possible to be all those things at once, but she was, anyway.

It was, however, the hurt that won out in the end.

She stepped away from Kylo, fixing a polite smile on her face. "Thank you for being honest," she said, retreating into the airs and graces of the Hapan court. "I suppose it's not completely unheard of for husbands and wives to sleep with each other, and I shall bear that in mind. Now, if you'll excuse me, my lord, I'll go see about lunch."

Kylo's opulent surroundings dimmed considerably after Rey left, like she'd taken all the light in the room with her. Still sitting on the canopy bed, he glared at the far wall as he mentally replayed their conversation.

"What the hell was that?" he asked himself out loud, his strident voice bouncing harshly off stone and velvet and silk. He'd sought to thank her for healing his injuries last month, and nothing more—but he'd ended up pouring his heart out and kriffing holding her and leaning into her touch! At the top of the list of grave tactical errors he'd managed to commit in under ten minutes, he'd also told her that he wanted to be more than friends.

Kylo's gloved hands fisted in the delicate sheets. Rey's nearness had awakened a memory—she'd been sprawled on top of him, in his bed on Coruscant, and she had pressed her lips to his. He'd been more than half-asleep then, and the sensation had bestowed such a feeling of peace upon him that he'd immediately sunk into the most restful slumber he'd had in years. Perhaps that never really happened and it was only a memory of a dream, but he'd been so sure a few minutes ago, and that was why he'd thrown all caution to the wind and revealed a glimmer of his true feelings.

Panic had set in not long after, exacerbated when Rey said nothing in response and continued to stare blankly at him. It had been much too late to recant such a bald declaration, but he'd had some hazy notion of assuring her that it didn't have to be all that complicated. In his turmoil, it had seemed like a good idea at the time.

"Isolder is going to kill me," Kylo muttered.
He flushed as soon as the words emerged from his lips. What did he care what the Hapan prince thought? What did he care what anyone thought?

Stars, why couldn't he have just kept his mouth shut?

Because there was no one around to see, Kylo flopped back on the bed, thinking about the long week that lay ahead of him. The mattress was as soft as a cloud and it sank beneath his weight; he was instantly enveloped in the fragrance of honeyed peaches tinged with notes of jasmine, amber, and wild rose. Rey's scent. His mouth watered, which was so absurd a reaction that he shot bolt upright, his heart pounding loud enough to drown out the ambient noise of the waves.

It had been a mistake to come here.

After a tense, awkward lunch in the royal suite's private dining area, Rey summoned Zan to give Kylo a tour of the castle. She'd been hoping to do it herself but their conversation earlier had left her thoroughly miffed, and it was in the interest of maintaining the peace that she made sure he was removed from her sight for the rest of the day.

Later in the afternoon, a group of noblewomen came calling. They'd just concluded a meeting with the Queen Mother in the capital city and had put in a request for an audience with the Chume'da before leaving Hapes Prime. Ostensibly, they were paying their respects, but all it took was one glance at the list of names for Rey to surmise that this was a thinly-veiled excuse to gossip.

She received her visitors in the Grand Salon with an array of small plates and fine teas. Headed by Lairelosse Yliri, they smiled and curtsied as they filed in— Wyllah Novar of Arabanth, Osira Varless of K'Farri, Myn Eriston of Lemmi VI, and Dechen Rhade of the Breakwater. The younger set, Isolder called them, women who were around Rey's age and already occupying important leadership positions on their respective homeworlds. She got along with most of them— even Wyllah, who had been firmly in Aleson's camp on the night of the duel— although only Lairelosse could be truly called her friend. If she was even that.

"I see that the Emperor's shuttle is docked outside, Your Grace," Myn said once everyone was settled and the formalities that opened every Hapan conversation were over and done with. "Dare I presume that the long-overdue honeymoon period has begun?" She was so casual, acting for all the world like it wasn't already common knowledge that Kylo was in town, the news of his arrival spreading from one aristocrat's intelligence network to the next like wildfire.
"It has, Ducha," Rey lied through her teeth. She had to present the impression of a happy, unified marriage. "My consort was preoccupied with administering to his empire this past month, but he recently freed up his schedule so that he could linger here in Alqualonde for a spell."

"You must visit K'Farri," Osira enthused. "The crystals are in bloom. It would be my honor to host you."

"That would be lovely, if time permits," said Rey. She couldn't accept any invitations now, or else they would all be clamoring for the privilege to have her and Kylo as their guests. "I shall send you a communique after the masquerade, Ducha Varless."

"Honestly, Osira." Lairelosse rolled her eyes at the other woman. "Did it ever occur to you that Her Grace and His Majesty might want some time to themselves? They did just get married." She was being a good ally as always, slyly offering Rey an opportunity to wiggle out of any possible commitments, but the implication brought a flush of heat to Rey's cheeks.

Osira huffed. "It was merely a suggestion, Lady Yliri. In my experience, too much time together can be positively disastrous for a husband and wife. We can't all be the Sevanars."

The other women tittered. The blatant affection that Ysanne and Markus showed for each other was a source of amusement among the royal court; Rey, however, couldn't help but wistfully remember how happy the couple had seemed at her engagement ball. For a moment she allowed herself to indulge in the fantasy of being loved like that. The arm around her waist in these musings felt too much like Kylo's, but she wasn't very keen on analyzing what that meant. It was all only in her mind, anyway. Harmless...

She was jolted back to reality by a flurry of movement around the table. The aristocrats were getting to their feet and curtsying, their gazes trained on the open doors. Kylo was hovering at the entrance to the salon, looking ill at ease to be the object of much feminine scrutiny. Once he caught Rey's eye, he jerked his head to indicate that he wished to speak with her.

"Excuse me, my ladies," Rey murmured to her visitors before she, too, stood up and crossed the room to meet him. "Yes, what is it?"

Kylo stared down at her, appearing disconcerted. Just as she began to suspect that he had forgotten whatever it was he was about to say, he collected himself. "I was wondering if my knights and I might put the courtyard to use. With your permission." His tone was stiff and the bags under his eyes
seemed more pronounced than they had a few hours ago. He did look like a bit of fresh air and exercise would do him a world of good.

"You don't need my permission for that," Rey said. "This is your residence as much as it is mine."

"Still. I thought I should ask." He fidgeted, his expression rife with conflict even as his eyes never left her face. "Thank you."

He walked away before she could respond. Bemused, Rey went back to the table; the Hapans had taken their seats and resumed talking among themselves as soon as Kylo was out of sight.

"Is black all the rage on Coruscant, Your Grace?" Dechen inquired. "The Emperor's wardrobe is rather... dull."

Rey could understand her confusion. The men of Hapes liked bright colors and flashy accessories as much as the women did. "Beyond the Veil, Countess Rade, not all civilizations prioritize aesthetic as we do," she carefully replied.

Dechen sniffed. "Be that as it may, I hope he wears something suitable to the masquerade. It would be most improper otherwise."

Rey cast a helpless glance at Lairelosse, who shrugged and fished out a pocket-sized datapad in order to make a note. "I'll have a tailor sent over as soon as possible, Chume'da."

"Fashion sense or lack thereof aside," said Myn. "His Majesty is quite attractive for an outsider. It's a shame about the scar, though. How did he come by it?"

"It's an old war wound, apparently," Rey told her, which wasn't a lie.

Osira paused in the act of bringing a cup of tea to her lips. "Do they not have bacta patches beyond the Veil? Or capable med droids?"

Rey frowned. Now that Osira had brought it up, it was indeed strange that Kylo's injury had scarred given the First Order's level of technological advancement. She was saved from having to respond,
however, by a skeptical Wyllah remarking, "Handsome or not, I heard he's ten years older than Her Grace."

The other nobles' beautiful, perfect features showed no trace of the disdain that Rey could feel in the Force. This was another thing that set Hapes apart from most human-centric cultures in the galaxy, where a man being with a much older woman tended to raise more than a few disparaging eyebrows. Here, it was the other way around.

"He's very good to me," Rey found herself saying. It wasn't exactly the truth—his gentleness towards her was a new, fragile thing—but she was suddenly compelled to rush to his defense for some reason. After all, what did these women know of her and the Emperor's relationship, of everything they had ever been to each other? "And, for the record, I like the scar."

"Of course, Chume'da," Dechen immediately replied, prompting a chorus of similar assent from her colleagues. One of the perks about being the second most powerful woman in the Hapes Cluster—and, as it so happened, the most powerful woman in the galaxy—was that no one wanted to get on Rey's bad side.

It was late afternoon by the time the guests took their leave. The steward informed Rey that Kylo was still training with his knights, and it was with a mixture of curiosity and restlessness that she rode the turbolift to a secluded tower room overlooking the courtyard. She hadn't seen him fight in a while, and she figured it would be useful to catalog any new techniques he might have learned.

Ensuring that her Force signature was under wraps, Rey gingerly peered out the window. The open courtyard nestled within the stone walls of the Reef Fortress was ablaze with the shrieking scarlet beams of Kylo's crossguard, confronted by the white-hot crackle of Hircine's electrostaff and the obsidian gleam of Boethiah's daggers, which were made from sturdy, lightsaber-resistant Mandalorian iron as Malacath Ren's greatsword had been. Rey would put credits on Boethiah gilding the edges of her blades with poison even for a friendly duel—and, indeed, Kylo seemed to be taking greater care to avoid her strikes than Hircine's.

It was warm out today. The knights had shed their masks and heavier outer layers, and even though Kylo was still wearing gloves, he was down to a sleeveless black shirt and his usual trousers and boots. Rey had seen him wearing less, but she'd been too busy tending his wounds to pay much attention back then.

Now, however, there was nothing stopping her from looking to her heart's content.
The shirt clung to his wide, ridiculously sculpted torso. There was not an ounce of fat on him that she could see—or feel, her traitorous inner voice reminded her. He'd been pure muscle beneath her that night on Coruscant, every inch of his body honed into a weapon. A weapon that he was putting to good use as he fended off his two opponents, ducking beneath the arcs of their blows and retaliating with lethal grace.

This was nothing like Rey and Luke's contained, oftentimes mechanical sparring sessions. The darksiders gave each other no quarter, fought like they were going for the kill. Strands of Kylo's disheveled hair were plastered to his sweat-stained face, his cheeks were flushed red, and there was a wild light in his dark eyes. The taut sinews cording his pale arms shifted with every thrust and parry, his teeth bared in near-feral snarls as he came within a hair's breadth of cutting Boethiah in half, of slicing Hircine's head clean off his shoulders.

Rey swallowed. She'd forgotten somewhere along the way that her husband was a dangerous man. Watching him like this, it was so easy to revert to the old ways and think he was a monster.

So what did it say about her, then, that a familiar heat was pooling low in her abdomen, seeping between her legs?

Memories of her wedding night flooded through Rey's system, each one so strong that she felt phantom sensations on her skin—Kylo's lips crushed to hers, his hand cupping her breast, his erection rubbing against her thigh. She remembered, too, the staticky warmth of his palm on her bare back when he'd rested it there as he dazedly begged her not to leave, and the burning intensity in his gaze from earlier, the husky timbre of his voice.

"I don't want to be just your friend, Chume'da."

Rey stepped back from the window, knees trembling together beneath her skirt. Slowly, shakily, she made her way to the tower room's velvet-upholstered chaise lounge and sat down, no longer able to remain upright. Hot. She felt too hot. Too consumed by thoughts of Kylo, her nerve endings itchy with echoes from the month before.

Rey leaned back against the chaise lounge and hiked up her pretty blue-gray skirt, the sewn-on flowers brushing against her arms with a friction that was maddening in her aroused state. She closed her eyes, her hand disappearing into her silken underwear, and she could almost smell him, could almost hear his harsh, ragged pants in her ear. Like he was there with her.
I'm so lonely, she thought with a lump in her throat as her fingers began to move.

Chapter End Notes

Rey's dress was inspired by this design linked to me by aramblingjane.

Gasser.

K'Farri.

Lemmi VI.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

So sorry for the delayed update and my continued radio silence in the comments. February wasn't a good month for me in terms of health, but here's to hoping that March will be kinder and more productive.

All my love to cloisismyfairytale (who also made a masquerade moodboard), angrydragonpuppy, beautyunderneath1, heylo-reylo, benisolo, avamarga, agalaxynotsofaraway, and kayurka (who also drew the cake batter scene in all its shoujo glory) for the stunning artwork and edits!

I'm aiming to post again within the week, y'all know what to do to motivate me ;) Oh, and in case you aren't already, you can also follow me on Tumblr for updates and meta regarding this story or just fangirling in general. Kisses!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A jagged beam of red light screeched and sputtered as it collided with the blinding coils of an electrostaff, Kylo's gaze latching on to Hircine's through a sheen of sweat and pure bloodlust. Over his opponent's shoulder he saw Boethiah charging swiftly towards them, her poisoned daggers at the ready, and with gritted teeth he exerted more strength into the blade-lock, overpowering Hircine so that the older man stumbled backwards. Kylo's booted foot drove heavily into Hircine's side, kicking him towards Boethiah, who jumped out of the way at the last possible second, one dagger coming perilously close to nicking the other knight's arm. Kylo didn't give Boethiah time to recuperate, his off-hand shooting out to pummel her with a telekinetic blast that sent her slamming against one of the draconic reliefs carved into Alqualonde's walls.

Kylo surveyed his knights while they struggled to right themselves, the crossguard spinning around his wrist as he prepared to launch into a new offensive. However, just at that moment, he registered an acute, heady burst of emotion in the Force, slipping out through shields that faltered like a dam slowly giving way. Shivering swirls of something—hopeful, desperate, painful, wild, higher—unfurled from one of the tower rooms, flickering in and out of existence as its source tried valiantly to keep it hidden.

It felt like Rey.

Hircine and Boethiah were both still on the ground, nursing various bruised parts of their anatomy. "We're done for today," Kylo told them, extinguishing his lightsaber and cinching it to his utility belt. Their perplexed gazes followed him as he sped indoors. He was no longer thinking rationally, focused solely on the golden thread that beckoned from upstairs. He had been channeling the dark side for hours while he trained with his knights and he was still reeling from its effects, from how it sharpened his baser instincts and made his blood sing as he zeroed in on Rey's light in the Force.
He barreled into the turbolift and waited in a barely-contained frenzy as it took him to his destination. The ascent was slow, rendered torturous by the brilliance of Rey’s signature overriding her mental shields as she experienced something that felt both terrifying and profound, the echoes of which made Kylo’s breath stutter in his chest.

He was almost at the tower room when the sensations started to ebb like the tide. A few seconds later, the turbolift glided to a stop and the doors slid open, and he found himself looking straight at Rey.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, startled. Her hazel eyes were bright, her cheeks flushed pink. "What are you doing here?"

What *was* he doing here? "I don't know," Kylo mumbled before he could think better of it. "You were— projecting—"

Rey was suddenly looking everywhere but at him. "I was going through some new Force techniques."

*Is* that *what they're calling it these days?* he almost retorted, but some latent self-preservation instinct kicked in. He stepped back to let her enter the turbolift and they descended in silence. Now that the initial urgency had faded, he became conscious of how disgusting he must have looked, drenched in sweat and red-faced from exertion. He didn't even want to think about how he *smelled* in this enclosed space. With those insecurities gnawing at his pride, the second-guessing began. Perhaps he'd been completely in the wrong and she *had* been practicing Force techniques, after all—and even if she'd been...having some time to herself, what right did *he* have to come barging in like a...a nosy idiot? Shame welled up inside him, so great that he physically cringed, hiding it under the guise of moving a courteous distance away from her. At the very least, he should spare her from any offensive odors.

She glanced at him, something like hurt flashing in her eyes. "Ben?"

"I— I stink," he falteringly explained. "I have just finished training with my knights..." He trailed off. She already knew that. He was being stupid.

To his surprise, Rey snorted. "Because I smelled like such a rose when we first met."
She had smelled like wind and sand and sunlight, a scent that had followed him into his dreams every night thereafter. Before he could tell her that, before he could tell her anything, they reached the ground level and she scurried out of the turbolift, the embarrassed blush from the tower room still on her cheeks.

He decided that a cold shower was in order. For more than one reason.

* *

Stars, he had almost walked in on her.

Rey wasn't sure her heart would ever recover from the near miss. Her shields had been in place when she started but she evidently needed to learn how to keep them up when she was... feeling frisky. She didn't have a lot of experience in that matter—Jakku had been a drought in more ways than one, the harsh daily routine leaving scant opportunity for any emotion other than hunger and weariness, and there had been no privacy in the communal Resistance quarters on D'Qar and Coruscant— but, given what Kylo had awakened in her on their wedding night, she supposed it had only been a matter of time before she touched herself again after so long.

What startled her, though, was how easily she'd crested. It hadn't been the fumbling, frustrating climb she was used to, capped off by a small, shivery, ultimately unsatisfying release. Imagining Kylo there with her had made her come harder than she'd ever had in her life. And yet... there was still this ache between her legs, an ache that had only worsened in the turbolift. He'd been within arm's reach, bare biceps glistening with sweat and, oh, so sharply defined after an afternoon of sparring. It had required every ounce of her willpower to abstain from jumping him right that second.

She didn't think she could take much more of this.

* *

Dinner later that night wasn't quite the drawn-out, agonizing affair that Kylo had been bracing himself for. It was casual by Hapan standards— an appetizer, a main course, a rose-petal sorbet for dessert. Rey's ladies-in-waiting alternated between happily chattering away about the upcoming masquerade and teasing Mitaka, who had a place of honor at the table as the only First Order officer in the vicinity, while Boethiah and Hircine stood guard outside the dining room— secretly relieved, Kylo suspected, that protocol dictated they take their meal with the castle staff and his shuttle crew afterwards.
But it wasn't really all that bad. He started to realize this halfway through the roast pheasant. The glow-panels set into the bronze chandelier had been turned down low, gilding the dining room in mellow amber light. Rey sat on the opposite end of the table from him, blinking a little drowsily but exchanging easy smiles with her ladies and intervening whenever Mitaka got too rattled. Kylo almost felt sorry for his lieutenant, who so obviously lacked the strength of character to handle the girls' pretty faces and sharp tongues, but pity was overshadowed by the natural contempt of a man made of sterner stuff.

"Your Majesty?" Rey said.

Kylo dropped his fork. It clattered against the side of his plate but he ignored it, leaning forward to gaze at his wife with rapt attention. "Yes, Chume'da?"

"The tailor will be paying a visit tomorrow morning to discuss your options for the masquerade. Please be available."

The array of garish, bejeweled Hapan men's attire that he'd seen so far flashed through his mind in a parade of horror. "I have clothes," he pointed out.

"None suitable for the event in question," Rey countered. "Your ensemble needs to complement mine. It's tradition, I'm afraid."

He narrowed his eyes at her from across the table with the sneaking suspicion that she was enjoying this; the faint hint of a smirk played along the corner of her mouth. It wasn't the classic smirk of an ambitious, scheming Hapan noble, though— that challenging playfulness, that ill-governed urge to court trouble, that was all Rey.

"If it pleases Your Majesty," Janassa spoke up, "I think Her Grace merely wishes to ascertain that you won't wear black."

"Janassa!" Sayl and Esli, who were seated on either side of her, quickly hissed. But they just as quickly covered their mouths to muffle their laughter.

Unflappable calm was the best way to deal with these children. Kylo raised his glass, giving the impression of toasting Rey before taking a sip of the lemon water that was the only non-alcoholic option that the Hapans cherished with their meals. "Far be it from me to go against the Empress'
wishes. Let your tailor do his worst, then."

"I'll hold you to that," Rey said, but her smirk appeared to have lost its edge. It was almost a real smile now, aimed at him and him alone.

* 

After dinner, Kylo retreated to the communications bay. He wasn't foolish enough to discuss fleet movements and sensitive political affairs in Hapan space, but there were plenty of minor issues that had cropped up during his absence. He'd left Daala in charge of the Citadel, and they spent a good couple of hours going over Coruscant's domestic affairs.

"Any word from Hux?" he asked her once they'd wrapped up. The general had left for the Chopani sector shortly before Kylo set off to Hapes.

"The expedition is well under way." Daala was an old hand at this; she chose her words with care, wisely keeping all references to the First Order's hunt for the Resistance vague. "No results yet. According to communiques from the parties involved, there's also a bit of a scuffle pertaining to matters of jurisdiction."

That meant the Outer Rim governors thought Hux was being a domineering prat while Hux thought they were being insubordinate. Kylo almost wished he were there to watch the fireworks. "I'm not surprised."

Daala grinned. "Neither am I, Your Majesty."

After signing off, Kylo remained in the bay for a while to mull over the troubling matter of the Resistance's mysterious whereabouts. *If I were Leia Organa, where would I hide?* he tried to discern, but such a line of interrogation proved fruitless. His mother had always been something of an enigma to him due to the different, sometimes outright contradictory roles she'd played while he was growing up— it had been one of the hard truths he'd had to face in later years, that as a child he'd loved her but hadn't known her very well at all. She wasn't an open book.

Not like Han Solo.

With a jolt, Kylo realized that he'd unconsciously touched his gloved fingers to the side of his face.
The spot that still burned, sometimes, from the memory of a dead man's touch. He dropped his hand back to his side with a frustrated growl and forced his thoughts to return to more important matters. There was a part of him that understood, deep down, that Rey was the key to the Resistance's location. He would have to bring it up with her eventually—if she wasn't already in the loop, they would contact her in due time, as Snoke had said, and his master was getting impatient...

Kylo made his way to the royal suite, his frustration curdling into a single-minded purposefulness. He'd let himself get distracted, let things lie for too long. He was going to confront her right now.

But, when he marched into the bedroom, the glow-panels had been switched off. Bright moonlight, a cold wind, and the roar of the waves spilled in through the balcony doors that Rey must have forgotten to close before falling asleep. And she was asleep, curled up on her side under the duvet, snoring away.

She sounded like a rusty propeller. Kylo felt a smile tug at his lips, but he reigned it in even as the tension evaporated with some reluctance from his spine. Trust this woman to cause his plans to go awry, as usual.

He'd showered before dinner so there was nothing left to do but grab sleep clothes from the walk-in closet opposite Rey's and brush his teeth in their shared 'fresher, deliberately prolonging what should have taken no more than a handful of minutes at most because crawling into the same bed as her when she was already asleep was too nerve-wracking, too intimate a thing. The spacious marble-tiled 'fresher appointed in shades of gold smelled of the white musk, almond cream, and black cherry essence that Rey used in her bath products—not overly sweet scents, but feminine enough for the more unsavory parts of him to start paying attention, to twitch with interest. He quashed the notion of seeking release as soon as it entered his mind and averted his gaze from his reflection, no longer able to meet his own eyes in the mirror. For all Rey's assurances that Alqualonde was his home as well, it seemed like the lowest, most perverse thing to slake his needs in a 'fresher that smelled of her while she was sleeping, completely peaceful and unaware, just a few feet away.

He stole out of the 'fresher, telekinetically closed the balcony doors with a wave of his hand, and approached the bed with a trace of grim apprehension. The light of the seven moons shone even more radiantly here in the middle of the Evernight, so far from the neon glow of the cities; it could almost have been morning still, silver-tinted. Rey was a lump on one side of the mattress, nearly hanging off the edge despite the vast space, her back turned to him as she lay hunched in on herself as if trying to be as small as possible. Kylo thought then of the AT-AT he had seen in her mind three years ago, that narrow makeshift cot that had gotten tinier and tinier as she grew older.

He eased onto the bed, taking great care not to disturb her and to keep to his half of the space as he rested his head on the eiderdown pillows. She'd hogged all the covers but he didn't mind—his body tended to run hot during the night and the suite's centralized climate control had automatically kicked in when the balcony doors swung shut. He once again reached out a hand to draw the curtains over
"General Organa." Poe's visage filled the holoscreen of the Raddus' bridge as it drifted through the Jodaka system, having just left the refueling station owned by one of the Hapan royal family's trusted allies. "Sorry it took me so long to get in touch. The Outer Rim's unbelievably hairy right now. It's like navigating a minefield, if the mines were First Order surveillance nets."

"I'm just glad you're still with us, Commander Dameron," Leia quipped. They were able to speak freely because the communique was being patched through Venomfang, Aleson Gray's private HoloNet channel that was shielded by layer upon layer of thorny encryption. "I hope you have good news for me."

Poe nodded. "Thanks to Rey's lead, we were able to infiltrate Artorias without incident. Caled Galfridian's rebel army is with us— as are most worlds in the Myto sector. Not only that, Galfridian gave us a direct line to other sympathizers spread throughout Mayagil, Elrood, and Jjannex—"

"The Jjanex sector lies between the Corellian Spine and the intersection of the Rimma Trade Route and the Hydian Way," Leia murmured. "Very strategic."

"We have more friends than we thought, General." Poe looked sallow and haggard but was otherwise beaming. "We've spent this past month touching base with them. Including the Adumari Union."

Leia raised an eyebrow. "That is good news." The people of Adumar were revered throughout the galaxy for their skill in combat and their formidable navy.

"The bulk of their fleet has retreated deeper into Wild Space, but they're ready and waiting for instructions." Poe hesitated. "There's something else..."

"What?"

"You're not going to like it."
She glowered at him. "Tell me anyway."

"Now, before you react, this is just a possibility that the team and I have been discussing, that's all. I'm not a big fan, either, but given the circumstances it's my duty to throw it out there— the Cartel might be willing to help us."

A sliver of fury shot down Leia's spine, prying open an age-old wound. "Commander Dameron, if you think for one second that I am going to consent to an alliance with the Hutts—"

"They hate the First Order," Poe quietly interrupted. "Paige and I overheard their goons ranting at the casino in Dunari's Rest while waiting for one of our Mayagil contacts. Apparently, Ren has started cracking down on the slave trade and his new policies are making it harder to move contraband around. All the kajidii want him gone."

"I killed Jabba Desilijic Tiure myself," Leia snapped. "I strangled him with the chains he bound me in. The Hutts have long memories, Commander, and so do I. If we lose sight of who we are and what we stand for, we might as well give ourselves up to the First Order right this instant."

For a moment, Poe looked like he was about to argue, but then he appeared to think better of it. "Understood, General."

No matter how much she wanted to, Leia couldn't allow her shoulders to sag when Poe signed off, as all eyes on the bridge were trained in her direction. However, she did let the tiniest of sighs escape from her lips as she settled back in her chair. So, her son was trying to eliminate the slave rings once and for all. She couldn't say it wasn't a noble intention— it was something that she herself had always planned on advocating for once the New Republic had sorted out its messy internal affairs. Why couldn't you have waited, Ben? she mused. If only you had given the world I fought for a chance, if only you had given me more time—

But that was exactly the thing, wasn't it? He'd grown into manhood running scared, with shadows peering over his shoulder. It was something Leia had realized too late— that, for her son, time had always seemed like it was running out.

Rey was ashamed to admit it, but her new life had made her unaccountably lazy. Now that she didn't need to wake up at the crack of dawn to scavenge or to train, she could no longer truly call herself a morning person. Being able to luxuriate in a comfortable bed as sunlight seeped into a beautifully
furnished room was still a novelty to her, and she tended to make the most out of it these days. So, when her bladder clamored to be relieved at—according to the chronometer on the nightstand—fifteen minutes past the hour of seven, it was with grudging reluctance that she slowly crawled out from under the covers, wincing as her bare feet hit the cold tiles. Her brain was still fogged up with sleep; that was her only justification, really, for failing to remember that she was no longer alone in the royal suite.

At least, until the 'fresher door slid open to reveal Kylo Ren standing at the sink, clad in nothing but a towel wrapped around his hips, his hair still damp from the shower, and his jaw slathered in shaving cream.

"Why didn't you lock the door?" Rey demanded, suddenly fully awake. For all her bluster, though, she couldn't quite stop herself from staring at his bare chest.

"I forgot," he grunted, lowering the razor from his face. His gaze flickered over her and darkened, and it hit her that the fabric of the pale blue nightgown she was wearing was perhaps a little too thin. She crossed her arms over her chest, trying to be casual, but it was too late, of course. Their shared embarrassment suffused the air.

"I—um— nature calls," Rey said.

"By all means." Kylo was careful not to let their bodies touch as he skirted past her in the doorway, the towel secured firmly around his lean hips. Some wicked, scandalous part of Rey keened in regret.

*Down, girl,* she sternly admonished herself.

Rey spent the whole morning studying dossiers transmitted from the Per'Agthra, each file containing a wealth of detailed information on each noble who would be in attendance at the masquerade and how they all related to one another. It was an intricate web of blood ties, informal alliances, and nuanced disputes that the Consortium spun, and as Chume’da and host it was her responsibility to keep all of these in mind as she mingled with her guests.

It would have been so much easier to commit these facts to memory if she could only stop thinking about her husband. Every time she blinked, she saw Kylo's bare, chiseled frame in the darkness behind her closed eyes, that expanse of smooth, pale skin disrupted by the lightsaber scar that trailed
to his shoulder and the bowcaster mark on his abdomen, the beads of water pooling in the hollow of his collarbones, the smattering of dark hair that dusted a tantalizing path from his navel to what lay hidden under the towel. She was— to put it in simpler terms— a mess, and she continued to be a mess until later on in the afternoon, when she finally had enough and called for the Chume’doro to assemble in the courtyard. Perhaps some intensive sparring would help dull the edge of all the pent-up emotions coursing through her veins.

It didn’t take Kylo very long to come to the conclusion that he utterly despised the Hapan tailor. The man's name was Belroc Moliere and he was in his mid-forties, slim, tanned, and bedecked in what was quite possibly the most flamboyant getup Kylo had ever seen. The floral brocade on his bottle-green veda cloth coat put even Ta’a Chume’s most ostentatious gown to shame, and the emerald-studded gold chaughaine sash around his waist glittered so copiously that Kylo couldn’t even look at it in direct sunlight for fear of going blind.

Like most other Hapans, Moliere loved jewelry. Several gem-encrusted rings sparkled as they moved through the air on the ridges of the fingers that he was tapping on the armrest after Kylo had submitted to the indignity of his measurements being taken by a couple of assistants, who were now flanking the tailor in his seat, jotting down notes on their respective datapads.

"I am sorry, Emperor Ren, but a plain formal jacket simply will not do," Moliere was saying, having no qualms whatsoever about letting his exasperation show. "The Chume’da’s couturier has been gracious enough to send me her design and it is positively lavish. You would look like a butler next to your wife, Your Majesty. I am afraid that I simply cannot allow it."

A nerve twitched under Kylo’s left eye. Had Rey not given him strict orders to stand down, Moliere would be suffering from a distinct lack of oxygen right about now. "Very well," he stiffly conceded, "as long as it is within the bounds of good taste."

"Of course, Your Majesty." The tailor sounded offended. "Now, let's talk about concept. Your costume must strike a delicate balance between complementing the Chume’da’s gown and not stealing her thunder, so to speak. Would you rather personify the resplendence of the peacock, the raw power of the tiger, the virility of the stag—"

"This was a mistake."

"Perhaps the ill temper of the Pervickian dung camel?" Moliere fired back. "The obstinacy of the common ass?"
Kylo smirked. "I'll have to abstain from that last option, Moliere. I wouldn't want to steal your thunder."

The two men argued, sniped, and glared at each other for the remainder of the meeting. By the time they settled on a design and Moliere exited in an icy huff, along with his assistants, Kylo was in the blackest of moods. Summoning his knights, he stalked off to the courtyard, desperately needing to let off some steam.

But Rey was already there.

Chapter End Notes

The Jodaka system.

Venomfang is a Dungeons & Dragons reference, just in case this fic wasn't nerdy enough :P

Mayagil sector.

Elrood sector.

Ijannex sector.

Adumar.

The Hutt Cartel.

Dunari's Rest.

Kajidii.

Pervicikian dung camel.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

You know what? I'm just going to go ahead and increase the projected chapter count because we are, in terms of plot, only halfway through my original outline. God, I remember when this thing was supposed to be only 25 chapters long. The Reylo truly cannot be contained :) I sincerely apologize to everyone who thought we'd have wrapped up by now. After this new chapter, I'll try and aim for lengthier ones that will cover more ground in terms of in-universe events—I mean it this time! xD

Today we have more beautiful artwork and edits from the supremely talented lovenlu, the wonderful thebrightest-starfell, the amazing renpresswardrobe, and the perfect kayurka who never fails to somehow both destroy me and give me life. Much love to you all.

Thoughts on this installment would be greatly appreciated. Until next time, darlings!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For Kylo Ren, Rey had always been a whirlwind in battle, sweeping and slashing through the ranks of her foes in deadly, concentrated movements that carried shades of both a Jedi's precision and a scavenger's instinct to survive no matter the cost. He was relieved to see that was still the case, that the months of aristocratic living hadn't softened her one bit. She commanded the vast stone courtyard, taking care to remain in the center of a maelstrom composed of five Chume'doro and their massive, electricity-spiked broadswords.

In contrast to the armor donned by the other women, with their heavy pauldrons and thick gauntlets, Rey wore only a breastband and black leggings, an outfit that showed off her trim figure and added fuel to the dark fires of Kylo's imagination. Even as he marveled at her technique, his gaze couldn't help but be drawn to the hard plane of her bare midriff, the slight flare of her hips, the enticing curve of her pert little derrière. Her toned arms gleamed in the sunlight as the white-hot beams of her saberstaff sang through the air, those endless legs of hers weaving nimbly amidst the fray. She looked like a war goddess. She moved like a primal hymn. Against his will, Kylo was hopelessly captivated.

However, he wasn't so far gone that he couldn't pick up on her dissatisfaction. While the Royal Guards were capable warriors, they were obviously holding back for fear of hurting the Chume'da, their attacks mechanical and circumspect, and Rey couldn't use the Force, or else it would be a horribly unbalanced session. Kylo saw it in her eyes, the longing for a no-holds-barred match, the hunger that demanded to be fed, and in response his heartbeat sped up and a restless, reckless urge overtook all common sense.

"Shall I look into blocking off a specific time for you to use the courtyard in the future, Your Majesty
— Mitaka started to ask, but Kylo was already stepping forward, much to the lieutenant's consternation, shedding his cape and tunic as he went, tossing the garments carelessly onto the stone tiles and entering the field of combat with his lightsaber ablaze.

As one, the Chume'doro broke their circle to form a barrier between him and Rey, who whirled around to face him, her brows nearly disappearing into her hairline in surprise. Boethiah and Hircine rushed to his side, drawing their weapons.

"Stand down," Kylo ordered his knights without pause.

"Fetharsi!" Rey called to her own guards, the meaning of the command becoming apparent when the Chume'doro hesitantly lowered their weapons. They moved aside to let Kylo pass but hovered at the edge of the courtyard, still prepared to leap to Rey's defense.

Kylo's lips curved into a faint half-smile as he assumed a two-handed low guard. "It has been a while. Shall I go easy on you, my lady?"

"I should be the one making such allowances for you, my lord," Rey countered, a devilish glint in her eyes as she swept her right foot back, holding her saberstaff in a one-handed grip above her head while her off-hand rose in challenge. It was a Soresu opening stance, but Kylo knew from previous experience that she would switch to Ataru as soon as the situation called for it.

They lunged at the same time, Kylo swinging his blade up to meet Rey's as she brought hers down in an overhead strike. She turned on her left foot and he sprang away just in time to avoid her right leg smashing into his ribs, countering with a jab that she blocked with the other end of her staff.

"Bit rusty," he quipped, meeting her gaze through the sheen of red and silvery white.

"I'm sure you're talking about yourself," she loftily retorted before using their blade-lock as leverage to launch herself into the air and assault him with a barrage of Ataru strikes so quick and ferocious that he was soon left with no other option but to push her away with the Force. She skidded backwards several feet but collected herself in the blink of an eye and charged at him once more.

It was a beautiful, terrible thing, Kylo thought as he and Rey sparred, as they danced around each other and met in the middle, again and again and again, fiery little static charges exploding between them every time his bare skin brushed against hers, his veins alight with a wild exhilaration that he saw mirrored on her face beneath the golden sun of afternoon. They anticipated each other's every
move in the way only old foes could and they pushed each other to the limit, the courtyard reverberating with the roar of plasma loops and the raw power bursting through the Force.

He had missed this. More than he ever thought he would. More than he ever wanted to admit.

* Mitaka wrung his hands as he watched the Emperor of the First Order narrowly avoid getting his head chopped off by a particularly enthusiastic slash from the Empress. "Surely we have to put a stop to this soon," the lieutenant ventured, casting a beseeching look at Boethiah and Hircine. "Their Majesties are going to end up killing each other."

"You want to try getting in the middle of that—" Hircine inclined his head towards the scene playing out before them; Kylo and Rey had just engaged in a sequence of attacks and parries across the length of the courtyard, gradually increasing speed until their figures were a blur— "be my guest."

There were flickers of movement at the periphery of Mitaka's vision. He glanced around to see faces pressed to the tower windows and peeking out from the various doorways leading to the courtyard. It seemed that the efficient clockwork routine of Alqualoné had ground to a halt as its entire staff paused in their chores to watch Kylo and Rey's duel. Mitaka could only hope that they weren't all about to become witnesses to regicide.

* Rey was happy.

No— happy couldn't even begin to describe it. This was ecstasy, pure and unbridled, shattered kyber screaming against durindfire, her body falling into all the old forms as she was pitted against another lightsaber user after so, so long. At some point down the line, she and Kylo had abandoned chasing each other across the courtyard— now they were fighting in extremely close quarters, loath to separate, the combined heat from their blades within millimeters of singeing her skin. He'd probably just gotten out of his meeting with the tailor; she could sense his frustration in the Force, and also how that frustration seemed to be melting away as the seconds ticked past. He was taking a certain twisted delight in this, just as she was. The dark side crooned to her from the abyss of his own soul, insisting that she could overpower him if she just moved a little faster, struck a little harder—

However, there was such a thing as striking too hard.
Kylo broke their next blade-lock faster than Rey had expected. She'd put all her strength into the blow and so she stumbled, spinning on her heel at the last moment to avoid falling to the ground. Kylo had stretched out his blade arm just behind her in preparation for his subsequent attack, and she ended up turning right into the crook of his elbow. Her waist was suddenly encased in the steely curve of his arm, her side pressed to his bare chest, one end of her saberstaff humming at his neck as his crossguard cradled her chin. The two of them were flushed and panting, chests heaving in tandem, his skin hot and sweat-damp against hers. *We're burning up,* Rey thought hazily, listening to the whine of plasma beams and to the skittering rhythm of Kylo's ragged breathing just slightly above her ear.

"I think I told you once," he murmured in a low, unsteady voice that sounded not quite like his own and also, somehow, like the truest version of him, "that it would be poetic for you and I to die together." His lightsaber inched up, further narrowing the distance between the quillon's lethal, serrated edge and the line of her jaw.

"Yes," Rey whispered, "I remember." She shifted the beam of her own weapon closer to his throat at the same time that her hip slid against his groin. He growled—in warning or in encouragement, she couldn't tell—and then his free hand was touching her, his fingers splaying out on her stomach, his thumb grazing the edge of her breastband.

Rey couldn't think clearly anymore. The dark was wrapping its sinuous tendrils around her very being, the thrill of combat morphing into something that felt infinitely more dangerous. She was so aware of Kylo, of how his broad frame easily dwarfed hers, of how tense his sinews were next to her own. He exhaled again, and this time she thought about how she had imagined him there with her in the tower room, how she had climaxed from the memory of his kisses and his wandering hands.

She cautiously turned her head to the left, just enough so that she could look at him from out of the corner of her eye. Perhaps it was a trick of the bright afternoon sun, but she could swear there were splinters of gold in his irises, mingling with the reflected shard of scarlet from his lightsaber. His energy signature leaped and shuddered like wildfire fanned by prairie winds, the same dizzying tangle of adrenaline and desire that engulfed her as well.

Rey closed her eyes against the red light, against the sunlight. She couldn't give in like this. Whatever it was that lay before her, it was a point of no return.

*There is no emotion,* she chanted silently in an attempt to anchor herself in what was right, in what was true. *There is peace. There is no ignorance*—
"Your move, Chume’da," Kylo rasped in her ear.

*There is you.*

Rey extinguished her saberstaff, her heart stuck in her throat. "I yield."

*She barely registered exiting the courtyard, telling her guards that she wanted to be alone, and stumbling into the turbolift that led to the royal suite. Her body went through the motions of locking the ‘fresher door and disrobing while her mind was somewhere else, still stuck in a high, keening daze. By the time she fully returned to herself, she was already in the shower, staring at the flecked patterns on the marble wall as water dripped down her skin, cooling the blood in her veins.*

*While there was an office for the mistress of Alqualonde in one of the western towers, where formal meetings were conducted and the bulk of datawork was carried out, the royal suite also boasted a private study that had quickly become Rey’s own little sanctuary in the past month. After her shower, she curled up on the burgundy-upholstered couch and pored over her dossiers with a teeth-gritting single-mindedness that, if she were being honest, was proof more of desperation to forget what had happened in the courtyard than any real desire to be an effective, politically adept host at the masquerade ball.*

After a while, she felt Kylo entering the suite, his Force signature dampened to a burning ember by his mental shields. Through the walls that separated the bedroom from the study, she heard his heavy footsteps, followed by the gurgle and hiss of water. The image of him taking a shower was the absolute last thing she needed right now, and so she hunched over her datapad in a burst of renewed determination.

Rey’s alcove was a pleasant enough spot but it sadly lacked a door and, when the better part of an hour had passed, Kylo poked his head through the arched entryway. She tensed, refusing to glance up from her files even as he stared at her for several long moments, and his scrutiny made her wish that she’d had more foresight than what grabbing the first dress in her closet had entailed. It was a form-fitting ivory sheath with gauzy, elbow-length chiffon sleeves and peach accents woven through a bodice studded with white pearls and black garnets, but the scoop-shaped neckline was cut to a mere few inches above her navel, exposing the sides of her breasts. As always, she’d been too lazy to dry her hair and had pinned it up into a damp, messy bun, and she was also wearing silk slippers that, while comfortable, clashed with such an elegant dress. Rey normally never thought twice about
spending her day in this kind of outfit within the walls of Alqualonde, but by now she was no stranger to feeling self-conscious in front of Kylo.

Finally, he walked in and stiffly settled into the armchair opposite the couch.

She very firmly cleared her throat and made a show of perusing her datapad— even though the words on the screen had lost all meaning— but Kylo gave no indication of leaving the alcove. Trust this man to be incapable of taking a hint.

"Rey," he said at last.

She couldn't help but look up, damn it. He so rarely called her by name and whenever he did it was always so soft in his mouth, his voice cracking around that single syllable. He was dressed in black as usual, his dark hair lush and glossy from the sanisteam dryer, the slight flush to his pale cheeks the only sign that he'd recently sparred with her to within an inch of their lives.

He looked good enough to eat. A growl of frustration gathered in Rey's throat, knotting it tight.

"What was that, earlier?" Kylo asked. "Why did you run?" His tone was deliberate, almost predatory, as if he already knew the answer.

"I didn't run," she scoffed, taking refuge in false bravado. "I yielded. There's a difference. I cut our duel short because I had things to do— as you can see," she pointedly added, holding up the datapad.

He ignored her. "You always run," he quietly mused. "Even back then, whenever we met in battle, you always fled once you felt yourself coming too close to the dark side."

She said nothing. Some indecipherable emotion flashed in his eyes— exasperation, perhaps, or a faint, sardonic amusement, mingled with a healthy dose of genuine curiosity. He'd channeled the dark side while they were sparring and he still hadn't shaken off its grip— she could sense it in the way it hung around him like a cloak, she could see it in the strange, wild expression on his face.

"The dark calls to you a lot, doesn't it?" he continued— meditatively, as if he were testing her limits in another form of battle, attempting to see what would cause her to snap. "Not a particularly commendable trait in a Jedi. But I understand that, perhaps even better than you think— and I also
understand that I grew stronger once I embraced it."

"Aren't you tired of trying to get me to come over to your side?" Rey snapped.

"You're already on my side," Kylo retorted. "We're allies. We're—" Although he stopped himself before he could say married, the unspoken word filled the tense atmosphere. "Why are you so afraid of your own potential?"

"I'm not!" Rey leapt to her feet, her fists clenched and the datapad forgotten on the couch.

Kylo stood up as well. He stepped closer to her and she saw the frustration in his eyes. The hunger. "Is it me you're afraid of, then? Me and this pull that exists between us?"

"I don't have to listen to this," Rey said stonily.

He cocked his head at her. "You're right. You don't have to." Those maddeningly full lips curved into a smirk. "Feel free to make your exit, then."

The gall. The utter gall. He'd been the one who came barging into this alcove and he knew it, judging from how absolutely smarmy he looked and sounded right now. He was teasing her, this annoying, infuriating man—

Rey charged. There were too many emotions left over from the courtyard, too many things that had been building up since Coruscant, and she seized the first possible outlet for all of them that came in the form of her temper spiking in a sharp flare and her body driving her towards Kylo under the hazy notion of— of what, she didn't know, she was at a loss what to do once she reached him, but he was just so irritating— "I was here first," she seethed, "you—"

His arms opened to receive her and she crashed into that wide, solid chest, and then they were kissing. She had no idea who initiated it— she surmised, perhaps, that their heads had moved at the same time, their lips colliding in a hot, open-mouthed tangle of biting teeth and punishing tongues. There was no grace to it but, then again, how could there be when they were both on edge, when he'd come into the alcove spoiling for a fight and had gotten this, instead—

Rey's eyes fluttered shut as Kylo leaned into the kiss, pressing one gloved hand to the base of her spine while the other slid down her buttocks, squeezing and caressing and, oh, it was all so shocking
and new, and her own hands couldn't make up their mind about where they wanted to rest, at first exploring the broad plane of his back through the ribbed material of his black tunic, then fistling into his hair, and then finally, finally cradling his face, her thumb tracing along the ridge of the thin scar on his otherwise smooth cheek. He groaned into her mouth when she did that, and then they were— moving? Yes, he was walking her backwards, their lips still connected, and she was nearly tripping over her own feet to keep up with his frantic pace—

They blindly knocked something over and it crashed to the floor and shattered— most likely the lamp on the end table by the couch. Rey couldn't bring herself to care because Kylo was shoving her against the wall, pinning her wrists in place on either side of her with his hands as he took what he wanted— and, in turn, gave her everything, everything.

This, to him, was a continuation of their duel in the courtyard. It felt the same— angry and frenetic, the Force roaring in his ears and passion blotting out all else. Her lips were as soft as he remembered, the feeling of her body against his so potent that it almost brought him to his knees and the shivery, looping currents of her energy signature so similar to yesterday that he couldn't help but mumble shaky words, half-formed phrases, into their kiss. "Know what you did— the tower— I felt it, Rey—"

She kissed him harder, as if attempting to shut him up, and wrenched her wrists from his grip. Once her hands sprang free, some innate part of him braced for the inevitable moment when she would push him away, but, instead—

— instead—

She draped her arms around his neck, pulling him even closer to her until he no longer knew where he ended and she began. This time, he was the one who deepened the kiss, rolling his tongue beneath the roof of her mouth. She whimpered, an urgent, needy little sound that went straight to his growing erection, causing it to throb and twitch within the confines of his trousers, and if he didn't alleviate this pressure soon he would quite possibly expire on the spot—

Rey seemed to read his mind— to decipher what he needed as instinctively as how she could predict the angle of his next strike in combat— because she reached down to impatiently hike her ivory skirts up one thigh and hook the adjoining leg behind his hip. There you go, Kylo thought in a daze as he feverishly ground against her center, chasing the blessed friction, the sweet relief, clever, beautiful girl— He swallowed her cries greedily as he thrust his hips in a roughshod rhythm that nevertheless served its purpose, feeding the dark burning inside him, his leather-clad fingers digging into her bared thigh, and it wasn't long before he decided that he wanted to hear what she would sound like when not muffled by his lips.
Kylo lifted his mouth from Rey's, took a moment to relish the sight of her glassy eyes and her wet, swollen lips, and then he bent his head to kiss a sloppy, hurried trail down the line of her jaw to the column of her throat and, at last, to the valley between her breasts framed by the low-cut neckline that was simultaneously the best and worst thing that had ever happened to him. "Oh," Rey moaned when his lips found the side of her left breast and his tongue darted out to taste. "Oh, I love that, I—" She broke off into a deep, shuddery sigh when he started using his teeth, her fingers burying into his hair and twisting and tugging to urge him on as he sucked bruises into her skin.

She was like a drug. The world was her and her alone, and perhaps it had been for a while.

She was also very short, and his spine was beginning to hurt from the way he was hunched over her. "We can't all be overgrown trees, my lord," she'd so haughtily sniffed on the night of the banquet, and he felt a twinge of annoyance that he would think about that—that he would feel such an odd, out-of-place burst of gentle affection—when he had his mouth on her breast as they rutted through their clothes.

Kylo straightened up as much as he could while still being able to capture Rey's lips in another searing, violent kiss. While she was distracted by that, he scooped her up into his arms, their mouths separating again at the movement, and he switched to nibbling at her neck.

"What—" she panted out, clutching at his shoulders, "Ben— where—?"

_Don't call me that_, he should have said. "Bedroom," he mumbled instead, the word all but lost in the slope of her neck as he took the first of many steps in what, he was absolutely certain, was going to be the longest walk of his life.

Chapter End Notes

Rey's gown is based on [this Marchesa](https://www.marcesa.com) linked to me by samanthastar47 <3
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

RETCON ALERT. Rey mentioned in Chapter 24 that the Marauders' Masquerade would be held "this coming Zhellday." I wanted to give her and Kylo at least a week to themselves in Alqualonde, but I fucked up because apparently there are only five days in one standard Galactic Calendar week. So let's just pretend that, back in Chapter 24, Rey told Kylo that the masquerade would be held two weeks from now. That gives our space marrieds ten/elevenish days of Honeymoon Bliss (TM) at their swag beachfront property.

There are new moodboards for this fic from dragon-and-his-wrath, eyre-bones, cloisismyfairytale (who actually made two), and thebrightest-starfell, new artworks from kayurka, selun-chen, and heidihastings, and this absolutely bangin' playlist from soloish and durindfireandkyber. I remain blown away by the generosity of this talented fandom and how y'all enrich my little 'verse.

Thanks for all the feedback and support so far! Do keep it coming, loves <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

This was not the first time he'd carried her in his arms. In the cold metal interrogation chamber on Starkiller Base, when he pushed into her mind and she pushed back, she'd seen Takodana in the chaotic reel of his memories. How enraged she'd been to see herself so limp and helpless, how keenly it rankled still.

Rey yanked at Kylo's hair as he stumbled out of the alcove, forcing his head up so that she could claim his mouth with a viciousness that would remind him that, this time, they were equals. Considering that he had the unenviable task of putting one foot in front of the other, he could do nothing more than accept her kiss and growl when she sank her teeth into the plush swell of his bottom lip, but his pace quickened, and then the bedroom doors were sliding open and she was being tossed onto the mattress. As soft as it was, it was like sinking into a cloud, but the swiftness of the motion knocked the breath from her lungs.

Lying back on the mountain of pillows and the neatly folded duvet, Rey glared at Kylo as he hurriedly tugged off his boots. "What did I say about you manhandling me?"

"I'll stop when you learn to be gentler with your teeth," he retorted, clambering onto the bed and kneeling between her spread legs. There was a smear of red liquid on his lip where she'd drawn blood, and he wiped it off with the back of his hand. She wanted to demand that he remove his gloves, suddenly needing more than ever to feel his bare hands on her skin, but he leaned down and slanted his mouth over hers before she could do so.
Rey was soon able to gather enough evidence to solidify a hypothesis she'd begun formulating in the alcove— making out was difficult. She didn't know when to sneak in a much-needed breath, oftentimes interrupting a kiss to gasp for oxygen, and she still had no idea what to do with her hands, making an absolute mess out of Kylo's hair. Sometimes their teeth clacked together clumsily and, as she struggled to toe off her silk slippers while their legs were entangled, she was pretty sure she ended up kneeling him in the ribs more than once— but, the thing was, he didn't seem to mind, forging ahead with an almost crazed determination towards some endgame that she could only grasp the vague shape of.

Eventually, he must have decided to give her poor, bruised lips a break because he switched to nibbling at the spot where her ear met her jaw. Rey's entire body erupted into goosebumps, her toes curling as Kylo worked his way down her throat and her collarbones in wet, biting kisses that would certainly leave marks. Hickeys, she'd heard other people call them. Lovebites.

It was when Kylo's fingers drifted beneath her rucked-up skirts that a shard of trepidation— no, of very real panic— pierced through Rey's arousal. She instinctively crossed her legs as best as she could, loosely trapping his hand between her thighs, and he stilled, his mouth hovering at her décolletage as he peered up at her in bleary confusion. "No?" he ground out, unable to form something more coherent than the most basic of speech, and she wished so badly that she were more sophisticated, more like the other ladies at court who were wise in the ways of the world. She wished she could just take charge of this moment and plow through it, come what may, but—

"I've never done this before," Rey admitted, cringing inwardly at how small her voice sounded.

It took a few seconds for Kylo to register her words. She saw the muddled haze lift slowly from his expression, his pale brow creasing and then his dark eyes widening. "Never?" he echoed, startled, perplexed, and... awed, somehow. It looked like awe, anyway.

"Honestly, did you think I'd have the opportunity or the time?" Rey muttered, deeply embarrassed. She attempted to wriggle out from under him, thoroughly hating herself for ruining things, for being so— so provincial, as a Hapan aristocrat might sniff— but Kylo flipped onto his back, rolling the both of them over so that she was now on top of him with her face buried in his chest, and he wrapped his arms around her, one hand resting on her lower back, the other between her shoulder-blades.

They stayed like that for a while. He stared up at the embroidered tapestry that hung over their bed and she listened to his wild, skittering heartbeat even out, and she felt hers do the same. The dark side gradually receded from them both until there was nothing in the air but the sound of the sea.
What could he say to her once the fever had passed and there was nothing to be done but lie there amidst the damask and the eiderdown? What was there left to say once his pulse had returned to a semblance of normalcy and the dark had retracted its claws? Perhaps if he'd had more experience he would have been able to notice her lack thereof— but Kylo's past dalliances had been rushed, fleeting things, with women who knew what they were doing, women who were paid to give pleasure and who expected none in return. As he breathed quietly there on the bed with Rey's cheek pressed to his heart and her small hands fisting in his shirtfront, a chill descended over him as he wrestled with the enormity of the realization that, if they went any further, he would be her first everything.

While she already wasn't his.

But she should have been. And that was what gnawed at him the most— if he'd only waited, just a little bit longer—

He was dimly aware that he wasn't being rational. There was no way he could have known back then that this was in his future, that he and Rey would be married and that she would return his kisses and melt in his embrace. However, despite his own appeal to logic, an overwhelming, sorrowful regret settled over his bones and he held her tighter in a silent, futile attempt to apologize for a past that he would never be able to bring himself to confess.

By the time Rey spoke again, the daylight had waned to early evening. "We should probably head down for dinner," she mumbled into his shirt. "Before someone starts looking for us."

"All right," Kylo said, and he slowly, reluctantly let her go.

A flush of pink crept onto Rey's cheeks as she stared at her reflection in the 'fresher mirror. Her bun was askew, already half-unraveled, and her eyes were bright and glittering, her lips kiss-stung. Angry red splotches littered her neck and the sides of her breasts, matching the finger-shaped bruises that she could feel had formed on her hips and thighs. She looked... debauched, her turbulent mind supplied for her, whispering that word into her subconscious like it was a dirty little secret.

She made to press her fingers to the topmost bruise that was directly below her jaw and— hesitated.
It was only common sense, of course, to heal these marks, to avoid other people from seeing, but there was some wicked, hidden part of herself that wondered why she had to avoid it in the first place. After all, she was the Chume'da and these marks had been given to her by her husband. Why should she care what anyone else thought? Let them see what lay between their sovereigns...

Rey gave her head a quick shake in order to snap out of this new trance that she'd fallen into. The intersection of power and desire was a crooning, euphoric thing, and she was turning out to be far less immune to it than befitted a Jedi apprentice. She forced her fingertips to touch the first of many lovebites, and she channeled the light and watched in the mirror as it disappeared.

After dinner, Kylo shut himself up in the communications bay located in another wing of the castle. He would probably stay there until late again, but that still didn't stop Rey from almost going into cardiac arrest when the datapad on her night table buzzed with an incoming transmission from Venomfang.

"Are you crazy?" she hissed at Poe's hologram as she used the Force to lock the bedroom doors. "I'm under blackout. Ren's here."

"Sorry, Your Worship, but this is urgent," Poe replied, not sounding very sorry at all. "Hux's flagship was sighted here in the Outer Rim with way too many escorts to be just a routine visit. We need to know what they're doing and where they're headed, so we can adjust our own movements accordingly."

"I'll figure something out," Rey promised. "But don't contact me again, it's too risky. I'll send word through Aleson."

"Copy that."

After Poe signed off, Rey shrugged on a robe over her nightgown and made her way out onto the balcony. The tunics and leggings she normally preferred sleeping in were a thing of the past, as was her casual daywear, somehow left behind at the Fountain Palace when she moved to Alqualonde. She was willing to bet that Ta'a Chume was behind the whole thing but, as was always the case with her domineering grandmother, she'd have to pick her battles. There was still the matter of being allowed to train with the witches on Dathomir, and Rey wasn't about to risk that for a sartorial issue.
The Evernight shone inky black beneath the light of the seven moons, its tide lapping at the island's shores. Leaning over the carved stone balustrade, Rey watched the play of silver radiance on dark sea and thought about her current predicament. Poe had commed just in time to remind her why she couldn't let her relationship with Kylo go any further. But, oh, how she wanted—

*Ben said it himself, didn't he?* The evil little thought wormed its way into her mind. *It can be purely physical. No complications. No feelings involved.*

*No sense of betrayal afterwards.*

Rey stood there looking out over the water until a ponderous knock on the bedroom door called her attention. Kylo had the security code but she'd activated the manual lock as well, to ensure that he wouldn't walk in during her conversation with Poe. Rey hurriedly left the balcony, waving her hand at the door to telekinetically undo the lock; by the time Kylo entered the room, she'd clambered onto her side of the bed, the sheets pulled up to her neck as she did her best to project an aura of nonchalance.

Kylo hesitated. *Shall I sleep somewhere else?* he asked stiffly.

Rey realized he was ill at ease because she'd locked the door. Now that she thought about it, such an action was especially damning given what they'd done a few hours ago and how she'd put a stop to it. His communiques must have also been stressful because he looked wrung out, the bags under his eyes more pronounced. Her heart clenched. *"No, of course not."* Guilt softened her tone. *"I meant it when I said you would always be welcome here."*

He offered her a slight nod, his face still wooden and tight-lipped, and she flashed a small smile in return. She was getting better at smiling at him, even if he always seemed at a loss how to respond. She busied herself with fluffing the pillows and arranging the sheets while he grabbed sleep clothes from his wardrobe and then disappeared into the 'fresher.

When Kylo emerged and claimed his side of the bed and turned off the glow-panels, the two of them lay there wrapped in the shadows which, like so many things on Hapes, were a guise, the heavy curtains drawn against the brilliant lunar illumination. She was separated from him by a good five feet or so but she swore she could feel the heat emanating from his skin, as if her limbs had developed phantom copies of themselves that reached for him in the dark.

"Rey."
She was glad that he'd spoken, as the deep timbre of his voice relieved some of the tension that had been building in the air, but she was also afraid of whatever he was about to say.

"Ben?"

"That night in the Citadel— did you kiss me before I fell asleep? Or was I already dreaming?"

Kylo sounded vulnerable, oddly young. Rey had the disquieting sensation that her answer would shape the course of the future in a crucial, significant way. Perhaps the more prudent option would be to lie, but she thought about earlier, when she'd blurted out that she loved his mouth on her skin. She thought about how freeing it had felt to be so honest after all these months of being surrounded by people who never said what they really meant.

And she thought about how she had promised herself that she would be kinder to her husband. In this case, the prudent option wasn't the kinder one.

"You weren't dreaming," Rey said to the darkness, to the silk, to the moonlight. "I kissed you."

It was a while before Kylo stirred, the mattress shifting at the changes in weight as he moved closer, approaching her cautiously while she stayed where she was, staring up at the dim tapestry over their heads and paralyzed by a slow, sick excitement, yes, please, now—

"What are you doing?" Rey whispered as he loomed above her, his features cloaked in shadow.

"Returning the favor," Kylo whispered back, his voice so husky that she already knew she would tuck this sound, these words, into the most precious corner of her memories where they would remain safe and untouched by the wreck of years to come. His soft, warm lips slanted over hers and she closed her eyes, sighing a little when his large hand dropped to the side of her neck, his bare thumb skimming across the hollow between her collarbones.

He pulled away far too soon but made up for it by pressing another kiss to the corner of her mouth. "Good night," he murmured against her skin.

"Good night," she responded in kind, digging her fingers into the sheets to curb the temptation to pull him to her and finish what they started.
Kylo retreated to his side of the bed. It was a long time before either of them fell asleep.

By Kylo's fifth day in Alqualonde, they had fallen into a peaceful routine, although it was a glass-like kind of peace that was perpetually on the verge of shattering. They avoided being alone with each other for the most part and there were definitely no more sparring matches, but their conversations during mealtimes were polite and laced with sporadic moments of genuine camaraderie. At night, they lay quietly in bed until he inched closer, always so careful and nervous, and kissed her with a mumbled "Good night" against her lips. It was fast becoming, much to Rey's chagrin, the best part of her day.

Three days before the masquerade, Ta'a Chume paid a visit to the Reef Fortress. Kylo learned of her impending approach when a harried-looking Rey burst into the office that he'd claimed as his own and ordered him to drop whatever he was doing and make himself presentable.

At first, Kylo could only blink at her, affronted, over his files. He was always presentable. But then he took a good look at her appearance and all coherent thought momentarily fled from his system—she'd changed into another one of those accursed, form-fitting sheath gowns, this particular piece a rich amethyst silk with a halter neck that bared her slim, infinitely kissable shoulders. Her chestnut hair was down, the loose curls echoing the wave-like design of the silver tiara perched atop her head, wreathed in diamonds that glimmered like sea foam.

"The Queen Mother's dropping in for afternoon tea. She'll be here any moment." Rey planted herself in front of Kylo's desk, hands on her hips, chin lifted in a determination that made clear she wouldn't budge until he complied. "Go put on a formal jacket or something."

He leaned back in his chair, raising an eyebrow at her while he affected nonchalance. "You've certainly taken to ordering me around, Chume'da. Is this to be the pattern of our life together?" he drawled even as he wondered where it came from, this desire to tease. Perhaps she just looked so endearing in this moment, all grumpy and stern.

Rey's lips pursed. And then she claimed a swift and decisive victory with five words: "Don't make me comm Moliere."
Kylo shot to his feet, fully regretting teasing her now. Her surprised bark of laughter followed him out of the office as he hightailed it to the royal suite, the sound of her dulcet tones eliciting the beginnings of a smile that he tried valiantly to curb.

Having just returned from the Calfa system, Ta'a Chume had made a spontaneous decision to visit Alqualonde on her way back to the Fountain Palace and see how the preparations for the masquerade were getting on— at least, that was what she told Rey as she bustled into the Grand Salon. Rey was highly skeptical that her grandmother could have been capable of doing anything on impulse, and her suspicions were proven right when, not even fifteen minutes into the tea, Ta'a Chume turned to Kylo and began discussing the proposed trade route that would link the Hapes Cluster to the rest of the galaxy.

"I don't understand why you'd want to chart the primary hyperlane through the Expansion Region."

There was a marked difference in the way Ta'a Chume spoke to Kylo now; she'd abandoned the chilly courtesy between two sovereigns of equal standing and was addressing him in the firm, mildly reproving manner she adopted around Rey and Isolder when she found their actions particularly baffling. "Why not the Core Worlds, or even the Inner Rim? The latter would certainly cut shipping time by more than half— unless the First Order is planning to outfit all freighters with those sub-hyperspace drives of yours."

"The sub-hyperspace drive is classified as military tech, reserved mostly for our capital warships," Kylo explained— and there was a tiny part of Rey that, although she didn't want to, seized this bit of information and filed it away for future use. "The Expansion worlds have good products but they're being crowded out of the market by the Core, the Inner Rim, and the Colonies. A direct route to Hapes would give their regional economy a much-needed boost."

"It's also the direct route aspect that worries me," said Ta'a Chume. "Border control, cargo inspection— these are not minor issues—"

"Perhaps we could establish a port of call for incoming trade ships," Rey suggested. "First Order goods could be vetted there before being delivered to the rest of the Hapan systems."

"And where do you propose this port be located?" asked Ta'a Chume.

"Shedu Maad? It's near the Mists, so it could also double as a center for border control," Rey said carefully. She thought about Kylo's strategy of channeling business to the sectors that needed it most, and added, "The inhabitants there also don't have much going for them in terms of industry, so we
would be providing them with jobs, wouldn't we?"

"Do not frame as a question any idea that you put forward," Ta'a Chume sternly instructed. "You sound like you're requesting permission to have a functioning brain, and that is not what leaders do. That having been said, it's a solid plan, Kira. Very good."

Maintaining an unflappable composure— as if compliments from her grandmother were totally normal things taken in stride— Rey shifted her gaze to Kylo. He did not seem pleased, and she was about to wonder why when he said, in a curt tone, "I'll consider it. However, this is the sort of topic that necessitates a formal meeting. I was under the impression we were merely having tea."

Ta'a Chume flashed a cool smile. "You should know by now that there is no separating the monarch and the crown. Even when she takes it off, it's always on her head. Or he and his, as it were."

"Indeed," said Kylo, narrowing his eyes. "It's not something I shall forget again in a hurry."

He excused himself as soon as it was socially acceptable to do so. Rey could only watch, confused, as he stalked out of the salon.

"A most volatile man, that one," Ta'a Chume opined, with only the faintest of creases on her brow to indicate annoyance. "According to our intelligence, he is every a bit a workaholic. I am puzzled as to why he would have taken offense just now."

It should already have been a given that the Queen Mother would have a file on Kylo, but this was still a chilling reminder for Rey that, like it or not, her marriage was loaded down with distrust and political machinations on both sides. "Who's spying on him for you?"

"For Hapes, vovina," Ta'a Chume corrected. "And that is something you will be informed of when the time is right. I believe I would like to check on the decorations in the ballroom now."

Kylo was fuming as he returned to the office. What he'd assumed to be an innocent get-together had quickly morphed into a trap, Rey and Ta'a Chume working in tandem to negotiate for revisions to his trade route proposal. Did they think he was a fool, that he wouldn't see through their tactics?
Perhaps I am a fool, Kylo thought bitterly. He'd let the past few days lull him into a sense of complacency, he'd allowed Rey's kisses and gentle eyes and the sweet way she called him Ben to lower his guard. He had forgotten, like some besotted teenager, that this was a marriage of convenience, that his wife was trained in the Hapan ways. She and her sly grandmother must be laughing behind his back right now in that gilded salon...

You're overreacting, another part of Kylo insisted. After all, the concession that they'd tried to gain from him was such a small thing, wasn't it—

But politics was all about taking a mile for every inch. And he was damn well going to be in control of how and where those miles were measured out, and it was not going to be when Rey had coaxed him into making himself presentable and then turned on him afterwards. He'd found it repulsive, how seamlessly she'd taken a cue from Ta'a Chume and how pleased the older woman had looked, so cunning and so satisfied.

The way Snoke looks when you successfully carry out his bidding, remarked that secret inner voice hidden away in a corner of Kylo's mind, that vein of treacherous thought. Rey had told him that the two of them had no more masters. She'd lied.

Kylo's foul mood was decidedly not improved by the slew of communiques that he then attempted to distract himself with. He and his officers were forced to dance around sensitive matters, ever conscious of Hapans that might be listening in on whatever transmissions were conducted in their space, and Hux could only offer a "fruitless" update on the Outer Rim expedition, implying that there was still no sign of the Resistance.

"I wonder if the answer might lie closer to home, Emperor Ren," said the general before signing off. There was no mistaking what he meant. They were wasting time and resources when a known Resistance ally was right in their midst. Kylo would have to confront his duplicitous wife; if he didn't, his High Command would take it as a sign of weakness, and Hux would latch on to that in a heartbeat.

And of course there was always Snoke, dragging the Force like icy fingernails along the edges of Kylo's mind, searching for a way in. Kylo had been ignoring his master's summons all week— being with Rey made it easier to do that, somehow— but he wasn't sure how much longer he could hold out now that that reprieve had been exposed for the deception that it was. He felt backed into a corner. He felt alone again— and the truth was that he always had been.
Rey breathed a sigh of relief once her grandmother’s ship disappeared from the horizon. Perhaps it made her a terrible person but she viewed Ta’a Chume’s visit as an intrusion that had upset her and Kylo’s idyllic time here on Alqualonde. It was as if a bubble had burst, and she would now have to scramble to pick up the pieces.

Unfortunately, Kylo appeared to possess no inclination towards helping her do so. He was mostly silent during dinner, meeting her attempts at their usual lighthearted banter with cold, monosyllabic responses. And when the glow-panels had been extinguished in their bedroom, he immediately rolled over on his side, turning his back to her, and he didn’t kiss her good night.

In her bewilderment, in her sudden, crushing sadness, she dreamed of him. Actually, it could have been anyone because she couldn’t see their face— but all she could do was feel and it felt like him, so big and warm and solid over her, around her, his lips burning her skin, his hands wandering to the place she’d previously barred him from. In those hazy wisps of a dream, he was murmuring her name over and over again, he was inside her, filling the ache, he was worshiping her body and she was wanted and adored...

Rey opened her eyes to pale morning light filtering in through the gaps in the curtains. She blinked, once, and wetness dripped down her cheek and onto the pillowcase. Why was she crying?

Why was she— *moving*—

Reality settled over her in gradual splinters of sight and sensation, slow to coalesce into a complete picture. At some point during the night, or perhaps the early hours of dawn, she and Kylo had met in the middle of their bed, and he had pulled her against him so that her back was to his chest and his massive frame was curled around her, one arm clamped around her waist while the other had slanted upwards, the hand attached to it cupping her breast through her nightgown. At some point, her dream had spilled over into the waking world and she was squirming against him, her skirts pushed up past her thighs as she rubbed herself against the hard, throbbing length in his loose trousers.

Rey knew she should stop. She should disentangle herself from Kylo and flee to her side of the bed. But she was too groggy for common sense, too frustrated from her unfinished dream, too *lost* in the feeling and the earnest desire to alleviate the painful ache between her legs.

*I'm so lonely.*
Kylo was still asleep, but his breath was harsh and erratic in her ear, his lips grazing the sensitive slope of her neck. *He was moving with her,* subconsciously shifting his hips for a better, more perfect angle. Was it too much to hope that he was dreaming of her as well? Stars, she was so wet, absolutely soaking through the silk panties that both muffled and heightened sensation as they scraped against his own garments. The pad of his thumb drowsily stroked across her nipple, eliciting a burst of pleasure so sharp that Rey couldn't stop herself from crying out, from arching against his chest and into his touch.

Perhaps the sound she made was what woke him up. She felt his presence stir in the Force as he surfaced from the depths of sleep, she heard him curse into her neck as his hips instinctively thrust against her backside, the outline of his erection nudging at the clothed, swollen bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs. A sob wrenched itself past Rey's lips— *Maker, that was it, that was the spot, she was going to die if he stopped—*

The sun had fully risen now. She could see— through eyelids that fluttered and couldn't make up their mind about whether they wanted to close or stay open— panels of soft amber illuminating the curtains, shafts of bright gold streaming into the room and over the edges of the bed where she and Kylo rocked together in this bizarre, fumbling imitation of sex. But no matter how clumsy it was, no matter how that one lingering rational part of her screamed that she shouldn't be doing this, it was still all so amazing and new and she was *almost there—*

The steely grip around her waist vanished, and Rey's eyes widened as her husband wrapped one large hand around her bare throat, his grasp loose but the cold metal of his wedding ring pressing into her overheated flesh. *"Say it,"* he growled in her ear as his other hand plucked at her breast, and although her stomach dropped at the vaguely cruel tinge to his voice, there was something wild inside her that seemed to blossom to life and unfurl its dark wings.

"Please," Rey managed to gasp out, "please, I'm so close, *Ben—"*

She felt him startle at the sound of his name, but soon she was thinking of nothing else but how that involuntary movement had rubbed him against her, *just right,* providing the final bit of stimulation needed for the pleasure building up inside her to hit its crescendo. She blindly stretched one arm back as she started to fall apart, burying her fingers into Kylo's hair as her toes curled and the world shattered all around her, lovely and brittle and *at last, at last—*

The relentless pace of Kylo's hips faltered. He pinched her nipple between thumb and forefinger, hard enough to hurt, and then he was joining her there at the height of delirium, stifling a grunt into her neck as the front of his trousers grew warm and damp against her similarly drenched underwear.
In the midst of Rey's aftershocks, Kylo lowered his head and skinned his lips against her jaw in what she could almost swear was the ghost of a kiss—the kiss that he hadn't given her last night, the kiss that he didn't give her now as he released her and scrambled out of bed. Rey's eyes burned with the light of the risen sun as she listened to him head into the 'fresher and shut the door, and she wondered how it was possible that she could feel so satisfied and, yet, so oddly bereft.

Chapter End Notes

Rey's purple gown in this chapter was directly taken from the cover art that the beautiful jackpotgirl made for this story a while back.

Her thoughts on how freeing it felt to be honest around Kylo were inspired by a discussion that partialto and datswatutink had in the comments section last chapter.
I haven't had much time to respond to everyone's lovely comments but please know that I treasure each and every word! In fact, the glorious feedback on the last chapter has inspired me to update ahead of schedule, as has the influx of beautiful fan creations from renpresswardrobe, okorrasami, lavenderkushkiss, selun-chen, reylocaligraphy, cloisismyfairytale, and kayurka. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

This latest installment was A Time (TM) to write, but I hope it doesn't disappoint <3 For everyone's reference, my Tumblr now has a little sidebar that displays the ETA for the next update of this fic. I'm also on Twitter now, btw. Follow for real-time writing woes and lots of thirst and fangirling ;)

Please keep the reviews coming, guys! They give me life and truly motivate me to write faster!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The seating chart, as Lairelosse Yliri well knew, was the most basic and yet the most crucial element of any formal state dinner. Given the complex and extremely volatile workings of the Consortium's internal affairs—not to mention the copious amount of alcohol that tended to be imbibed—even the slightest miscalculation could lead to all-out pandemonium. Lairelosse still shuddered every time she recalled the infamous banquet at Starfall, her family estate on Talcharaim, where two lords of neighboring fiefdoms had declared war on each other halfway through the soup course. There was simply no room for error when it came to determining who sat next to whom, particularly at a royal masquerade dinner where both allies and detractors would be in attendance.

"I've been having doubts about Table 4-A, Your Grace," Lairelosse told Rey in the latter's office a couple of days before the event. "There are four duchas of the Lorelli Reach here, as well as Beed Thane. It wouldn't be advisable to group them together, considering that the Reach played an instrumental role in Kalen's rebellion and the Queen Mother doesn't trust Thane as far as she can throw him. Who knows what they'll get up to, yes?"

"Indeed," Rey said absentmindedly.

"We can move two of them to—" Lairelosse squinted at the holographic blueprint projected on the desk—"Table 5-B, perhaps?"

"Sure."
Lairelosse’s brow wrinkled as another problem occurred to her. "But that’s no good, either, because 5-B is composed chiefly of marchionesses and earls. The duchas of the Reach might consider it an insult to be seated with so many nobles of lower rank."

"Can’t have that," Rey distantly agreed.

Lairelosse looked up. Rey was paying no attention whatsoever to the hologram—instead, she was staring at the far wall with a troubled expression on her face.

"Chume’dā." Lairelosse switched off the holoprojector. "Is everything all right?"

* *

Rey blinked at Lairelosse, who had posed her question in a calm tone but was studying her with a hint of concern. Can I trust you? Rey wondered wearily. She was twisted into knots over what she and Kylo had sleepily done just a few hours ago that had been followed by an entire morning of cold, standoffish behavior on his end. She felt confused and vulnerable, and angry that she was confused and vulnerable.

However, her anger in itself was a weak, tired thing. She just—really needed to talk to someone. She needed Jessika, but Jess was helping Poe marshal a rebel army in the Outer Rim. While Lairelosse couldn’t have been more different from the rough-and-tumble pilot, she was also the only option right now, although Rey would have to choose her words with care because it was a foregone conclusion that anything divulged to Lairelosse would find its way to Ta’a Chume.

"It’s about the Emperor," Rey finally admitted.

Lairelosse was much too composed to immediately lean forward, all ears at the juicy promise of a man’s flaws being picked apart, but the sudden spark of interest in her eyes was reminiscent of Jessika and other female Resistance soldiers. Perhaps some experiences were truly universal.

"He’s being..." What was Kylo being? Mean to me sounded too juvenile, a heartless bastard who got his rocks off and then couldn’t get away from me fast enough was too much information. "A prick," Rey finished.

Lairelosse smirked. "More so than usual?"
Rey couldn't help but snort at that. "Yes." She proceeded to explain, in the broadest possible strokes, what had been going on— that she and Kylo had come to an understanding on Coruscant and that they had been sharing space in relative harmony until the Queen Mother's visit, after which he had reverted to his old ways.

But she should have expected that Lairelosse wouldn't be content with such little information. The Ducha bit her lip, tilting her head in that way of hers that suggested she was giving a certain matter serious thought. "Your Grace," she said slowly, "I ask this with all due respect and with no other intention but to be of utmost assistance. Have you and His Majesty engaged in... physical congress?"

"I brought this upon myself," Rey inwardly grumbled. "We've kissed a few times." The other woman offered such an attentive, sympathetic nod that she was compelled to add, in an abrupt burst of pure, wrenching honesty, "We went a bit further but he stopped when I told him I'd never done this before and he started kissing me good night every night—" The words spilled out from her in a rapid, reckless stream, because she would only say this once, she would never admit this and how badly it affected her to anyone else ever again— "but yesterday he didn't and I think he's furious with me but I don't know why—" She clamped her lips shut. She'd already said too much.

Lairelosse dropped her gaze, idly peering down at her gold-tipped nails as if sensing that eye contact while discussing this sensitive topic would only make Rey more uncomfortable. "You and the Emperor are in a very unique predicament, Chume'da. You are former enemy combatants strong-armed into a political marriage who now find yourselves in the untenable position of being attracted to each other. It seems to me that, because you acted on this mutual desire, His Majesty started to develop... shall we say, certain expectations about the nature of your time together here at Alqualonde. You didn't get a honeymoon, after all."

Rey was baffled. "You're saying he thinks this is a honeymoon?"

"Or perhaps he wanted it to be, even if he won't admit it to himself," Lairelosse corrected. "I have a feeling that, when Ta'a Chume started talking shop, it shattered the illusion and served as a jarring reminder that yours is no ordinary marriage. It might not be completely outlandish to posit that your consort has a bit of a romantic streak, hmm? He did try to woo you with good night kisses. That's sweet, if I do say so myself."

"W—woo me?" Rey sputtered. She felt too naive for this conversation, like she couldn't keep up with the nuances of interpersonal relationships that Lairelosse understood so well.

The other woman smiled. "I asked you once, didn't I, why shouldn't a woman seduce her betrothed. It's the same thing. Why shouldn't a man woo his wife?" Lairelosse sat up a little straighter,
indicating that she meant business. "And now, Your Grace, I believe it is time we revisit those lessons I endeavored to impress upon you so long ago. If you wish to fix your relationship with His Majesty, you will need to use the tools that every woman has at her disposal."

Rey thought back to the day she and Kylo first met as Emperor and *Chumé'da*, how she'd decided that she had to leave behind some parts of herself and embrace her new role in order to throw him off-balance and draw first blood. Perhaps this was the same thing, as Lairlosse had said. Perhaps it was all the same thing in the end. "All right." She echoed what she'd told her ladies-in-waiting when they brought her the crown. "Do your worst."

Lairlosse's smile widened.

Moliere nodded stiffly at Kylo as one of the tailor's assistants carefully tucked the Emperor's masquerade getup into its protective case. "I believe this concludes our last fitting, Your Majesty. I shall conduct some final alterations later and deliver the completed ensemble tomorrow."

"You mean it's not yet done?" Kylo snapped.

"I," Moliere retorted with dignified hauteur, "take pride in the flawless quality of every garment that leaves my shop. There are a few minor details that could be improved upon. Of course, these are easily missed by all but the trained eye—"

Kylo knew *exactly* where Moliere could shove his trained eye but he held his peace, eager to put this unpleasant encounter behind him as soon as possible. They left his office and were forced to walk together in awkward silence because they were both headed downstairs, the assistants trailing behind.

As sheer *luck* would have it, they encountered Rey and Lairlosse on the first floor landing. After the initial formalities, Moliere turned to Lairlosse with an enthusiastic cry. "Ducha Yliri! My light, my muse—"

"Come off it, Belroc," said Lairlosse, rolling her eyes. But she didn't hesitate to take the tailor's arm. "Her Grace and I have just finished ironing out the wrinkles in the seating chart."
"You nobles are no fun," Moliere chided. "What's life without a diplomatic crisis every now and then?"

"Honestly, I doubt the Ducha AlGray can take much more at this point," Lairelosse quipped, and Moliere burst into hearty laughter.

While the two of them were bantering, Kylo and Rey tersely hung back, not meeting each other's gaze. Rey was wearing a gown of dusky pink chaughaine today, the asymmetrical neckline leaving one shoulder bare while her other arm peeked out from a cape sleeve that trailed to the floor in translucent folds of gossamer. Her hair was gathered up in a tight bun, the severity of the look softened by a couple of loose chestnut strands that framed her face. She looked... delicate, almost, and against Kylo's will he remembered how easily she'd bruised under his mouth—and even farther back than that, Jakku, the Jakku that he'd seen in her mind, how meticulously she'd wrapped herself up in rags to shield her complexion from the burning sun. It seemed like such a strange, precious thing to know, that this powerful Force user, this heir to the Hapan throne, had sensitive skin.

"Your Grace, I do apologize," said Lairelosse, turning to Rey, "but I'd quite forgotten that there are a few things I need to discuss with Belroc regarding my younger brother's apparel for his birthday celebration on Talcharaim next month. I'm afraid I shall have to bow out of our scheduled lunch."

"The food's already—" Rey started to protest, but some enigmatic flicker in Lairelosse's expression made her stop. "Of course, Ducha," she said uncertainly.

"Perhaps His Majesty can join you instead. No sense in letting the preparations go to waste." With that, Lairelosse dragged a slightly confused-looking Moliere away, leaving Kylo and Rey alone on the landing.

Kylo glowered down at his boots, but it wasn't long before Rey stepped forward, angling her body so that she was in his line of sight. "Would you care to join me for lunch, my lord?" she asked, sounding both nervous and hopeful.

She was turning out to be a remarkable actress, he thought bitterly. "No. I have a conference call with my generals."

Rey exhaled lightly, so lightly that it would have been imperceptible if she hadn't been so close. Kylo recognized this mannerism—he did it sometimes, breathing out a splinter in the heart. The first faint stirrings of guilt nagged at the back of his mind. "Surely you can eat something first," she persisted. "Your meeting with the tailor ran late. You must be hungry." She touched his sleeve, her slender fingers clutching at the fabric covering his elbow in a gesture that was unnervingly beseeching.
Kylo hurriedly widened the distance between them. He had to, or else he would have shoved her away out of defensiveness or kissed her out of frustration. "I don't think you actually care whether I eat or not." But, stars, how he wanted her to care, and that in itself was already part of the problem. She awakened in him the most foolish of dreams.

He left her there in the hallway, staring after him, and he sought— unsuccessfully— to drive her from his thoughts for the rest of the afternoon.

The castle staff had prepared a meal for two out on one of Alqualonde's many terraces overlooking the sea. Determined to make the most of it despite the contrariness of certain individuals, Rey all but attacked the food. It helped that she was famished after the meeting with Lairelosse that had lasted for hours as they went over the many strategies to— as the Ducha put it— soften the Emperor's disposition. Her first attempt had been an utter failure, but it was really more Kylo's loss than hers because the food was delicious.

At least, that was what Rey tried to console herself with.

"Chume'da."

Niobe sauntered out onto the terrace, her red hair shining in the sunlight. Rey gestured at the empty chair across the table and the girl sat down, an excited gleam in her silvery eyes.

"Do you have something for me?" Rey asked.

Her lady-in-waiting nodded. "It has been difficult getting dear old Dopheld to be more forthcoming regarding Empire business without arousing his suspicion. I've spent the past few days gaining his friendship, and earlier this morning he finally let his guard down. Since you mentioned that the increase of First Order activity in the Outer Rim might have something to do with the Resistance, I simply mentioned how concerned I was that the Resistance was still at large."

"Mentioned?" Rey dryly echoed.

Niobe giggled, unabashed. "There may have been a few dainty tears involved— an oh-so-pitiful declaration that I didn't feel safe. The gallant lieutenant was very quick to assure me that the First
Order was taking care of things—that, in fact, the Resistance had been spotted in the Outer Rim, and General Hux is tightening up surveillance in that region, particularly in Chopani and surrounding sectors."

A chill shot down Rey's spine. She had to tell Poe right away, she had to warn her friends—

"That's not all, Your Grace." Niobe leaned forward, her demeanor markedly more somber. "Janassa was playfully bickering with the Emperor's shuttle crew about whether Consortium or First Order technology was more superior. She wasn't able to obtain details about the sub-hyperspace drive as you instructed, but she did get the pilot to brag that the First Order would be installing communication tracking nets all throughout the Outer Rim any day now. These nets are apparently able to detect incoming transmissions and, while they can't slice or intercept them, they can pinpoint in a matter of seconds where the broadcast signal is coming from. Even if the communique is patched through an encrypted channel, the First Order will manage to trace its origin point."

If the situation had been any different, such tech would have struck Rey as pointless. Thousands of messages flowed through the HoloNet at any given time. She had a feeling, though, that transmissions from the Hapes Cluster, where a known former member of the Resistance dwelt, to the Outer Rim, where the Resistance was currently suspected to be, would raise more than a few eyebrows.

"Thank you," Rey said to Niobe. "You and Janassa have done well. Please keep this between us for now. It's not that I don't trust the other girls, but..."

"But they still have a long way to go before they're ready for political intrigue," Niobe wisely finished. "Don't worry, Chume'da, I understand."

It had been a gamble on Rey's part to tell Janassa and Niobe the truth. She'd been carefully observing them for a while, and she'd come to the conclusion that they were the perfect accomplices—cunning, fearless, and, above all, more loyal to her than to Ta'a Chume because they were clever enough to invest in the future Queen Mother. It was still a risk, but at least it seemed to have paid off for now.

Rey abandoned what was left of her lunch to contact Leia in the privacy of her office. She'd be breaking the terms of her blackout but this was an emergency—the Resistance cells in Hapes needed to stop transmitting to the Outer Rim posthaste.
Her first comm went unanswered, as did the second and third. After an hour and a half of unsuccessfully trying to contact Leia's ship, Rey had all but worn a groove into the floor with her worried pacing. What was going on? Should she attempt to reach the Falcon instead—

The holoscreen lit up with a string of ciphertext. Rey eagerly hit the buttons that would automatically translate its contents through Venomfang's decryption sequence but, instead of the message from Leia that she was expecting, there was only a short, clipped sentence sent from the Evenstar.

*See you at the masquerade.*

"What the hell?" Rey wondered aloud, frowning at the screen. Why would Aleson Gray message her like this out of the blue? It couldn't be a coincidence. There was no way. Even if he were the type to willingly attend a royal ball, he could have confirmed his attendance via the usual channels. Enough time had passed since her first comm to make it possible for someone in Leia's camp to find him and get him to relay this ciphertext. It could only mean one thing— that the Venomfang network had been compromised, somehow, and any communication between Rey and her comrades would have to be facilitated through Aleson in person.

Rey had never felt as useless or as helpless as she did now, possessing critical information but lacking the means to share it with the people concerned. What good was being the most powerful woman in the galaxy if she couldn't even save her friends?

A heavy weight settled on her shoulders. She was so talented, wasn't she, at avoiding truths she didn't want to face. But this crisis— this increased possibility of the Resistance getting caught— had driven home what she needed to do. She had to redouble her efforts where Kylo was concerned. And she had to think like a Hapan, using, as Lairelosse had said, any means at her disposal.

After that *wonderful* little chat on the landing, Kylo expected Rey to freeze him out for the rest of the day. To his consternation, she was unfailingly polite during dinner, even as he rebuffed her attempts at small talk. Her ladies, obviously sensing that something was wrong, rallied behind their Chume'da, picking up the conversational ball every time he let it drop. This ensured that there were no lengthy periods of tense silence at the table, although Rey seemed to grow sadder— and yet, somehow, more determined— as the minutes passed. Kylo was not going to let it affect him, however, and when he was finished eating he disappeared into his office once more.
Daala seemed surprised to hear from him again only a few hours after the exhaustive conference call with the rest of High Command, but she gamely took note of his new instructions and answered his questions—although they were, in truth, mere reiterations of earlier inquiries. He knew it and she knew it, and when he fell quiet because he'd run out of things to discuss, she said, "Your Majesty, I believe this is sufficient for today. Might I suggest taking the rest of the evening off?" A hint of mischief crept into her green eyes. "I'm sure the Empress is waiting for you."

Kylo scowled. "You know that's not what this marriage is, Admiral."

Canny enough to sense when she was on the brink of pushing her luck, Daala snapped off a sharp salute, holding the position until Kylo ended the comm and the screen faded to black.

And then lit up again a few seconds later.

It was a dispatch from the governor of the Myto sector, heavily encrypted and set to self-destruct in fifteen seconds in order to shield its contents from prying eyes. There were as-yet unsubstantiated reports that Resistance troops had been spotted in the outlying villages on the planet of Artoria. The governor was personally investigating the matter and would keep His Majesty updated.

Kylo stared numbly at the message until it disintegrated. The prickle on the back of his neck told him it was no mere coincidence that the Resistance had headed for a world with people in open rebellion against the First Order. But how could they have known, given the galactic media restriction and the government surveillance on all communication networks—

There had been a leak, somewhere, in the chain of command. And Kylo's officers had freely associated with the Hapans during his and Rey's nuptials. It was highly possible that news of the Artorian rebellion had slipped to a member of the Consortium, who would have all too eagerly reported it to Rey, who would then have...

The communication terminal's dashboard started to emit sparks and smoke. A fissure blossomed on the screen, cracking it into jagged halves, the device helpless in the face of Kylo's smoldering rage that exploded through the Force.

When he entered the bedroom—*their* bedroom, insisted some primal corner of his mind, *his and Rey's*—he was immediately enveloped in the scent of almonds and cherries, fading fast. His wife had
just emerged from a bath, it seemed; she glanced at him over her shoulder as she shrugged on a filmy, gold-embroidered robe over her peach satin nightgown, her skin dew-damp and glowing in the light. It was such a quiet, fleeting moment— just Rey, turning to look at him, her wet hair pinned up in a haphazard bun— but the inside of Kylo’s chest hollowed out with need all the same.

And he knew, right then and there, that he couldn't be in the same bed with her tonight.

"I'll sleep somewhere else," Kylo bluntly announced.

Rey froze. "Why?" There it was again, the hurt that wavered just beneath the surface of her expression as if she couldn't suppress it. Such a clever, conniving little thing, the woman he had married.

"I was not aware that I needed to explain myself to you."

The way her lips parted, that tiny exhale... Her reaction seemed genuine enough that he could almost take a certain twisted, vengeful delight in it. "Ben, we can't sleep in separate rooms. People are going to talk. You know as well as I do that we have to present a united front—"

"United?" he mocked. "It's appallingly obvious by now that you and I have vastly different aims."

"What do you mean by that?" She whirled around to face him head-on. "Please tell me why you're mad. We can fix this." Her tone was so earnest, so beseeching, and his heart dropped further into his stomach the more he listened to her sounding like that. Surely this was proof that it was all an act. The Rey he knew was fiery and defiant, not this meek shadow—

Not meek, something tried to tell him. Some memory. Gentle. Like she was on Coruscant. She is being gentle with you.

Kylo steadfastly ignored it. He couldn't afford to second-guess himself anymore. "There is no unity without trust," he declared. "I allowed myself to get sidetracked— to forget that I cannot, in fact, trust you. Perhaps it's not entirely your fault; you were so desperate for a family for so long that of course you will do as they bid. Recent events have made that all too clear."

Rey swallowed, apparently at a loss for words. He could practically see her mind racing, could feel her trawling the currents of the Force in a vain attempt to gain insight into his headspace and where
this conversation was headed. "I meant it," she told him, "when I said that we could work together."

"You seek to destabilize my reign. That's a unique definition of working together."

"What are you talking about—"

"Are you in contact with the Resistance?" Kylo interrupted through teeth clenched from the effort of not raising his voice. No matter how furious he was, no matter how deceitful she was, he would not shout at her. He'd witnessed his parents fighting too often to ever want to be the kind of man who shouted at his wife. "Do you know where they are?"

Rey abruptly turned on her heel and stalked out onto the balcony as if she wished to get as far away from him as possible. Kylo thundered after her, his eyes narrowed at her figure clad in webs of gold, silhouetted in the silver moonlight, against the black sea.

No sooner had he joined her beyond the glass doors when she faced him again, looking mutinous. "Why are we fighting about this only now?" she demanded. "If you've been harboring doubts, you should have said something before we—" She broke off but the unspoken words hung in the air. Before we kissed. Before what we did in bed this morning. "What happened? Did Snoke worm his way into your mind again?"

"You truly are shameless." Kylo sneered at her. "Still fishing for information—"

"I am trying to understand you," Rey quietly insisted. "I am trying to keep up with your— your mood swings—"

"Where is the Resistance?" he asked, his tone implacable.

"I don't know." He noticed, too late, the tears shimmering in her eyes. Unlike in the garden at the Fountain Palace, however, this time she didn't let them fall. "Do you honestly think that I would be here if I knew? Do you honestly think that I wouldn't want to be with them?" She stepped closer and he could do nothing but stand there, stunned, as she gazed up at him in pure, defeated heartbreak. "They're my friends. They'll always be my friends. I found a place with them but, thanks to the First Order, all that has been lost. I was reunited with my family and my people and my homeworld, yes, but you showed up again and now I might lose all of that, too, if I put one foot out of line." Her voice wavered but she pressed on, resolute. She seemed more tired than angry. "You've made it a habit of tearing down every home I've ever known, but I'm doing the best I can. And maybe—"
maybe all I'm asking is that you do the same."

*I don't know how,* Kylo nearly said out loud, rendered powerless by the raw, naked honesty on Rey's beautiful face— an honesty that transcended his suspicions and his fears, even if only for just one ephemeral, moonlit, saltwater moment. *I don't know how to do this at all.*

*#

He camped out in the living room of the suite that night, his overly large frame crowded onto the sofa. He couldn't sleep— he kept replaying his and Rey's altercation in his head, looking for the exact moment when everything had changed and his righteous fury gave way to niggling unease. Had he miscalculated? Was she telling the truth? Stars, she'd cried because of him again...

There was still a possibility that it was all a charade on her end, but Rey's tears had struck him as real, as had the sadness that he'd glimpsed in her energy signature. And there was no denying the truth of what she'd castigated him for, either. Logically speaking, what Kylo had done in the name of the First Order was indeed for the good of the galaxy. The devastation he'd left in his wake had been something of an abstract concept until just now, when he'd been forced to see things from Rey's point of view.

He spent the night tossing and turning as much as the cramped space would allow. Sleep continued to elude him, which was theoretically something he was used to but tonight his fatigue and restlessness contained a sharper edge. It took him a while to realize it, but this was the first sleepless night he'd had since his arrival at Alqualonde. For some reason, he slept better when Rey was in the same bed.

He heard her much later— a thready burst of a sob through the stone walls, quickly muffled, perhaps by a palm or pillow. His wife was crying herself to sleep, like that one night he'd heard his mother doing the same after a particularly vicious argument that had ended in his father disappearing for a couple of day cycles. Kylo couldn't remember what Han and Leia had fought about— he must have been five or six years old— but he knew only that it was the first and last time his mother had ever cried in his presence.

In the darkness of the living room, the fingers of Kylo's right hand reached out to trace the curve of the wedding ring on his left. *Am I turning into you?* he asked someone— a memory, a ghost. *Does every son turn into their father in the end? Am I fated to make your mistakes?*

There was no answer. But, then again, Kylo hadn't been expecting one, anyway.
In the bedroom, curled up on the mattress as the wind blew in from the sea, Rey wept. She wept because she was terrified, because there was no going back from what she'd done earlier. She'd lied to Kylo outright, and she'd started crying in the middle of it because she was lying. Yes, some of her real sentiments had leaked through, but in the end it was still a lie. Somewhere in the back of her mind was Niobe casually mentioning that she'd used a few dainty tears to get what she wanted—and, while Rey hadn't planned on that, the mere fact that she'd thought it would not absolve her of any guilt.

*I'm doing the right thing,* she repeated to herself, over and over and over again, but the mantra served as poor consolation.

Who knew that doing the right thing could be so hard?

She was eating breakfast when he woke up. The smell of piping hot foodstuff wafted over to him from the suite's private dining area. Stomach growling, Kylo blearily followed the scent, his body stiff in yesterday's clothes.

Rey was still in her robe and nightgown, making quick work of a heap of panna cakes spread generously with green bantha butter and drenched in poptree syrup. She ate mechanically, though, without her usual relish—merely with the instincts of someone who had learned, at a very young age, to take advantage of food whenever it was there.

Their gazes met as he hovered at the doorway, and she nodded to the place that had been set for him at the table across from her. Kylo sat down, wincing slightly when his back creaked in protest, sore from his makeshift sleeping accommodations.

"Rough night?" Rey muttered sarcastically.

He glared at her. Upon closer inspection, though, she looked just as tired as he felt, her complexion too pale and the skin under her eyes smeared with dark crescents. "Couldn't sleep?" he shot back before he could think better of it. He knew, of course he knew—he'd heard that sob for himself, and now he was throwing it in her face. But *she'd* started it, hadn't she?
It was almost fascinating to him, how breathtakingly cruel they could be to each other.

Kylo helped himself to smoked terrafin loin and egg-dipped Iktotch toast, washing it all down with a cup of bitter caf. Hapan beans were surprisingly one-note, abysmal compared to the vine-coffee of Belsavis or even the Spiran caf found throughout the rest of the galaxy. Perhaps that was why Consortium nobles preferred wine.

Rey didn't speak again until she pushed away her empty plate and stood up to prepare for the rest of her day. She paused to look at him and said, "Please sleep on the bed tonight."

Her firm tone made it clear that this was a command rather than a request. Instead of taking issue with it, however, Kylo found himself overcome by a curious sort of relief. A softening of spirit. He'd assumed that it was the emotional toll of their fight that had kept her up, but could it be that she'd had trouble sleeping without him, too? It was a ridiculous notion, but hope stirred in his chest all the same.

Not wanting to speak for fear that his voice would crack, Kylo simply nodded. Only then did Rey leave the dining area.

*#

It was turning out to be a very bad day.

Rey had no idea if the Reef Fortress staff was nervous because the masquerade was tomorrow, or if they'd somehow picked up on the tension between her and Kylo and it rattled them, or if it was her own sour mood and lack of sleep making small things appear so much worse. In any case, a priceless heirloom vase was dropped while being carried down a flight of stairs, the technician in charge of fixing a conked-out turbolift— incidentally, why the staff members had been carrying the vase down the stairs in the first place— short-circuited the glow-panels in an entire wing of the castle, and a curtain in the Grand Ballroom caught fire for mysterious reasons no one could explain but Rey suspected had something to do with a malfunctioning vacuum cleaner.

She ordered a replacement curtain brought out of storage, fixed the vacuum cleaner and restored power to the south wing by herself, and mentally rehearsed an explanation for Ta'a Chume as to why a vase that had been in the royal family for centuries had ended up in pieces on the carpet. This was on top of all her other preparations as hostess for tomorrow's event; by early afternoon, she decided that she quite needed a break.
Glancing at the sliver of glass window peeking out through the newly-installed curtain, Rey noticed that the sky was overcast and the sea was slowly starting to churn to froth as the wind picked up speed. It was her favorite kind of weather, that nice gray chill right before a rainstorm, and all of a sudden she wanted nothing more than to head down to the beach.

It might be good for Kylo to get out of the castle for a while, too. Perhaps they could return to a semblance of their former equilibrium on more neutral ground.

*And perhaps a friendlier husband will be less suspicious of you,* whispered that part of her that had soaked up Consortium lessons all too well.

In the communications bay, Kylo watched another dispatch from the Myto sector self-destruct before his eyes. The governor had conducted a thorough search of the outlying villages on Artorias and found no sign of the Resistance. He would keep looking, he promised, but for now it seemed that the reports might have been a false alarm.

*I made her cry for nothing,* Kylo realized bleakly.

As if right on cue, there was a knock on the door and he knew at once that it was Rey, her Force signature subdued but unmistakable, like the sun behind the clouds. After checking to make sure that there was no confidential information on the holoscreen, he telekinetically waved the door open and she hesitantly entered the room.

"Don't you like your office anymore?" she asked, her eyes flickering around the communications bay.

Kylo could hardly tell her that he'd destroyed the terminal in his office in a fit of misplaced rage. "I needed a change of scenery," he ground out. And then that part of his brain that tended to go haywire for the first few seconds in her presence finally caught up to speed and told him that she was wearing—

She was wearing—
Oh.

Sleeveless, belted tunic overlain with crossed panels of gauzy gray fabric, arm wraps, leggings, boots.

Just like old times.

* 

Rey fidgeted under Kylo's scrutiny, casting a wry glance down at her outfit. "Speaking of a change in scenery," she quipped, although it felt odd and out-of-place to quip when they were technically still in a fight, "I was thinking of going for a walk on the beach. Care to join me?"

He didn't respond. Her gaze snapped sharply back to him. The man looked positively confounded by her appearance, and it didn't take long for her insecurities to set in. She'd changed into old garments of hers that had survived Ta'a Chume's meddling so that she could traverse the shoreline unhindered, but it occurred to her now that Kylo might not appreciate this reminder of the scavenger she'd been before they were married.

"I..." He swallowed, then looked at the dashboard where a couple of lights were blinking to signal queued-up transmissions. "I have work to do."

The Hapan Chume'da is still the Chume'da no matter what she wears, Rey told herself. She could do this. She could harness her people's legendary charm. She'd learned from the best, after all. "Surely it can wait a couple of hours," she attempted to cajole. "You've been here almost a standard week and I haven't shown you around the island yet." She employed what Lairelosse had taught her, allowing a vague smile to soften the corners of her lips as she peered up at Kylo through her lashes—

The stare that he leveled at her was one of abject confusion. "What's wrong with your face? Are you in pain—"

This was the breaking point in what was already a string of terrible events. "Oh, forget it!" Rey snapped. "You're impossible, Ben!"

Kylo's brow creased. "Rey, what—"
"You don't— you don't ever react appropriately to anything!" She hadn't raised her voice in the thick of their argument last night but by the Maker was she raising her voice now. "I heal your wounds and kiss you and you fall asleep and don't comm me for a month, I offer to be friends with you and you tell me we should have sex, I make out with you and you stop," she railed, jabbing an accusing finger at him as she listed his transgressions, "I start liking our good night kisses and you stop, we give each other orgasms and you leave, I invite you to lunch and you get cranky, I ask you to try your best for the sake of our relationship and you sleep somewhere else, I flirt with you and you ask me what's wrong with my face—" His eyes were the widest she'd ever seen them and she was shaking, flushed, absolutely humiliated. "Well, forget it. I'll go for a walk by myself!"

She stormed out before he could say a word, feeling like an utter failure.

*

After Rey left, it took Kylo approximately one whole minute to come to terms with all that she'd divulged. It took another minute for him to put two and two together with the startling clarity that was a product of sheer emotional exhaustion— if that ridiculous grimace had been her idea of flirting, that meant she hadn't been using Hapan wiles on him after all, no matter what Snoke tried to convince him of.

That meant—

*It had all been real.*

The holoscreen blinked to life as Hux's communique came through. "Greetings, Emperor Ren," the general said imperiously. "I shall now proceed with the daily report— Your Majesty, where are you going—"

The only response was the door slamming shut behind Kylo as he rushed out of the communications bay.

*

Rey's *Chume'doro* kept a polite distance as she clomped along the waterline, kicking up spray and wet sand with her every step. The salt-stained wind dragged icy fingers over her form as she watched dark clouds spread out from the gray horizon, the surface of the Evernight speckling over with a
million goosebumps heading inexorably towards the small island.

"Your Grace," called Moreem, "we should head back inside before it pours—"

Rey turned back to the assembled guards, opening her mouth to tell them to go ahead, that she would be fine, but the words died on her tongue when she saw Kylo running towards her. The shifting sands made his frantic pace difficult but he charged through it with bullheaded determination, his pale face grim and resolute, and he reached her just as it began to drizzle.

"Now what do you want?" Rey grumped.

The gale blew strands of Kylo's dark hair across his forehead as he bent down. The tide rolled in as he pulled her to him by the waist and crushed his lips to hers, lightning streaking the sky in a flash of blinding white and midnight-hued waves crashing against the shore.

"Are... are you seeing this?"

High up on one of the terraces, Boethiah glanced over to Hircine at his disbelieving question and then followed his line of sight. Down below, on the beach, the royal couple was locked in a passionate kiss, Kylo's black cape rippling in the wind and Rey's arms wrapped around his neck.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Boethiah mused, "but I think things just got even more complicated."

Hircine let out a low whistle. "Kriff."

"Yeah," Boethiah agreed. "Kriff is right."

Chapter End Notes

I can't provide wiki references atm because I have to get ready for work, but Rey's pink gown in the first half of the chapter is based on this Rami Kadi linked to me by
ivycrowne, and all credit to datswatutink for the long-ago comment that inspired the "What’s wrong with your face" scene!
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

There's been so much interesting discussion surrounding the last chapter that I truly regret that I don't have time to engage with everyone. My schedule these days makes it so that I can either reply to comments or work on this fic. However, please rest assured that I see all your reviews and I very much appreciate the different perspectives that have been brought forth.

Regarding Rey's actions in particular, I'm seeing some pushback that, while understandable, urges me to issue a gentle reminder that this is currently not the Rey we saw in TLJ. She is simply not there yet in terms of her character development. As stated in the text, I'm working with a backstory of her having spent considerably more than a smattering of days with the Resistance and with Luke, and I believe that her ties to them would run very deep under these circumstances. As for Kylo, he is still very much a figurehead of a cruel regime with blood on his hands, and, unlike us, Rey is not privy to his inner thought processes. There is also no Force bond as of now, the Force bond that was instrumental in getting them to know and understand each other on a deeper level. I'm also seeing some comments that she was using tears to manipulate him in Chapter 29, and perhaps it's my fault for not making it clear enough in the narrative but let me just state, for the record, that Rey was crying for real, because she did not want to lie to him. I will endeavor to be plainer in my meaning in future installments.

However, this doesn't mean that I want everyone to blindly agree with where I'm going in terms of characterization! On the contrary, reading the contrasting viewpoints has opened my eyes to issues and nuances I wasn't aware of, and I will definitely be incorporating what I've learned from your comments into the narrative. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts!

Big shoutout to kayurka, thebrightest-starfell, do-reylo-mi-fa-so, and aprillka for the lovely art and edits, and to ntantzen for helping me determine the correct tone for this new chapter.

Finally, please mind the change in rating. I hope you enjoy this update, ya filthy animals ; ) Reviews will motivate me to post the next one quicker teehee <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Very few things in Rey's life had ever been as lovely as this moment, Kylo's bear hug of an embrace keeping out the worst of the wind, his mouth so warm slanted over hers, the surf and her heartbeat pounding in her ears. At some point during the last few seconds she'd looped her arms around his neck, clinging to him for dear life else the world spin away from underneath the soles of her worn boots. She deepened the kiss and he rumbled a sound of approval, low in the back of his throat, the gloved fingers of his right hand tracing the spur of her hip in a slow caress.

What is this? Rey found herself thinking, in that tiny corner of her mind that was still capable of rational thought. Why does it feel different from before? This kiss was neither angry nor tentative.
There was passion, yes, but there was also tenderness, there was also something that Kylo was trying to tell her with his lips and his tongue and his hands— something that her own body echoed back to him even though it took her a while to put it into words.

*I'm sorry.*

*I need you.*

*Let's forget everything else for now.*

Rey was certain they would have stayed like that forever had the rain not started pouring in earnest. A loud clap of thunder heralded the deluge that cascaded from the gray sky in heavy sheets, and she untangled herself from her husband with a breathless sound that was somewhere between a shriek and a laugh, water dripping into her eyes and the spray from the turbulent waves pounding into her side. She glimpsed a faint trace of genuine amusement on Kylo's face before he lifted his cape over her head, shielding her from the rain and, temporarily, from view. Out of sight of her scandalized guards, he bent down once more to mouth at the slope of her neck while she ran her fingers through his hair, the blood in her veins wild like the thunder, caught up in the giddy delight of it all.

By the time they made it back to the castle, they were both soaking wet, dripping rainwater onto the burgundy carpeting of the stone foyer. Rey barely had enough presence of mind to order the equally drenched Chume'doro to dry off and take it easy for the rest of the afternoon before Kylo hauled her into the turbolift, wasting no time in kissing her again once the doors had slid shut.

They didn't talk. Not as they stumbled into their bedroom still intertwined and he shrugged off his cape, not as he dotted the round of her shoulder with nibbling little kisses as they perched on the edge of the bed and she removed her sand-crusted boots with shaking hands. They didn't speak at all, even though she stifled another laugh against his lips when he kissed her through the process of impatiently struggling with his own shoes, lurching off-balance every so often so that she had to be the one to hold him up, steadying him by the shoulders so that they wouldn't topple off the edge of the mattress in a clumsy heap. They didn't utter a single word to each other, not while she tugged off his gloves with an imploring expression and he let her, not while his bare hands roamed over her slight curves and set all her nerve endings aglow. This fragile thing between them always shattered anew every time either of them spoke. Better to not say anything at all. Better to just feel.

The storm lashed at the exterior walls of the Reef Fortress, creating a sonorous melody of raindrops pattering on wind-carved basalt. The glow-panels in the bedroom had been switched off but the curtains were wide open, and the meager daylight that spilled in through the glass doors was soft and pale, veiling the angles of Kylo's face in silver as Rey gently pushed him back onto the bed, straddling his hips and kissing him for all they were both worth. She quite liked being on top, with his large hands greedily exploring her figure— running over her spine, crumpling the fabric at her
waist, stroking her thighs, cupping her bottom— while she practiced *this kissing thing* with a
concentrated enthusiasm that she usually reserved for learning new fighting techniques. If the
increased urgency of his caresses was any indication, he liked it when she dragged her tongue
alongside his, and when she took the plush swell of his bottom lip between her teeth. It was when
she gave an experimental little suck that his hand suddenly curved down her backside, the tips of his
long fingers grazing the damp spot between her clothed legs— a dampness that had absolutely
nothing to do with the rain they’d gotten caught in.

Rey squirmed, chasing the light friction, the sparks at each point of contact. She didn’t know exactly
when her hands started moving of their own accord but, soon enough, she’d unfastened Kylo’s belt
as well as hers, in service to a primal instinct that clamored for *closer, more*. She and Kylo worked
together, fumbling, grasping, to lift his tunic over his arms and head, a process impeded by the fact
that they were loath to stop exploring each other’s mouths. Once he was shirtless, he peered up at her
through hooded eyes in something like challenge and, although Rey was never one to back down,
she had no clue where to begin. There was just *so much* of him bared beneath her, his ivory skin a
fine contrast to the wine-colored sheets.

Eventually, she decided that the scar she’d given him was as good a place to start as any. Lightning
flashed through the glass in splinters of brilliant white as Rey lowered her lips to where the thin,
jagged line started on Kylo’s brow. She felt him close his eyes, his lashes fluttering against her face,
his hand squeezing her bottom in a gesture that seemed more affectionate than lewd. Encouraged,
she traced the scar down to his cheek and his jaw and the side of his neck, and he sighed when she
got to his collarbone, the fingers of his other hand stirring ever so slightly between her thighs in a
way that drove her crazy, that spurred her on. Another brilliant idea occurred to her, and soon she
was embarking on the rather *delightful* journey of marking him up, biting and sucking and soothing
the sting with her tongue. It wasn’t long before Kylo was gasping, was bucking up against her, was
burying his fingers in her hair and *pulling* almost tightly enough to hurt.

By the time Rey surfaced, her back aching at having been kept in a hunched position for a good
several minutes, Kylo’s neck, clavicles, and chest were littered in lovebites, mottled red bruises that
stood out like crushed rose petals against the paleness of his flesh. He was gazing up at her with such
sheer hunger that he looked like a man possessed, and *she* didn’t feel entirely like herself, either.
There was a wicked wind blowing into this room, through the current of the Force, matching the
intensity of the gale outside.

Rey stared into Kylo’s eyes as she slowly shed her tunic. She saw him swallow, saw the deliberate
bob down the column of his bruised throat, before her vision was obscured by the fabric going over
her head. And then it sailed to the floor, and his fingers crept up her exposed ribs, leaving a trail of
goosebumps in their wake, stilling once they reached the edge of her breastband.

"Take this off, *Chume’da,*" Kylo whispered, his voice hoarse.
Rey should have bristled at being ordered around by the likes of him.

She shivered instead.

Kylo watched with hawk-like eyes as Rey unwound the band that covered her chest. Even though the plain, practical undergarment was a far cry from being conducive to seduction, seeing her take it off made every drop of blood in his veins rush south. He fought to maintain what little composure he had left but, when the band joined her tunic on the floor and he—Maker, at last—had an unobstructed view of her breasts, it was all he could do to not come in his pants right then and there.

His wife had the loveliest breasts in the galaxy. Small and shapely and, to his never-ending delight, dusted with freckles here and there. He could have stared at them for hours and perhaps he would have, with his mouth hanging open, had Rey not started to cross her arms in front of her chest, a nervous intake of breath parting her lips.

"No," Kylo said hurriedly, all dignity forgotten because he was going to die from pure anguish if he couldn't look anymore, "don't—" He caught her wrists and dragged her hands back to her sides, his gaze zeroing in once more on those breasts that had haunted his fantasies for so long. Even in the dim light, he could see that her rosy nipples were hard—perhaps from the cold air, perhaps from the need to be touched.

Figuring that he might as well cover all his bases, Kylo blew into his palms and then rubbed them together to create more heat. Rey gasped out loud when he cupped her breasts, a tremor running through her slim frame as if she couldn't make up her mind whether to jerk away or to strain further into his touch. She mercifully decided on the latter, and he tried to be gentle at first, of course he did, but he'd never touched a sexual partner's breasts with ungloved hands before and it was just so—

—fascinating. The suppleness of her skin, the smooth swell, the way her nipples stiffened in response when he stroked the pad of his thumb over them. Rey fell forward with a sharp cry, bracing her arms against the headboard for support. This brought her breasts mere inches from his mouth, and Kylo was suddenly struck by the most brilliant damned idea of his life.

Sitting up as best as he could, he took her right nipple between his lips. Ooh, how she jumped at that, how her fingers twisted into his hair as he sucked. This was the most amazing thing, the only thing, using his mouth to elicit such startled mewls of pleasure from his wife. He should have known, however, that Rey wasn't the type to stay passive for long—she yanked his hand to her neglected left breast, and he was all too happy to comply with her unspoken demand, rolling the tight bead of
her nipple between forefinger and thumb while he laved at its twin with the flat of his tongue. Her
cries grew louder, the husky scrape of her voice forming the shape of his long-dead name as she
rocked against him while the storm raged all around them, sound and fury piercing through stone and
glass.

By the time both breasts were flushed and wet from his ministrations, Kylo couldn't take it anymore.
Rey squeaked as he flipped her onto her back, as he caged her between the mattress and his body,
hiding his face in the junction of her neck and shoulder while he struggled with peeling her leggings
down her thighs.

"Didn't think you felt the same," he babbled in a ragged tone, "thought it was all an act—"

She went rigid beneath him. Just as he began to fear that he'd once again ruined everything by the
simple act of talking— as he was so very wont to do— her arms closed around his shoulders.
"Whatever happens," she whispered into his hair, "know that, here and now, I feel it, too."

Rey was well aware that she was digging a deeper and deeper hole for herself with every moment
that passed. With each kiss, with each touch, her mind screamed that she was using him, that there
were some things that would always be unforgivable in whatever light. But her body could not be
swayed from responding to him, the haze of desire clouding all rationality, all logic.

And it wasn't just desire. Unfolding in Rey was a yearning that had always been lodged deep in her
soul and was now being coaxed forth by her husband's lips, his hands, and the look in his eyes. It
was a yearning for reprieve from her loneliness, for the sense of belonging she had lost the day
Coruscant fell and never quite managed to regain in the viperous Hapan court. It sang through the
Force, it blossomed like golden flowers beneath the surface of her skin, it rendered her powerless to
stop the tidal wave of each overwhelming sensation that cut through her entire being from some
distant shore.

Kylo kissed her again, a dizzying, open-mouthed kiss, his hand sliding between her thighs— bare
now that he'd pulled her leggings down to her ankles. Her eyes fluttered shut.

*Let me have this.*

His fingers skimmed along the damp crotch of her panties, a light, tentative touch, before gently
tracing the outline of her swollen clit through the fabric. A sob caught in her throat.

*Just for a while...*

He teased her for what seemed like ages. No matter how she squirmed, no matter how hard she kissed him back, he never let his fingers dip below her soaked underwear. She recalled the morning he’d rutted against her from behind, of how he’d held her by the throat and commanded her to *say it*, to tell him what she wanted. She thought of the boy he’d been, the sort of childhood he’d had, and her heart clenched at how he was still looking for tangible assurance, for some concrete and undeniable form of affirmation, even in this.

"Need you," Rey murmured into Kylo's mouth.

It was the signal he'd been waiting for. He shoved her panties to the side and glided his fingers along her slickness, up and down and— "Oh, stars," she moaned, completely taken aback by how *exquisite* it felt to be touched down there by someone else, "fuck—"

The corner of his lips curved against hers in a smirk. "That's the idea."

Her eyes flew open, and she pulled away to glare at him. "You just couldn't stop yourself, could you?"

"Not at all," Kylo agreed, blissfully unrepentant, before swooping in to nibble at her throat at the same time that he pushed a long, thick finger inside her.

Rey's spine arched off the mattress. Another strong gust of wind sent a curtain of heavy rain thudding on the glass doors, the racket echoing the jagged drum that her heart had become as it beat frantically, in near-perfect sync with how she throbbed and ached for him. She clawed at his bicep while he kissed his way down to her breast, his hot mouth latching on to her nipple once more as his finger slid and prodded and *curled."

She was so focused on the circuit of pleasure afforded by Kylo lavishing attention on two different parts of her body that, when he added a second finger, she didn't notice until he started to thrust. But how she loved it, how her hips canted to meet his wrist, how her palm pushed at his nape to encourage him to take more of her breast into his mouth and—
"Ouch!" Rey yelped. Kylo had wiggled his fingers perhaps a bit too ambitiously within her walls, the jolt of pain similar to that of a pinched nerve.

He raised his head from her chest, his expression a muddle of horror, shock, and contrition in the gray half-light. "Sorry," he muttered, color flooding his pale cheeks. He kind of looked like he was going to cry, and Rey almost laughed at that. It was so endearing—and, if anything, it was a comfort to know that he was just as untutored in this as she was.

To show him that no harm had been done, she settled back against the pillows and held his sullen gaze as she wrapped her fingers around his wrist. Her hand moved with his, and together they worked out the rhythm she liked. He was studying her face now, so serious and intent, as if using the parting of her mouth and the fluttering of her lashes and the scrunching of her nose as a gauge to determine whether he was doing it right. Before long, her pleasure had mounted again like it had never been interrupted in the first place, and her hand fell to the sheets, scrabbling and raking at the silken material while he brought her higher and higher.

"Ben," she grated out, with the last bit of coherence left in her system, "kiss me."

And he did. He slipped his tongue between her lips and rolled it under the roof of her mouth as his fingers crooked inside her just right, his thumb rubbing at her sensitive bundle of nerves until she careened off the edge, every single thing about this moment disintegrating into shards of white heat. Her thrusting hips strained and stillled as the long, glorious spasm of release unfurled from her core to consume her entire body in wave upon wave of orgasmic sensation, and he kissed her through it all, eagerly swallowing her hitched breaths, her drawn-out cries.

_I'm never going to be the same_, Rey thought, an errant tear streaming down her cheek as she gasped and shuddered and writhed beneath Kylo. _I will always remember this. Just him and me and the storm._

He switched to pressing languorous kisses to her neck as she came down, withdrawing his hand from her and wiping it off on the already damp sheets. Stars, they were going to have to change the sheets—Rey blushed at this epiphany once she'd recovered a semblance of normal brain function but, aside from that, it was so difficult to care. Now that her climax had melted away the tension she'd been carrying, she was hit hard by last night's sleeplessness, rendered drowsy by her afterglow. She yawned, and Kylo looked up, blinking at her owlishly in the faint illumination. After a while, the line of his mouth softened and he rearranged her boneless body in his arms, shifting her onto her side and curling his broad frame around her so that her back was tucked neatly against his chest as he wrapped her midsection in a loose grip.
"What about you?" Rey asked groggily, her eyelids already drifting shut. She could feel his unsatisfied arousal poking into her scantily-clad rear.

"Later," Kylo said, the word muffled into her shoulder-blade.

That didn't seem fair at all. She stirred, trying to turn around and face him, but he held her in place. "We've got time," he promised. "Rest."

Cocooned in his arms, she finally succumbed to a contented sort of exhaustion, letting the sound of the rain lull her to sleep.

* 

As it turned out, they did not have time, and by early evening Kylo was sorely regretting his *magnanimous*— for lack of a better word— decision to postpone his orgasm.

He and Rey had managed to sleep in for all of three standard hours before her datapad started blaring with messages regarding last-minute concerns for tomorrow's masquerade. Right as he was about to implore her to turn the blasted thing off, the intercom in their suite had crackled to life, Zan the steward announcing Moliere's arrival with Kylo's finished ensemble.

Rey had hurriedly extricated herself from Kylo, changed into one of her gowns, and left him with another stern reminder to be nice to the tailor. That was the last he saw of her for a good, long while. After the meeting with Moliere— during which Kylo did, in fact, fail spectacularly at being nice— he had to attend to the spate of communiques that had been cut short when he ran down to the beach. The holograms of various sector governors and high-ranking officers issued their reports and requested his approval on minor administrative processes, and all the while Kylo could only think of his wife.

Of the sounds she'd made. Of how tight she'd been.

He emerged from the communications bay with an hour to go before dinner and immediately went off in search of Rey. Her shields were lowered just the slightest bit and he was able to trace the imprint of her Force signature to a northern area of the castle; from there, a servant dusting the balustrade informed him that the *Chume'da* was in the library one floor above.
Kylo took the stairs two steps at a time. He was halfway up when he abruptly stumbled, almost losing his footing— the inside of his head reeled with another summons from Snoke. Cold, dark fingers reached for him from the Unknown Regions— and were thrown off before they could take hold. By something.

By someone?

Kylo glanced around even though he knew it was a foolish, futile act. Of course there wasn't anyone with him at this exact moment. But he'd felt it before, this... aura. It had been there when Snoke punished him on the night of Rey's coronation, creating a safe space that had allowed his mind to escape from the torture intact. Strange and familiar all at once.

An uneasy chill went through him. He hastened his pace up the stairs, focusing solely on the warm glow of Rey's Force signature. This mystery could wait. His master could wait. Everything else could wait.

*\*\*

Alqualonde's library was a treasure trove of ancient tomes, beautifully bound and inscribed, arranged with precision on the towering wooden shelves that lined the walls. To minimize the effects of time and wear on the manuscripts, the artificial lighting here was soft and muted, the air climate-controlled. Kylo would normally have paused to take in the grandeur of the place— the sense of history that hung over the rows and rows of books. However, Rey looked up as soon as he walked in and, as usual, the rest of the world fell away.

She'd left the bedroom in such a rush earlier that he hadn't been able to appreciate the gown she was wearing, but he more than made up for it now. It was a long-sleeved, form-fitting assemblage of opalescent silk and white-gold brocade, with cutout sides that exposed the willowy curves of her torso, tantalizing stretches of bare skin that he longed to press his fingers to as soon as possible. The neckline was revealing as well, dipping almost to her navel, the sides of her breasts peeking out at him.

Kylo promptly cast all his grievances with Moliere aside— for now— and thanked the benevolent universe for the gift of Hapan fashion.

"Finished with your work?" Rey inquired, returning the book she'd been reading to its shelf.
Kylo nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak just yet. He made his way towards her, and something gleamed in her lovely hazel eyes— something that looked like his own heightened anticipation, reflected back at him.

"What about you?" His voice came out too low for such harmless small talk, and talking was indeed the absolute last thing he wanted to be doing right now, but the sense of propriety that had been drilled into him from an early age insisted that one did not simply jump their spouse in a library.

"The Chume'da's work is never done," Rey dryly replied. "I had to take a break before I started yelling at Zan."

"The steward is infinitely yellable," Kylo agreed.

"Yellable?" Rey snorted. "Not your most eloquent insult, I'm afraid."

She was within arm's reach now. "Loth-cat got my tongue," he all but rasped, reaching out to finally, finally trail his fingers down her uncovered midriff.

Rey's lashes fluttered against the tops of her cheeks. She tilted her chin upwards, pink lips shaped to receive his kiss. It was a sudden burst of mischief that prompted Kylo to go straight for her neck instead, nipping at the sensitive spot below her ear. She giggled in both surprise and delight, and the sweet, unexpectedly sultry sound almost made him smile to himself as he worked his way down. He longed to use his teeth but he didn't think she'd appreciate having to go through the effort of healing each and every lovebite— unlike the high collar of his tunic that hid the marks she'd inflicted on him earlier, her gown left little room for subterfuge.

Rey's breathing grew unsteady as Kylo lavished the valley between her delectable breasts with feather-light kisses. Her fingers twisted into his hair while his own hands tightened around her waist. Despite the climate-controlled environment, the air had become very warm, the wild roses of Rey's perfume drowning out the scents of parchment and ink and vellum...

It occurred to Kylo that there was a faraway noise like a hiss, as if the library doors had slid open, but it failed to penetrate the desire clouding his senses. His mind, whittled down to nothing but the basest of instincts, instantly dismissed it as unworthy of concern while he kissed his way to the side of his wife's left breast.
A throat was cleared. Rather loudly.

The couple froze, their gazes whipping to the library entrance. Prince Isolder was standing there, arms crossed, a thunderous expression on his face.

Kylo Ren, Emperor of the First Order, saw his life flash before his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Last scene was greatly inspired by this kayurka piece xD
Ch​apter 31

Chapter Notes

Much love to cloisismyfaireytale for another great moodboard and mrvioletwrites for the pretty art!

A note on terminology: I've been thinking long and hard (hehehe) about this, with some input from folks on Tumblr and Twitter, and I've decided that, because there is in-universe precedent for modern-day slang and because euphemisms can get unwieldy with too much usage, I won't shy away from certain explicit terms for genitals. If this is the sort of thing that bothers you or takes you out of a story, think of it this way: The characters are not speaking or thinking in English, although we are reading about them in that language and, as such, their words need to be translated into terms that we can grasp. If that still doesn't fly with you, sorry! I promise I'll try my best not to overdo it xD

Next chapter will be the masquerade, so it's not too late to send me your ideas for costumes. In the meantime, this update is dedicated to NivMizzet in the hopes that it can make her smile.

Lastly, Happy Star Wars Day, dear readers! Thank you for everything. May the Fourth be with you. ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey had always prided herself on being a capable individual. Her quick thinking and resourcefulness had saved her life countless times on Jakku and in the battlefield. There had never been an emergency that she hadn't swiftly dealt with using her wits, her gumption, and her ability to seamlessly adapt to a rapid change in circumstance.

Currently, however, she was drawing a blank on how to handle this—caught in the act, or the prelude to the act, anyway, all wrapped up in her husband's arms with his mouth hovering between her breasts while her father postured in the doorway, features contorted in wrath.

How long had Isolder been standing there? How much had he seen?

Rey and Kylo came to their senses at the same time, springing apart a good several inches from each other and very emphatically placing their hands at their sides to show that they were, in fact, not touching. His hair was hopelessly mussed, however, and the fragile silk of her gown was crushed in the spots he had held on to, so it was a bit of a lost cause.

After what felt like an eternity, Isolder relaxed. He offered the couple an elaborate, courtly bow, and
then straightened up with a polite smile as he walked over to them. "Dearest," he said to Rey, holding out his arm, "I sent word that I would be staying here overnight for the masquerade but, as I seem to have caught you unawares, I assume my message was lost in transmission."

"It's probably in my queue," Rey admitted guiltily, slipping her hand into the crook of his elbow out of habit.

"Ah, well, no harm done," Isolder said cheerfully. "Shall we proceed to dinner?"

"Um—" Rey glanced back at Kylo, whose eyes were as wide as the plates they were going to be eating out of. "Sure?"

Kylo remained where he was, rooted to the spot, as Isolder escorted Rey out of the library, but this changed when the Hapan prince boomed, "After all, there is no reason the three of us can't enjoy a nice meal," which sent the Emperor trailing after them.

Rey was uncertain as to whether her father was still mad or not. He maintained a neutrally amiable expression on the way to the dining room, chatting about recent developments in Ta'a Chume'Dan. When she reached out with the Force, he seemed calm on the surface, and she didn't prod any further because that would be an invasion of his privacy.

Mitaka and the ladies-in-waiting were already seated at the table, although they stood up and bobbed their respective bow and curtsies when the three royals arrived. Once everyone had settled down again, the attentive staff immediately began serving the first course.

"We had no idea where you and His Majesty had gone, Chume'da," Sayl piped up. "I'm glad Prince Isolder found you without incident."

Rey's spoon clattered against her soup bowl. On the opposite end of the table, Kylo appeared to choke on a sip of lemon water, hastily setting the glass down and dabbing at the errant wetness on his chin with a napkin.

"They were in the library," Isolder replied, a pleasant smile fixed on his face. "I spent many hours there as a boy, myself. Quite the compendium of knowledge. I would venture to say that it is a sacred space, with many old and fragile manuscripts."
Sayl blinked, appearing confused by the pointed emphasis of Isolder's little speech, but Vanya came to her rescue. "Yes, the staff here at Alqualonde has done an excellent job in keeping the place well-maintained. I love the library."

"As do Their Majesties, from what I've seen," said Isolder.

Before Rey could contemplate using the aforementioned spoon to dig a hole into the floor where she could burrow down and never emerge again, Esli turned to her. "What were you reading today, Your Grace?"

Rey panicked at first. She couldn't, for the life of her, remember what book she'd been holding before Kylo entered and started going to town on her breasts, but the title finally flashed through her mind's eye. "Sonnets, my lady. I hadn't encountered poetry before returning to the Hapes Cluster. It's... interesting."

Esli looked at Kylo in an effort to include him in what, from her end, was merely social chitchat. "And as for yourself, Your Majesty?" She was just doing her job, of course, there was no way the poor girl could have known, and so she understandably shrunk back when Kylo's features arranged themselves into a defensive scowl.

"Oh, Emperor Ren was helping himself to a treatise on the members of the Royal House," Isolder airily replied. "I'm sure he found it very edifying."

From there, the conversation shifted to other matters, much to Rey's relief. Kylo still looked vaguely shell-shocked all throughout the meal, as if bracing for the worst. But the worst never came—for him, at least. Instead, once the last of the plates had been cleared and it was time to retire, Isolder turned to Rey and asked if they could have a moment alone. She had to fight every instinct in her body to refrain from mouthing Save me at Kylo as she and her father proceeded to the salon.

"Rey," Isolder said once they were in private, studying her with concerned blue eyes. He opened his mouth to continue, but then visibly deflated, his pale brow wrinkling while he pondered how best to approach the issue.

Rey said nothing, although she, for some reason, found her chin tilting up in defiance. She didn't know how to process this feeling of wanting to defend her choices but also being afraid that she'd
disappointed him in some way. Perhaps that was something only people who had grown up with their parents could understand.

"This entire situation has been... difficult," Isolder finally confessed. They were standing by the hearth, and he fiddled with the intricate carvings on the mantelpiece as he spoke. "Not just the alliance with the First Order, but everything else in general. For fifteen long years, you were a child in my memory. Tiny and precocious and energetic and so quick to throw tantrums. Did you know that you didn't like being hugged?"

"What?" Rey was so startled that she let out a disbelieving laugh. "I didn't?"

"You hated it," Isolder said ruefully. "You kicked us away whenever we tried to cuddle you— me and Teneniel, I mean."

"I wouldn't have," she told him, her voice oddly thick, "if I'd known what was going to happen." I would have held every touch, every moment, to my heart.

He smiled, reaching out to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. She had a vague recollection of someone else doing this, someone with more slender fingers and eyes like hers. "What matters is that you're here now. And that's the thing, you see. You came back into my life full-grown, so strong and confident and self-assured. I remember when you demanded that Ta'a Chume listen to you on the Star Home. A twenty-one-year-old in soot-stained, ragged attire, facing down the Queen Mother of the Hapes Consortium... I was so proud of you then, and that pride only increased as the months passed and you met every new challenge head-on. You are very brave, my daughter, and yet also very hardened by the life you led before we met again. That's why I have no desire to begrudge you whatever happiness is within your reach, but..." He sighed. "With this recent development in what is already a precarious state of affairs, I'm not convinced you completely know what you're doing."

"I don't," Rey whispered. He had given her his honesty and so he deserved hers. "All I know is how I feel."

Isolder grimaced, as if this was precisely what he'd been afraid of, and she hastened to reassure him. "But it's not—I mean, I don't—it's pure and simple attraction, B— Kylo and I have already talked about that—"

"Well, that's a relief," Isolder said faintly, "that's what every father wants to hear—"
Rey's lips pursed. "What I'm trying to say is that it's not something that will cloud my judgment. When the— when the time comes."

"Ah." All trace of sarcasm left Isolder's tone. "Now that is something Ta'a Chume would want to hear. And at this early stage I can't figure out if that's good or bad." He regarded her in somber silence for a while, and then shook his head. "For now, I can only hope that you'll tread carefully—and that you won't forget I'm always on your side."

Rey swallowed the lump that formed in her throat at his promise. "Thank you." And then she added Atta, which was the Hapan word for father, and Isolder folded her into his arms. She thought he might have sniffled a bit, and her lips curved in an amused, bittersweet smile. Her propensity for the waterworks appeared to be a genetic inheritance.

"I apologize for being furious earlier," he said when they drew apart. "We missed out on a lot of things, and that includes me attempting to scare off your suitors."

"He's already my husband," Rey pointed out, rolling her eyes. "Besides, he's not the kind of man who scares easy."

"I know," said Isolder. "That's why I worry about you."

*

Kylo was on his side of the bed when Rey entered their room, leaning against the mountain of pillows piled at the headboard and squinting down at the book on his lap. A tiny shiver of delight went through her at the sight of him clad only in loose sleep pants, his sculpted torso flecked with the lovebites she'd inflicted earlier.

He lifted his head at her arrival, his dark eyes containing a hint of wariness. Rey plopped down beside him, her legs hanging off the edge of the bed, and he automatically shifted to grant her more space.

They regarded each other in silence until she could no longer resist the temptation to trace the path of the marks she'd made. He flinched a little but otherwise let her fingers wander along the dip between his neck and collarbones, all the way down to the hard planes of his chest. His bare skin was smooth and nearly hot to the touch, marked up in several places by her teeth—perhaps she liked that more than she should.
"I assume your father now has a price on my head," Kylo drawled. He sounded unaffected, even bored, but that illusion was dispelled when an anxious nerve twitched under his left eye.

Rey leaned forward and pressed a kiss to that spot. The hollow under the eye was probably a weird place to kiss someone but Kylo didn't seem to mind, judging from the way he immediately cradled the side of her face in one large hand, stroking her cheek with the pad of his thumb. "If there is, the only one who'll be collecting is me," she murmured.

"I find that I don't doubt it." He set the book down on the nightstand with his free hand and, her gaze drawn by the movement, she belatedly noticed the familiar red cover, embossed in handsome gold script. It was the same collection of sonnets that she'd been perusing earlier.

"Do you like them?" she asked.

"Very much so," he replied in an absentminded tone of voice, staring at the deep neckline of her gown.

Rey turned positively crimson. "I meant the sonnets, you ass!"

"Oh." Kylo flashed her another one of his awkward, tremulous smirks. "The sonnets are all right."

She gaped at him in disbelief. "Are you—" Surely not, it was too outlandish a concept— "are you teasing me?"

She wasn't prepared for what he did next. One hand still cradling her cheek, he gathered her close by wrapping his other arm around her waist, hiding his face in the slope of her neck. "Evidently, I'm not doing a very good job," he mumbled with a hint of embarrassment.

Rey did not have the words for what her heart did next. It felt like the beating thing in her chest swooped down to her stomach and then rose back into place on swirls of light, turning her all shivery from the inside, spreading outwards, in response to this rare, fleeting show of wry yet boyish vulnerability from such a powerfully-built, perennially brooding giant of a man. She didn't know what to do or say, and so she tipped Kylo's chin up and kissed him because that had so far proven to be, if not the wisest course of action, then the one that produced the most desirable results.
He returned her kiss eagerly, and soon she was boneless again in his arms.

The private tower room in the cantina on Telkur Station existed to be rented out to the highest bidder on a nightly basis. Cloaked in shadow, bathed only by the emerald glow of the Transitory Mists that could be seen dancing beyond the viewport, it was usually a place for the conduct of secret assignations or illicit deals.

Tonight's renters, however, filtered into the room in small groups until it was at capacity. They were all wearing hoods to conceal their features from prying eyes and they all conversed in Basic— albeit some more haltingly, in heavy accents. The green cosmic haze, which was never static, flickered and pulsed over bejeweled rings and badges carved into certain insignias— a rose, a spider, and a sixteen-rayed sun, to name a few. Most predominant was a silver caltrop etched on a white field, the likes of which had not been seen in the Hapes Cluster for more than fifteen years but was still capable of garnering sympathy— and allegiance— in the right places.

As the emerald-black night wore on, information was exchanged and plans were finalized. Near the end of the meeting, a cold, imperious voice asked, "You are certain your operatives can handle them?"

It was a woman who replied. "No weapons are allowed in the presence of the Queen Mother so they'll be unarmed, with their respective security details posted outside the ballroom, and we've seen for ourselves how helpless they are in the thrall of the ysalamiri. I'm not saying it will be easy, but the odds are stacked in our favor."

The first speaker frowned. "Everything needs to go perfectly. We'll never get a chance like this again."

"You don't need to tell me twice, boy." The woman's tone dripped with icy contempt. "I assure you, we've been waiting for this opportunity for a very long time. We won't let it go to waste."

"I foresee another possible complication," ventured an older male figure. "We might need to ensure that they are far apart when we strike. No sense risking them teaming up."

"What can they accomplish even together, without their precious Force?" sneered another figure. "In any case, that's extremely far-fetched— those of us who fought with him during the war, we all know how much he loathes her. If you really think about it, we're actually doing him a favor."  He
paused. "Well, before we get rid of him, anyway."

After another round of discussion, the conspirators began trickling out of the room and went on to leave Telkur Station as discreetly as they had arrived. No sooner had their last shuttle departed the hangar, however, when one of the remaining docked ships hummed to life as a figure of diminutive height, disguised in bounty hunter's apparel, sprinted up its ramp.

"Well?" Finn demanded from the pilot seat as he sped through the preflight checks. "Did it work?"

" Barely." The figure tugged off her helmet, a mussed curtain of shiny black hair spilling down her round shoulders. "I couldn't get the bug close enough to hear everything without tripping off their scanning devices, and there was a ton of interference. It's confirmed, though, that they're making their move tomorrow night at the masquerade."

"I hate it when Aleson's right," Finn muttered.

"Oh, come on." A dreamy look softened his companion's olive-toned features. "He isn't so bad."

Finn groaned. "Not you, too, Rose!"

Rose Tico sniggered, but she and Finn were quick to return to more serious matters as their ship coasted out of the hangar and made the jump. "We have to warn Rey," he declared, his eyes fixed solemnly on the starlines. "Aleson's going to the masquerade to tell her that Venomfang's been compromised, but he doesn't know about this latest development. Is there any way we can reach him?"

"Not unless he randomly decides to drop by the Corsair Outback for a quick chat before the event," said Rose. She mulled it over and, after a while, her expression cleared. Became resolute. "We could always just tell Rey ourselves."

Finn blinked. Before the retreat to Hapes had necessitated the various branches of the Resistance working together in closer quarters, he'd known Rose only in passing, and only as Paige's perpetually grumpy, perpetually grease-smudged little sister. It was the same for Rey, too, and he was surprised that Rose would willingly stick her neck out. But the more he thought about it, the more it made sense— Rey would always be Rey to him, first and foremost, but for other people she was the Resistance's best hope. And there was nothing either of the Tico sisters wouldn't do for the Resistance, in the same way that there was nothing Finn wouldn't do for Rey.
"Well," he said at last, "looks like we're going to a party."

Kylo and Rey broke apart for air, their labored gasps filling the bedroom. Think I've got this making out thing down pat, she couldn't help smugly congratulating herself as she took in his dazed, half-lidded eyes and wet, bruised lips. They'd ended up in the middle of the mattress, pillows haphazardly scattered everywhere and the sheets in disarray all around them. He was currently on top of her, his lean hips cradled between her thighs— bare now that he'd helped her shimmy out of the tight skirt. His pants were undone and she could not, for the life of her, remember if he'd taken care of it himself or if her own blindly grasping fingers had been the culprit.

What Rey did know was that Kylo had been the one to unfasten the front clasp that held her bodice together, ripping the tiny metal hook from its seams in his clumsy haste. Now, as he gave her a chance to catch her breath, he was palming her exposed breasts while nibbling at her throat and she was just— a mess, really, flushed and shivering all over, arching up into his touch—

He stopped.

Rey's eyes flew open. He couldn't stop, how dare—

But he had, and he was staring down at her with a vaguely uncomfortable expression on his face, as if he'd just remembered something.

"What is it?" she queried, reaching up to brush his thick dark hair away from his forehead.

"Your father—"

"— is absolutely the last person I want to discuss at this particular moment in time," Rey interrupted, aghast.

Kylo looked the most sullen she'd ever seen him. And that was saying something. "It doesn't strike me as..." He paused, brow furrowed as he searched for the right word. "Respectful," he finally supplied, "to do this with him under the same roof."
Rey shot a pointed glance down her body, where her breasts jutted out from the top that Kylo had practically ripped open. "I don't think it was ever going to be very respectful anyway, so—"

"You know what I mean."

"No," she said, "I don't."

She surged upwards, knocking him off-balance and straddling him once his back hit the mattress. She shrugged out of her top while he gazed at her as if she had turned into a million stars—and she felt like she had, too. She felt reckless and ethereal, all her shyness crumbling away in the rush of being the object of someone else's desire.

And speaking of desire...

Kylo was hard between her legs, his arousal tenting the seat of his loose pants. It was sheer, burning curiosity that demolished whatever shreds of reservation still lingered, and she scooted backwards down the solid musculature of his thighs so that she would have more room to examine... it.

*His cock, Rey,* she told herself firmly. Her time on Jakku had ensured that she was no stranger to such a crude term, and using it in ribald conversation in the past had never given her pause before, but this was different, somehow. It was different because it was him.

In all honesty, the raised triangle of fabric was a bit of a comical sight, but Rey was definitely *not* laughing when she tugged Kylo's waistband down his hips—gingerly, because his erection was of a considerable height and she didn't want to risk getting her eye poked out. *It's not going to fit,* was her first, most instinctive reaction, echoed by a throb from her core. He was long and thick and flushed nearly as pink as his sensual lips, with just the slightest hint of upward curve. The longer she stared, the dryer her mouth became, while certain other regions of her body did the exact opposite. How was it that she could find sparks of pleasure in the mere act of looking? How was it that she found this part of him as beautiful as the rest?

"Rey," Kylo gritted out, and her attention returned to his face. He looked like he was in pain.

"Does it hurt?" she wondered aloud.
"A little. May I..." He trailed off, one hand lifting from the sheets to gesture abashedly at his erection. He was asking for permission to touch it, to grant himself some relief without scaring her off. It was sweet, in an odd kind of way. Sweet like his good night kisses, sweet like how he'd put her to sleep earlier instead of taking care of his own needs. Rey suddenly wanted nothing more than to do something for him.

"I can handle it," she said, managing to cringe *only a little* at the unfortunate pun.

"You don't have to—"

Her fingers closed around him, and the rest of his sentence tapered off into a sharp intake of breath.

Rey knew what she was supposed to do *in theory*, but the act itself was hindered by her own nervousness, by her own need to explore every novel inch of him. His skin down here was soft and smooth to the touch, stretched thin over engorged blood vessels, the overall effect being rather like holding steel encased in silk. There was a generous amount of clear fluid leaking from his tip, and it was a burst of inspiration that made Rey run her thumb over the mess and spread as much of it as she could down his length. *Like greasing the axle*, the mechanics-inclined part of her brain supplied, much to her private inner horror.

She looked up once more at the sound of a groan tearing itself loose from Kylo's throat. She'd been so focused on her task that she'd failed to notice that he'd started panting more heavily, his fingers clawing at the sheets. His lust hung thick in the Force around them, his energy signature a jumbled, frantic haze. Biting her lip in determination, she wrapped her fist around his shaft and gave it an experimental pump—

He *jolted*, a full-body spasm that dislodged her from her perch astride his thighs. "Sorry," he gasped as she landed on the mattress with a sharp *oof*, "sorry— keep going—"

Rey glared as she knelt beside him. "Hold still."

Now that she was within arm's reach, his hand settled on the small of her naked back and she felt his satisfaction resound through the Force, as if he'd been aching to touch her all along. "I'll try," he said.

She resumed her ministrations, this time with both fists stacked on top of each other. He seemed to *enjoy* that, judging from the way his abdominal muscles contracted and his breathing hitched. It was amazing how responsive he was, how the slightest shift in pressure, the slightest variation in rhythm,
elicited appreciative, gravelly moans from him, his hips bucking up to meet her strokes as he twitched and swelled within the circle of her palms.

"R—Rey," he stuttered after a while and, oh, how she loved the sound of her name like that, all broken on his tongue, "let me kiss you— please—"

"I thought you didn't want to do anything," she said, projecting an aura of false innocence despite the growing wetness in her underwear, despite the fact that his precome was dripping all over her fingers. "Because, you know, it's not respectful—"

He pinched her. Kylo Ren, one of the most powerful darksiders in the galaxy, her former nemesis and now erstwhile political husband, reached down to pinch her butt.

Before Rey could do more than shriek in affronted surprise, before she could muster some form of retaliation— maybe she'd pinch his butt, see how he liked it— she was suddenly being tugged down onto the bed, the back of her head hitting the pillow as Kylo rose over her, all but devouring her mouth with sloppy, half-crazed kisses. She must have pushed him a little too far because there was nothing tender or reluctant in the way he grabbed her hand and wrapped it around his erection again; she happily obliged, letting herself be kissed senseless, letting his large hand guide hers in a mirror of how she'd taught him earlier this afternoon.

It didn't take long, not when he was already so on edge— a few fast, quick strokes, and his other hand was bunching up the pillowcase next to her head, his spine bowing as he grunted what sounded like her name against the corner of her mouth, thick ropes of something warm and wet dribbling through their entwined fingers, splashing onto her belly.

He collapsed on top of her, his weight pressing her into the mattress. Remembering how nice it had felt to be held after her orgasm a few hours ago, she draped her arm over his waist and peppered the wide slab of his shoulder with kisses, the fingers of her other hand carding through his sweat-slicked hair. He rumbled encouragingly as she did so, nuzzling at her jawline with languid affection.

*I made my husband come,* Rey thought with a glimmer of pride. Granted, said husband had helped her along, but, all in all, it wasn't bad for a first try.

Chapter End Notes

Telkur Station.
Our story has once more been blessed by art and edits from the talented kayurka,
lovenlu, dragon-and-his-wrath (who actually made a bunch because they're awesome),
and thebrightest-starfell.

So I'm flying to New Zealand on June 2 and I'll be there for a couple of weeks. My
friends and I are roadtripping all over the North and South Islands, so I doubt I'll have
time to work on this story, which means that there might not be an update the whole of
next month. To try to make up for this, I promise that I'll do my absolute best to post a
new chapter in the last week of May. It's going to be tight because I also have to work
on my story for the upcoming 2018 Reylo Fanfiction Anthology and submit it before I
leave. Please motivate me! ;)

Kylo awoke the next morning to golden sunlight and a fresh breeze pouring in through the open
balcony doors, his mind enveloped in that rare bubble of contentment that was only attainable after a
good night's sleep. He drowsily blinked up at the starry tapestries hung overhead as he felt around for
Rey. Much to his chagrin, he was alone in the massive bed, although the space beside him still
contained a trace of warmth and the lingering scent of cherries.

His pleasant mood dissipated when his brain kicked into gear and gradually started assembling a
clearer picture of what had happened the night before. The last thing he remembered was afterglow
— rolling off of Rey as he was overtaken by the sated exhaustion of a much-needed release, curling
his body around hers, pressing his lips to the spot between her shoulder-blades, and...

"Kriff." The curse exploded throughout the quiet room. He'd fallen asleep on her. Like some callous,
lumbering oaf, he'd taken what he wanted and then dozed off, leaving his wife unsatisfied.

What must she think of him?

Kylo shot out of bed, seized by the determination to make amends. Thankfully, he had enough
presence of mind to stop by the 'fresher to gargle away his morning breath and pat his hair into a
semblance of neatness before stumbling off to find Rey.

As luck would have it, she wasn't very far— the smell of panna cakes and the glow of her Force
signature summoned him as a beacon would to the royal suite's dining area, where she was eating
breakfast. Dressed in a flimsy lilac nightgown over which she'd shrugged on a matching robe, she
smiled at him as he hovered in the doorway. The morning light streaming in through the stained-glass windows veiled her in soft, jewel-toned radiance, and for a moment she looked like the angels of Iego, like everything that was too good and pure for him.

But there was nothing angelic about the mischievous twinkle in her hazel eyes when she asked, "Sleep well, my lord?"

Kylo wrinkled his nose at her, and her smile turned into a grin. She gestured to the chair across from hers in an invitation for him to sit down but, instead, he walked over to her and captured her lips in an ardent kiss, bracing his hands on the armrests of her seat for support. She sighed happily as she looped her satin-clad arms around his neck, her mouth tasting like syrup and butter, with a hint of the strawberries that garnished the heaps of panna cakes on the table. Kylo greedily chased the sweet combination of flavors with his tongue, pushing Rey back into her chair until it began to tilt off the floor under the added weight.

She was quick to recover, using the Force to right the chair’s legs as she gently disentangled herself from him with a breathless little laugh. "Eat up," she coaxed, waving her hand over the breakfast spread once more, and before he could quip that he was hungry for something else, she continued, "The masquerade's at eighteen hundred and you need to start getting ready three hours before. Taking into account our final briefing and dry run, we'll only have time for a light lunch later, so I suggest filling up now."

Kylo frowned as he telekinetically dragged over his assigned chair from the opposite end of the table so that he could sit beside Rey as they ate. "I don't require three hours to prepare for a ball."

"Be thankful— I, apparently, require four," Rey grumbled. "Moliere said three hours was the absolute minimum he needed to make you look presentable, so—"

"Moliere?" Kylo barked out, freezing in the act of pouring a cup of the wretched caf.

"Yes, he was most insistent on doing your hair and makeup himself, as well as making sure that his creation didn't get damaged in the process of you putting it on."

"My hair and makeup," he once again parroted, this time in a deadpan tone.

"Nothing too elaborate," Rey assured him. "It's just that— well— the Chume'da's consort is a reflection of the Chume'da herself. If your countenance tonight is anything less than... celebratory,
the court might view it as an insult to Hapes' time-honored customs."

"That's a pretty speech." Kylo wasn't annoyed with her, exactly—more with the prospect of having to be groomed by the likes of the insufferable tailor—but she happened to present a convenient target, because there was no one else around. "Is that you or your grandmother talking?"

Rey didn't say anything for a while. They picked at their food in silence, while Kylo wondered how things between them could have become so strained again after just a few minutes of conversation. Stars, maybe they shouldn't bother talking to each other at all, if this was where such an act would only ever lead.

"What if I said it was me?" she asked. "For many of these nobles, I'm not Hapan enough—aside from my mother being an outsider, I married one as well. As the first event I'm hosting, this masquerade is a chance for me to prove that I'm worthy of my title."

"Why should you go out of your way to impress them?" Kylo demanded. It gnawed at him to think of this strong, beautiful woman feeling unworthy of anyone or anything. "Whether they like it or not, you will be Queen Mother one day. And you're the Emperor's wife, which means you hold more power in your little finger than any of them could ever dream of accumulating in a lifetime."

"It's not about impressing anyone," Rey said hotly. "It's about being accepted by my people, it's about showing Ta'a Chume that I'm capable of fulfilling my responsibilities as her heir so maybe she can stop breathing down my neck for once—" She stopped, lips clamping together as she realized that she might have divulged too much about her own insecurities, her own fears.

Kylo was thrown for a loop. He knew this sentiment all too well, just as he had recognized the tremor in Rey's expression back when Ta'a Chume had reprimanded her for being late to that long-ago breakfast. The pressure to live up to a legacy, the constant striving towards the barest hint of approval... He was too familiar with all of it.

"I apologize," he said at last, while reflecting that Rey was the only person he ever apologized to and meant it. "I'm being a poor—" husband—"ally. Of course I will support you in this, in any way that I can." Despite his noble intentions, he couldn't help a slight grimace. "Even if it means letting Moliere paint my face."

Rey studied him as if assessing his sincerity, and then her smile was quick to return. "It won't be as bad as what my face will have to go through, I promise."
Although he tried not to show it, Kylo was staggered by her forgiveness, by how easily it was granted, by how uncomplicated it was. He offered her a polite nod and they resumed their meal in the kind of peace that had characterized their quieter interactions so far—a peace that, for him, would always feel newfound, would always feel undeserved.

By the time early afternoon rolled around, Rey was giving serious thought to what she'd fleetingly contemplated on the day of her wedding—namely, walking away from her obligations, commandeering the nearest ship, and turning to a life of piracy. And she'd take Kylo with her, too.

It wasn't even the stress of the preparations or the nerves over the masquerade itself that was getting to her. The pure and simple truth was that, after last night, all she wanted to do was stay in bed with her husband and continue her very fruitful exploration of his body—and let him explore hers in turn.

Perhaps pure wasn't the right word for it.

Kylo wasn't making things any easier, either. After the final rehearsal for the opening dance—during which his dark eyes burned as he held her close—he insisted on escorting her to her office, where she was supposed to have one last meeting with the castle staff. On the way there, he suddenly changed course, all but hauling her by the arm into one of Alqualonde's many unused rooms.

Before Rey could ask Kylo what he was doing, he backed her up against the wall once the door slid shut behind them and plied her with a multitude of fiery kisses that made her head spin. She responded in kind, out of sheer instinct, but a tiny corner of her brain was still in *Chume'da* mode and so she opened her mouth to reprimand him the moment he pulled away.

"Ben—"

And that was as far as she got, the rest of her sentence evaporating like a fine mist, because those sinful lips of his were quick to trail what was fast becoming a well-loved path from the soft spot where her ear met her jaw to the gentle curve where her neck met her shoulder.

"Ben," she said again, this time in a breathy little hum when he scraped his teeth along her pulse point—lightly, to avoid bruising her, but with enough sharp pressure to make her melt. How quickly her knees buckled. How effortlessly he held her so she wouldn't fall.
"I left you wanting last night," he murmured in her ear. "Let me make it up to you?"

And she would have said yes. She would have thrown all caution, all sense of duty, to the wind and let him have his way with her, right there in that forgotten room in the middle of the day, if the dainty silver comlink on her wrist hadn't gone off.

"Chume'da." It was Zan. "We've all gathered in your office now and we're ready to begin the meeting at Your Grace's convenience."

Rey blinked helplessly at Kylo. He scowled, his hand flying to her wrist as if to switch off the comlink or remove it altogether, when there came the shrill sound of another incoming transmission and the comlink pinned to his lapel crackled to life.

"Emperor Ren," said Mitaka, "the tailor has sent word that he will be arriving shortly. Shall I direct him to the royal suite or would you prefer to get ready in your office? Please advise."

Kylo deactivated his comlink, with Rey following his lead, but it was too late. After this intrusion, they couldn't shut off the rest of the world anymore. He huffed, looking so put out that she couldn't suppress a chuckle as she rose on tiptoe to dart a quick kiss to his chin.

"Don't worry, Your Majesty, I'm not that hard up," she said. "I took care of myself while you slept."

"Rey," he groaned. Now he looked like he was about to burst into tears at the knowledge that he'd slept through her doing such a thing.

"See you later." She left the room, but not before pinching his butt, which caused his jaw to drop in disbelief as he watched her walk away.

Sweet revenge.

There was an empty chamber in Kylo and Rey's suite that, according to Zan, usually served as the royal children's nursery. "However, in the current absence of heirs," the old steward said with a
straight face, although there was a suspiciously regretful, faraway look in his eyes, "it will serve as Your Majesty's dressing room so that you and Her Grace won't get in each other's way."

Kylo managed not to squirm at the mention of heirs but he was less successful at handling Moliere's cruel and unusual form of torture with grace. The tailor pored over him for the next damned eternity, tutting and muttering to himself in Hapan as he arranged Kylo's hair and applied brushes dipped in various— worryingly glittery— pigments to his face. How the hell did Rey put up with this almost every day?

Speaking of his wife— Kylo heard her and her retinue enter the suite a while later, the doors sliding open and a gaggle of footsteps and chatter reaching his ears, muffled by the walls. He made to stand up, with a vague notion of saying hello to Rey, but Moliere let out what could only be called a shriek.

"Your Majesty, with all due respect, this is a very delicate undertaking! Please do not move!"

This prompted a dark glare from the Emperor but Moliere sniffed and resolutely continued with his work, snatching another brush from his complex-looking array of tools. "In any case, it is better for you and the Chume'da to see each other once you're both all done. To appreciate the full effect."

Late afternoon had dimmed the sky when Moliere pronounced himself satisfied, holding up a portable mirror for Kylo's perusal. Kylo blinked at his reflection. It wasn't as bad as he'd feared. True, it did look like someone had dumped a bucket of glitter over his head, but the bulk of it was concentrated on his hair, gold dust woven through the dark locks that Moliere had coiffed into an elegantly tousled style. The glitter that had ended up on Kylo's face lightly gilded his temples and cheekbones, and his eyebrows were flecked with tiny shards of gold. Instead of concealing the scar, Moliere had chosen to inlay it with gold as well, and he'd smudged midnight-black kohl along the edges of Kylo's eyes and highlighted his lower lash lines in silvery-white. Kylo's mouth had thankfully been left well enough alone, save for a strip of shimmering gold pigment that ran down the middle of his lower lip.

"In traditional Hapan aesthetic, that is the mark of the consort, Emperor Ren," Moliere said, noting where the other man's gaze had dropped to in the mirror. "It is meant to symbolize the Chume'da's kiss. It shows that you have her favor." The tailor cocked his head, bemused. "Astounding. His Majesty looks rather nice."

"You're merely congratulating yourself," Kylo pointed out in the driest of tones.

"Oh, to be sure," Moliere said loftily. "We must all take praise where we can get it. Otherwise, it
would be a very sad life, indeed."

As the sun began to sink into the horizon of the Evernight, shuttles surrounded the Reef Fortress like moths swarming to a flame, each one waiting for their turn in the landing sequence, each one then unloading a masked aristocrat bedecked in finery, who would haughtily stride up to the entrance of the castle, present their holographic invitation to the guards, and then disappear into the gleaming foyer.

A group of three made their way up the incline that connected the landing docks to Alqualonde's main building. The shortest figure was dressed in a long-sleeved white gown with a shawl collar and silver fur trim; her half-mask was crafted from porcelain, arched-browed and short-nosed, with a pair of faux tauntaun horns sprouting from the cheekbones to curl down the sides of her jaw before pointing forward. The man whose arm she held on to wore flashy purple robes draped over a long, cream-colored tunic, his golden mask—with its thorny frills and studs of malachite—bearing close resemblance to the head structure and scale pattern of the Messian flame lizard.

They were trailing after the third member of the party, a bearded man in a nondescript security uniform, the wide brim of his cap pulled low over his features to obscure them from view. "Make way, make way," he called out with rather more pomp than the situation warranted, a hidden PUT device translating his words to fluent Hapan, "his lord and her ladyship coming through!"

"If you ask me, he's enjoying this entirely too much," the tauntaun hissed to the flame lizard.

"He's just playing the part," the flame lizard hissed back, "and so should we. Straighten your shoulders a little bit more—"

"My word," a woman in a tiger mask remarked, glancing over as they passed by, "those costumes look like they were purchased off the rack."

"It's a big party, dear Ducha," said her companion, a reed-thin gazelle. "Even the lower houses are in attendance. Perhaps they've fallen on hard times."

Rose whirled around with fists clenched, but Finn was quick to grab her by the waist and steer her away. "Okay, first of all, we did buy off the rack at the first shop we could find," he muttered, "and, secondly, we won't be doing Rey any favors if you punch one of her bridge club ladies or whatever
"I am not going to be talked down to by someone wearing enough stupid gemstones to feed an entire village for a year—" Rose started to argue, only to have to forcibly clamp her lips shut because they had reached the castle entrance and were now stopped in front of one of the guardsmen.

"Good evening," he said deferentially. "May I see your invitations, please?"

As one, Finn and Rose turned to their bearded companion, who quirked an eyebrow at them before fixing his storm-blue gaze on the guard. With a calm flourish of his hand, he intoned, "You don't need to see their invitations."

A glazed expression came over the guard's face. "I don't need to see their invitations."

"You will let them through."

"I will let them through."

With that, the guard stepped aside, and Luke Skywalker made a show of saluting to Finn and Rose. He watched them enter the castle and then he retreated to the docks, where he would wait in the shuttle to facilitate a quick getaway—or to serve as backup, should worse come to worst.

A chilly prickle of intuition made him pause in his steps. He glanced over his shoulder, looking up from out of the corner of his eye. A slender, masked sentry dressed in black was perched on one of the tower ledges, the edges of her cloak streaming in the wind. She was lounging, entirely too relaxed for her precarious position, but, then again, she'd always felt at home in the heights. She'd always been fearless.

Luke wasn't worried about being discovered, as he'd taken care to shield his Force signature and she was too far away to make out his features. But a pang of regret shot through him, and he shook his head before hurrying off to the docks.
Fully costumed, Kylo waited in the living room of the suite for Rey to emerge from the bedchamber. He had elected to remain standing because he was in danger of pitching Moliere right out the window if the tailor admonished him one more time to be careful not to sit on his cape. Despite covering only half of his face, Kylo's mask was just as heavy as his usual obsidian helm, being made almost entirely of gold and weighed down with a plethora of jewels. He felt uncomfortable and ridiculous, particularly in such... colorful attire.

Niobe bustled into the suite, all cat's eye mask and bouncy red curls and excited grin, followed by Mitaka, who was wearing his best dress uniform but had gotten into the spirit of things— or, more likely, been dragged into it kicking and screaming by Rey's ladies— with a long-snouted mask bearing thin, shiny whiskers.

"Everyone's downstairs!" Niobe gushed. "It's almost time—" Her jaw dropped open at the sight of Kylo. "Oh, His Majesty looks rather nice!" She hastily dipped into a curtsy while Kylo scowled and Moliere seemed entirely too pleased with himself.

Mitaka hurried over to Kylo, clearing his throat. "Emperor Ren, Hircine and Boethiah are at their stations but it's impossible for them to cover you from the ingresses alone. I strongly urge that you insist your knights be permitted inside the ballroom or, failing that, that you be allowed to carry your lightsaber on your person during the event."

Kylo could have told his lieutenant that there was no point in butting heads with Rey over such a matter, considering that Alqualonde was already heavily guarded and fortified, but there was something else on his mind. "Are you a womp rat?" he finally asked.

Mitaka's hand flew up to touch his mask self-consciously. "Uh, yes, sir."

And that was when the bedchamber doors slid open. Kylo automatically turned at the hydraulic hiss that cut through the air and watched, robbed of words and breath, as Rey stepped into the living room. The rest of the ladies-in-waiting were trailing behind her, but Kylo only had eyes for his wife. There was no possible way he could have looked at anyone else in that moment.

Rey's glossy chestnut brown hair was piled high atop her head in soft, loose curls threaded through with delicate chains of miniature everlilies, wrought in gold and studded with tiny emeralds and diamonds— the same kinds of gems that liberally embellished the ornate butterfly wings covering the upper half of her face, each graceful filament lovingly rendered in both bright gold and a silver as pale as arctic stars. Her collarbones and shoulders had been left strikingly bare but, then again, there was no need for necklaces, not when the bodice of her costume was already one large piece of jewelry in itself— nothing more than a skimpy band that seemed to be made entirely of golden leaves, wrapped around her ribcage and barely covering the slight swell of her breasts. The leaves rested on golden stems spaced apart so that they afforded generous glimpses of her toned stomach.
before connecting to a long, lustrous, emerald-green skirt, the hem shorter in front, showing shapely calves ending in slim ankles surrounded by the diamonds dripping from the golden straps of her stiletto-heeled shoes.

Kylo felt like his brain had turned to mush, not just because of the ethereal, sylvan silhouette Rey cut, but also at the sight of so much skin. Skin that appeared to glow, as if subtly lit from within. Logically, he knew that they must have bathed her in goat's milk and pearl dust to achieve such an effect— a method commonly employed by the galaxy's wealthier denizens for important celebrations — but it didn't seem at all far-fetched to assume that Rey carried her own light, that she was made of it, that her radiance would envelop him...

*And everyone else at the masquerade,* whispered the inner voice that dwelt in the ugliest corners of his mind.

He'd seen her in revealing outfits before, but he'd never had to face the prospect of sharing such a goddess with a ballroom full of Hapan nobles until today. A tight, burning feeling accumulated in his chest as he thought of all the other men who would be staring at Rey from behind their masks, who would no doubt be lining up to kiss her hand and dance with her and put their hands on her body. Hell, he even had a crazy urge to kick Mitaka and Moliere out of the suite just for looking at her.

"You're not wearing that," Kylo growled.

Rey started. And then, even though the butterfly mask obscured her eyes, he had the distinct impression that she was narrowing them at him. "What did you say?"

He had to hand it to Rey's ladies— they moved fast, and as a single unit, grabbing Mitaka and Moliere and fleeing from the suite. "I've quite had it with noblewomen dragging me away just as things get interesting—" Moliere started to protest, but one of the girls must have elbowed him or stepped on his toes because he yelped and fell silent.

Once Kylo and Rey were alone, his hands balled into fists. "You heard me."

"Then allow me to rephrase." She crossed her arms in front of her chest— the universal sign, he thought sardonically, that someone's husband was in deep trouble. "What makes you think you have any right to dictate what I wear?"

"It's not that," Kylo said, but he didn't know how to explain that things were different now, that he
felt different, that he didn't want anyone else to even think of doing the things she'd let him do to her.

"So what is it?" Rey snapped. And when he didn't immediately respond, she pursed her lips and continued, in a voice dripping with sarcasm, "I sincerely regret that my costume doesn't meet your standards, but it's rather too late to change into anything else."

"You have an entire closet full of gowns," Kylo shot back. "Surely there's one that's—" He floundered for the right words but, put on the spot as he was, he snatched the first that came to mind and knew it was the wrong thing to say the moment he said it— "less obscene—"

Rey flinched, her crossed arms lowering from her chest to her midriff. Kylo swallowed the lump in his throat. He hadn't meant to say that. He hadn't meant to say it like that.

"I thought I looked all right," Rey finally said, her voice small as she tilted her head to fix her gaze somewhere away from him. "Nice, even."

Kylo's every instinct was shouting at him to go over to her, to take her into his arms or perhaps fall at her feet and beg for forgiveness. But he was paralyzed by the sheer horror of having wounded her again, by the nagging fear that she might reject his apology— he'd already messed up once today, after all— and by trepidation at the prospect of having to try and put his irrational jealousy into words.

He had no idea how long he stood there just staring at her in abject helplessness, but eventually the doors opened once more and Janassa poked her head back into the room with the long-faced demeanor of someone who had drawn the shortest straw. "Your Majesties, the masquerade is about to start," she cautiously informed them. "They're all waiting for you."

Rey's heart had skipped a beat when she first saw Kylo in costume. His mask was made of gold, crowned with a diamond-sprinkled wreath carved to resemble oak and laurel leaves. Jutting out from the sides slightly above the eye-holes was a pair of tall golden antlers, kingly and resplendent. His crisply tailored doublet was the same deep, iridescent green as her skirt, cinched at the waist with an emerald-studded belt that was gold like the trim on the high collar and wide cuffs. Embroidered on the front of the doublet, in shimmering gold thread, was a stylized tree pattern, the slender trunk slanting up the right half of his ribcage, the bare branches fanning outwards to streak across his chest in burnished rays. Moliere appeared to have taken pity on Kylo where his pants were concerned because they were simple in comparison— just plain black silk of various weights— but his formal boots were a dark mulberry hue, as was the cape that flowed from his broad shoulders.
The colors were striking against his pale skin and sable hair. The outfit made him seem dashing and mysterious, and perhaps the sonnets Rey had been reading could be blamed for this but she'd rather liked the poetry of her being the butterfly and him the stag—at least until he opened his big, fat mouth and told her that, apparently, she looked obscene.

After they left the suite, Rey determinedly avoided speaking to Kylo or glancing his way or letting any part of her body touch his as they walked together. She couldn't deny that there was a tiny part of her that had been excited for the masquerade, that had thrilled at the implication of anonymity as she slipped on the mask. She'd even allowed herself an enigmatic smile as she studied her reflection in the mirror; now she just felt self-conscious as they filtered down to the Grand Ballroom. Was her costume too much? Would people laugh at her behind her back?

While Mitaka, Moliere, and the ladies entered the venue through the main doors, as the other guests had, Kylo and Rey ducked into an antechamber, where they were supposed to wait for the lights to dim before slipping into the crowd. Unlike the norm at other celebrations, there would be no grand entrance for any of the royals, in order to preserve the illusion that the shrewd, observant members of the Consortium would somehow fail to immediately recognize their Queen Mother, Chume'da, Emperor, and Crown Prince just because their eyes and noses were covered. It was a bit silly but, then again, the Hapan court thrived on artifices such as this.

In the quiet solace of the antechamber, Rey could feel Kylo locked in some fierce internal battle with himself. She attempted to pay him no mind but, as always, he proved difficult to ignore, his commanding—if conflicted—presence filling the small space. Despite her best efforts, her gaze darted to him every once in a while, and so she was able to see the moment that a steely resolve came over him, straightening his spine, hardening the set of his jaw.

"I'm not good with words," he said at last, staring straight ahead instead of at her, as if he felt that not looking at her would make this less difficult. "Something about you makes me not good with words. What happened back there in our quarters, that was thoughtless of me—perhaps even cruel. You look beautiful, of course."

It was the first compliment on her appearance she'd gotten from him that hadn't ended in him calling her an idiot, but the flicker of unexpected delight was overshadowed by confusion. Rey's brow creased. "Then why are you mad?"

The ghost of a rueful smile played at the corner of his mouth, and her gaze was drawn to the stripe of gold painted down the middle of his bottom lip. The mark of the consort. "You look too beautiful. I find that I don't want to share," he admitted. "But that is...my problem, and not yours. I shouldn't have taken it out on you. I'm sorry."
"That's twice in a day you've apologized to me," Rey couldn't help but marvel out loud. It had to be some kind of record.

"You make me not good with words," Kylo tentatively repeated, "but you also— that is— apologizing comes easier to me. When it's you."

He was trying. Like she'd asked him to on the balcony the other night. His admittance of his faults prompted Rey to also mentally go over where she'd gone wrong. "I should have dismissed everyone else before cutting into you," she said. "That should have been a private argument. And I shouldn't have resorted to sarcasm, because that just makes people defensive and things get ugly fast. I'll try to be better about that in the future."

"As will I." The lights would dim and the door to the ballroom would open any second now, and so he extended his silk-gloved fingers towards her. "Would you take my hand, Chume'da?"

She didn't hesitate at all before slipping her hand into his so that he could escort her out onto the dance floor for the opening waltz. She could barely feel the shape of his palm through the golden chains of diamonds and emeralds that encrusted hers, wrapped around her wrist and hand like fingerless gloves, but, somehow, his warmth permeated through the layers of silk and metal and jewels.

The door slid open with a hiss that was at once lost in the first strains of violins. That's our cue, Rey thought, and, together, she and Kylo stepped out of the antechamber to join the throng of graceful, masked silhouettes, glittering in the darkness as if outlined in the light of millions of stars.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to the Reylo Discord for their help with costuming! In particular, Rose's tauntaun mask was suggested by ahsokaren and Finn's Messian flame lizard getup was sassydelusions' idea.

This is the inspiration for Kylo and Rey's makeup, although the gold-inlaid scar is based on this art linked to me by letstrysomereylo.

I also have lavenderkushkiss to thank for Rey's costume although, as you can see, I changed the color scheme and a few other elements. Kylo's costume was sourced from both lovenlu's gorgeous art and a design by the amazing darthvictoriana, who was kind enough to share their considerable knowledge of historical fashion with me.

Last, but not least, the retaliatory butt pinch scene is dedicated to AO3 user raeneshine >;))
The Marauders' Masquerade was a nod to the Lorell Raiders who originally colonized the Hapes Cluster and were all but wiped out by the Jedi in 4030 BBY, leaving behind a decimated population from which rose the first Queen Mother, who established the Consortium and broke off contact with all civilizations beyond the Transitory Mists. Alqualonde's Grand Ballroom, with celestial patterns splashed all over its hangings and tablecloths, was decorated to resemble the starry wastes through which the great pirate fleets had once sailed, although the lengths the castle staff had gone to did not become clear until the lights dimmed and the music started.

Hiding in the crowd, keeping his Force signature under wraps to avoid detection by Kylo Ren or any of the knights, Finn watched in awe as thirty or so couples glided onto the dance floor, their vivid, gemstone-encrusted costumes sparkling beneath enormous chandeliers of crystal and bronze. As they waltzed, dozens of holograms gradually shimmered into existence—planets and shooting stars and asteroid belts and misty nebulae, piercing the gloom in whorls of arctic silver light. Every once in a while, a dancing couple would pass through a hologram and it would disintegrate into thousands of pieces, like fireworks, before reassembling into another type of celestial body. An entire universe floated in the perfumed air, constantly being reforged to the swell of violins. It was an amazing sight—Finn had never seen anything like it before.

"There's the Chume'da," a feminine voice beside him said to her friends. "A butterfly is an interesting choice but, then again, Her Grace is quite unorthodox."

"I personally find her refreshing," declared a young-sounding lord whose banded metallic costume gleamed like the speckled scales of a harpercod. "She's a bit rough around the edges but she's very lovely. Can't say the same for her husband."

His companions tittered. It wasn't long before Finn's gaze alighted on the couple in question, and his eyes widened behind his mask. True, he'd seen footage of Rey dressed in Consortium splendor, but it was no less of a shock in person. The lush emerald folds of her skirt swirled around her ankles as she led Kylo through the dreamy, fluid motions of the waltz, his hand resting at her slim, gold-spangled waist, and Finn would never have believed it was them if the people around him hadn't confirmed it.
For starters, they weren't trying to kill each other. Instead, they were entwined far more closely than the other couples on the dance floor; the stag held the butterfly in a lover's embrace amidst the stardust, occasionally bending his head to whisper in her ear, and Finn was—

— severely weirded out by the whole thing—

"I notice that the Ducha Erriston has dressed as a pirate queen," sniffed another guest to Finn's right. "How original."

Someone else chortled. "It's a safe choice. The inhabitants of the Lemmi system are not exactly known for breaking the mold, are they?"

After scores of constellations had come and gone, the orchestra hit its crescendo and the floral arrangements around the dance floor— roses and lilies mounted on elegant marble pedestals—ignited into rivers of silvery blue flame that burned brightly yet somehow left the delicate petals unharmed. The lights were cranked up again and the regal, airy waltz melted into the livelier beats of lutes and drums as some of the dancers melted into the crowd, either to chat with other guests or sit at their respective tables, while those who elected to remain were joined by a fresh wave of dancers from the gathered throng.

It was quite the spectacle, and Rose was having none of it. "Unbelievable!" she seethed out loud. Thanks to her PUT device, the word was in Hapan to those who overheard, but the sentiment was decidedly not, and so she drew more than her fair share of curious glances.

"I know!" Finn hastened to cover for his erstwhile comrade. "A pirate queen costume? In this day and age?" He waited until the nobles around them had gone back to their business and then he leaned in closer to Rose. "We're blending in, remember? That's the whole point of this."

"Yeah, yeah," she grumbled. "Doesn't mean I have to like it, though."

* * *

It hadn't taken long after the music started for Rey to arrive at the conclusion that her butterfly mask was actually quite fitting. Her stomach certainly seemed like it was filled with dozens of those tiny, fluttering wings.
The last time she and Kylo danced like this had been at their wedding. As she soon learned, it was one thing to dance with a man she hadn't wanted to marry, but it was another thing, entirely, to dance with a man when she knew how his come felt on her naked abdomen.

He had been so very gentle with her last night. She'd heard it bandied about that men were quick to fall asleep once they'd orgasmed, and Kylo had barely managed to collapse back into bed and wrap his arms around her from behind, gathering her to his chest, before he was out like a light. Perhaps she'd been just the tiniest bit annoyed, but the slumbering glow of his Force signature was so warm and contented that she'd had to laugh to herself, craning her neck to press a kiss to his bare shoulder before she slipped a hand between her legs and got off rather efficiently, letting the even sound of his breathing guide her to her peak and then to sleep.

He had promised to make it up to her, though, and she was thinking about that as they danced. It was a wonder she could concentrate on the steps at all, given how she kept looking at his lips, given how his gloved hand on her waist thumbed over the exposed skin with an increasing urgency that was surely too scandalous for where they were and what they were doing and who they were surrounded by.

As the steps of the waltz brought them closer to the edge of the dance floor, Rey snuck a glance at the audience. It was easy enough to spot Ta'a Chume— she wore a silver dragon mask, with matching tailored cape and an impressively frilled collar, and the weight of her iron stare was palpable, her lips a cruel obsidian slash on her pale face.

"Your grandmother has apparently elected to forgo subtlety tonight," Kylo remarked. "A dragon mask for the dragon queen."

"I don't think she knows how to be anything else," Rey said.

"That is her loss." Through the openings in his golden mask, she saw his dark eyes flicker over her from head to toe. "There are far lovelier creatures in the galaxy."

And she knew— she instinctively knew— that he was trying, in his own stiff, unsure way, to compensate for how poorly he'd received her outfit earlier, but all of a sudden she felt quite... shy, heat rising to her cheeks. "You're teasing me again," she grumbled.

"Just because I'm teasing doesn't necessarily signify that I don't mean it."
They waltzed through one of the holograms and, in that brief moment after it scattered and before it reassembled into a newer shape, they were caught in a whirlwind of bluish flecks as fine as snowflakes. "I want to be alone with you," he murmured in her ear, his fingers curling at the small of her back, brushing over her spine.

Rey's breath hitched at the feeling. "It's only a few more hours."

"Too long." Kylo dipped her in time to the music, leaning in far more closely than the other men around them did with their partners, his own breath hot on her neck. Her hand, for some reason, tugged at his doublet, as if in a bid to pull him further down to her so that their lips could meet...

And that was the moment the flowers ignited and the lights brightened again, yanking them back to cold reality.

"Later," Rey promised in a quiet tone of voice as she straightened up and attempted to regain a semblance of composure.

Below the gilded plane of Kylo's mask, his jaw clenched in frustration, but he nodded tersely and offered her his arm before they went, as protocol dictated, to pay their respects to the Queen Mother.

* *

With the party in full swing, Finn assumed that it would be easy to pull Rey aside for a little chat, using the crowd as cover and his costume as camouflage. He soon realized, though, that he'd been sorely mistaken. He hadn't counted on the sheer number of aristocrats that flocked to the Chume'da once she left the dance floor, forming a nigh impenetrable ring around her as they waited for their turn to gain her favor.

"Come on," Rose piped up, grabbing Finn's arm. He let himself be towed along while she pushed her way through the crowd, elbowing the Hapans aside and stepping on their toes without the slightest compunction. "'Scuse me, my lady," she said cheerfully, slapping away the protruding feathers of an eagle headdress. "Pardon me, good sir," she sarcastically drawled, shouldering past a fyrnock and causing him to spill his wine on a nearby gizka.

She was a tiny battering ram, leaving a trail of affronted exclamations in her wake. Despite her best efforts, however, they were unable to get to Rey before she was whisked back onto the dance floor.
by a nobleman in a Loth-wolf mask.

Rose's lips pursed in annoyance as she and Finn watched their target sail out of reach. They had already attracted a fair bit of unwanted attention from several of the kind of people who would never dream of shoving someone out of the way at a royal event.

Catching Rose's eye, Finn inclined his head towards the buffet tales just north of their position. They might as well make it look like that had been their plan all along.

Rose nodded. Employing far more discretion than they'd initially set out with, the two of them skirted past where Ta'a Chume was holding court with Prince Isolder, who was dressed as a lion. Kylo Ren loomed beside his father-in-law and Finn ducked his head as he and Rose walked by, but he needn't have bothered—the Emperor didn't even spare them a glance, his attention fixed solely on the dance floor, his mouth drawn into a fearsome scowl.

* 

"It's quite a splendid party," Ta'a Chume remarked, glancing around the ballroom over the rim of her champagne flute. "You've done well, Lairosse."

"I merely assisted, Ereneda," the Duchy Yliri graciously replied. Both her mask and gown gave the impression of being woven from stained glass, the sparkling colors softly transmuting as she moved through the light. "I picked out the motifs but Her Grace was the one who engineered the code for the shifting holograms."

"Truly?" asked one of the other nobles, sounding impressed. "The Chume'da is a woman of many talents, it seems."

Kylo tore his gaze from Rey and her dance partner to glare at the man who had spoken. Or the boy, really—he looked to be in his early twenties, his lips nestled between the curved fangs of a maalraas mask and his cloak made of bright red gemweb, a teardrop-shaped opal hanging rather dashingly off of one ear. Kylo had no idea who he was but he swiftly came to the conclusion that he loathed him.

Kylo loathed the man Rey was dancing with, too, that tacky wolf who'd had the gall to just—just go up to her and request a waltz, when she had obviously just finished dancing and any decent person would have let her rest for a while. He also loathed the nearby trio of dandies who were making no secret of their admiration, commenting on his wife's excellent sense of rhythm and the fine figure she
"I profess myself rather envious of Count Yalthik," one of them said. "I do hope Her Grace will spare me a dance as well."

"She already smiled at you at the last formal dinner," his friend protested. "Let us have a turn, old chap—"

The third member of the group was the one who noticed that Kylo was frowning at them. He nudged his companions, and they all smiled politely at the Emperor and bowed in sync. Afterwards, they resumed their conversation.

Kylo tried his best to not feel insulted beyond belief, but it was hard going.

Isolder cleared his throat. They hadn't spoken one-on-one since the incident at the library, and for a fleeting moment Kylo was mildly terrified about what the prince was going to say. But there was no belated rebuke forthcoming— instead, Isolder told him in a low voice for his ears alone, "I realize that things are different beyond the Veil. Here, it is expected for men to fawn over highborn ladies at such gatherings. It's simply another way to pass the time, and the women take it as their due."

Kylo was glad for the mask, for how it hid the embarrassed flush of his cheeks. Was he truly being so obvious?

Isolder flashed a wry grin. "I'm standing close enough to notice you glaring daggers at all the young lords, Your Majesty. And that scowl speaks volumes."

Taking heed of Isolder's warning, Kylo attempted to relax the line of his mouth. To distract himself, he turned his attention back to the Queen Mother— just in time to see her stride out onto the dance floor with an elderly gentleman in an ice-boar costume. There was a subtle change in atmosphere; a few Hapans started whispering among themselves behind lace fans and bejeweled hands, while others simply regarded Ta'a Chume and her partner with interest.

Lairelosse promptly filled Kylo in. "That is Vosh Ktrame, the Archon of Jodaka. He holds the distinction of having been Ta'a Chume's most favored lover."

Kylo's eyebrows damn near shot off the top of his forehead. "Most favored lover?"
"She Who Has No Equal was young once, Your Majesty," Lairelosse said in a vaguely reproachful tone.

"But... most favored..." Kylo trailed off.

Lairelosse blinked behind her glass mask. "Of course the Queen Mother took many lovers in her youth." She spoke slowly, as if having no idea what part of this he couldn't seem to understand. "It's another means of expediting political and economic alliances."

"Ducha, I think you're scandalizing His Majesty," Isolder broke in with a laugh. "Quite a few cultures beyond the Veil hold monogamy in high esteem, particularly in marriage."

"Monogamy?" Lairelosse echoed like she'd never heard of the term before. "How... interesting."

Kylo's gaze shot back to Rey in panic. She was already dancing with someone else and, gathered at the edge of the dance floor, were more than a few noblemen who seemed to be waiting for their turn. Among them were the maalraas and two of the three lords whose conversation he'd overheard.

He excused himself from his current circle and made his way to the dance floor, having some faint idea of cutting in. It might be a bit of a social gaffe but surely he was well within his rights, surely a husband could rescue his wife from all these lechers who wanted to use her for political gain—

Isn't that what you were doing when you married her? queried his nasty inner voice, which he pushed to the back of his mind but not before it left a sour taste in his mouth.

Before Kylo could reach her, Rey switched partners again, her old one depositing her into the waiting arms of a tall, dark-haired man in a raven's mask whose feather-lined black-and-gold costume showed off his sinewy frame.

"So the Lord of the Serpent's Trace has shown up as a bird," a lady just off to Kylo's right said to her friends. "How droll."

Someone laughed uproariously, sounding deep in his cups. "Good old Aleson's angling to be the Chume'da's bird, if you ask me."
"Why, yes, she did save his life at that duel—"

"— I have it on good authority that they played together when they were children—"

Kylo wanted to scream. Upon further inspection, Aleson was holding Rey closer than was strictly necessary and she was leaning in, too, the two of them murmuring to each other as they danced. A sickening blend of rage, jealousy, and despair welled up inside Kylo until he could barely see straight, until there was the thorniest of knots in his throat. Perhaps he should have seen this coming the night Rey leapt in front of the lasers for Aleson and referred to him by his given name. Perhaps it had only been a matter of time since then.

The lights in the ballroom were too bright all of a sudden, the noise of the crowd almost deafening. Kylo clenched his hands into fists to stop the tremors that shot through his fingers and, before he could allow himself to think twice, he resumed a determined path towards his wife. His.

"I detected foreign interference while on the line with General Organa a couple of weeks ago," Aleson was telling Rey as they waltzed, his voice soft in her ear, barely audible over the music. "It lasted for half a second and was barely a blip. It could have been anything— could have been just a gamma discharge from somewhere— but we felt it best to take no more chances."

"I understand," Rey said. "But if it was someone listening in, then who...?"

Aleson shrugged. "There are only two possibilities, Your Grace."

Her grip on his shoulder tightened involuntarily. She knew what he meant. It was either the First Order or someone working for Ta'a Chume herself. And the latter option was more likely.

"She shelters the Resistance because of you," Aleson continued. "The moment she decides you're more trouble than you're worth—"

"I'm aware," Rey said curtly. "Why do you think I let her boss me around?"
Aleson snorted. "Fair point. Anyway, that's what I came here to tell you. Venomfang's been compromised, and any messages you might have for your friends will need to be coursed through me. At our last meeting, the General gave me a cloaked binary beacon so I'll know where to find them."

Rey nodded. Ascertaining that a courteous smile was pasted on her face, she proceeded to divulge what little information she'd managed to glean about the First Order's communication tracking nets in the Outer Rim, as well as how Hux was on no routine visit but, rather, on a mission to hunt down the Resistance troops that had been sighted therein.

"What about the sub-hyperspace drives?" Aleson prodded. "What about Snoke?"

"I haven't been able to discover anything important," she admitted ruefully. "I think, perhaps, if I go to Coruscant, it will be easier to snoop."

"Just keep me updated, then. And—" His amethyst eyes softened amidst the gleaming obsidian of his raven mask—"be careful."

"I will."

"I have to go now."

"After one waltz? Your dedication to the cause is admirable," Rey quipped.

"I will be immediately heading to the Corsair Outback after this," said Aleson, "but, presently, this hasty exit has more to do with the fact that your husband is approaching with murder in his eyes."

With that, he deposited her at the perimeter of the dance floor and disappeared into the crowd with one last, elegant bow. Rey turned around; sure enough, Kylo was bearing down upon her, paying no heed to the numerous aristocrats who hailed him as he passed.

"My lord," she said in greeting. It came out quieter than she'd intended—now that the adrenaline of discussing matters of espionage while waltzing in full view of everyone had worn off, she was once more caught in that place between trepidation and guilt. If I go to Coruscant, it will be easier to
snoop, she'd told Aleson, thinking nothing of it then— her path was always so much clearer when she was considering only the safety of her friends and the goals of the Resistance— but, with Kylo in front of her, things were clouded again. The prospect of destabilizing his reign in his own backyard made her uneasy.

"My lady," Kylo gritted out in response, and that was when Rey realized that his fists were clenched and his dark eyes were glinting with barely contained... anger?

Fear coiled in her gut— did he suspect? Or had he somehow managed to discern what she and Aleson had been talking about?

"Chume'da!" Tyrral Leven, the Marquis of Ediorung— at least, Rey was almost certain it was him in the brown-and-green asyyriak helm— materialized at her elbow. "May I just say that you look positively heavenly tonight— a vision of resplendent loveliness—"

"Thank you," Rey said with a startled laugh, more preoccupied with how the electric wrath in Kylo's Force signature seemed to have abruptly spiked to dangerous levels at the interruption.

"Your costume is divine, and so fitting for a creature of sunlight and summer and heavenly grace—"

"You used heavenly twice," Rey couldn't resist pointing out.

Tyrral slapped a palm against his forehead in mock chagrin. "So I did! Perhaps you could allow me to expand my vocabulary as we dance—"

"She's already spoken for," Kylo snarled, shouldering Tyrral aside in the process of grabbing Rey's arm.

Rey had enough presence of mind to glance back at the marquis with an apologetic smile as she was ferried away. And then she narrowed her eyes at her husband. "Alienating my— our subjects is hardly the way to go for a party we're hosting, don't you think?"

Kylo didn't answer, leading her towards the antechamber through which they'd entered the ballroom. The orchestra chose that moment to strike up the opening notes of a fast-paced Bynarrian jig, which drew most people's attention to the dance floor as several new couples rushed forward, laughing gaily. This ensured that Kylo and Rey were able to make their way through the crowd relatively
unnoticed— helped along, of course, by his use of the Force to dampen the perceptions of nearby guests. In her high heels and swishing skirts, it was a struggle to keep up with his long strides, and by the time they entered the antechamber and the doors slid shut behind them, Rey was quite put out. And also mildly panicky.

*There's no way he knows,* she reassured herself as she took a deep, calming breath.

However, all efforts at maintaining composure swiftly came to naught when Kylo leaned down and kissed her so savagely it made her head spin.

*Oh, Rey thought,* her heart skipping a beat like it always did at the initial press of Kylo's soft lips against hers. But he didn't give her time to luxuriate in the sensation— instead, he greedily swept his tongue into her mouth until it felt like less of a kiss and more of a *taking,* and she would be lying if she said that it didn't make excitement leap within her abdomen like a bonfire fanned by the evening breeze.

And yet they couldn't kiss as deeply as they wanted, not with their heavy, elaborate half-masks in the way. Kylo pulled back and, expecting him to take his off, Rey's hands flew up to her face to follow suit.

"Leave it on," he commanded, his tone imperious and his gaze inscrutable as he made no move to remove his own mask.

"What *has* gotten into you?" Rey demanded. It wasn't that she *wasn't* getting turned on— apparently, she was absurd enough to find this princely high-handedness attractive for the challenge it presented — but it *was* a bit startling.

"I *told* you," Kylo growled, slipping off his gloves and letting them fall carelessly to the floor, "I don't want to share." He grabbed her by the waist, his bare fingers kneading at the skin of her lower back, causing her spine to erupt into a river of sparks that was exacerbated when he kissed her again, so violently that she wondered if it might leave them both bruised. "*Never,* do you hear me?" he muttered against her lips. "I *never* want to share—" He punctuated the breaks in his sentence with one hard kiss after another, each time pulling away before she could kiss him back— "not with that bastard Aleson— not with *any* of them— I don't *care* what anyone says—"

Rey's eyes widened as the epiphany struck. She wrenched her mouth from Kylo's so that she could glare up at him. "If you think, for one *second,*" she hissed, "that you can forbid me from dancing with whomever I please—"
His lips curled into a humorless sneer. "I rather doubt dancing was all your fine-feathered suitors had in mind."

"You're preposterous," Rey snapped. "You told me in this very room that this was your problem, not mine, so if you could kindly refrain from getting mad at me—"

"I'm not mad," Kylo interrupted, "I'm jealous—"

"You don't have a reason to be!" she burst out, resisting the impulse to tear at her painstakingly styled hair in frustration. "You're the only one I'll ever—"

And that was when she faltered. Because, the truth was, she couldn't say for sure, could she? Especially in these treacherous circumstances. No one could tell the future. It lay before her like an open pit.

Kylo immediately picked up on her hesitation, flinching as if she'd struck him. And then his shoulders squared with the same steely resolve she'd seen come over him a while ago in this very room, when he'd apologized to her, and before she knew it he was kissing her again—only now it was more focused in its intensity, more calculated, as if he were concentrating on moving his lips and tongue in a manner that would draw out the most primal of reactions from her.

And it worked. Oh, how it worked. Rey moaned into his mouth, the fine material of his doublet crushed between her fingers where they dug into his arms for support as her knees turned to jelly. There was discomfort, though, in how her mask clacked against his, the metalwork pressing into her face, and eventually he broke the kiss and scooped her up into his arms. walking the short distance to the antechamber's sitting area and depositing her onto the handsome, gilded chaise lounge, pushing her down so that she leaned against the cushioned backrest.

Kylo looked like a forest god as he fell to his knees before her, golden antlers gleaming in the light, his large hands hiking up her emerald skirts as he spread her thighs apart. He was no less beautiful when he took off his mask and she had an unobstructed view of his features, his scar, painted in gold. Keeping his gaze locked on to hers, he hooked her left leg over one broad shoulder and pressed his lips to the ankle peeking out from amidst the golden straps of her shoe. There was something desperate about the expression on his face, a desperation echoed in the feverish kisses that he then littered along her bare calf, his hand slipping under her right buttock to angle her center towards his wandering mouth.
By the time he'd gone past her knee, Rey was a shuddering mess of anticipation and desire, her silk panties completely soaked through. His first nip at her inner thigh caused her to cry out and, stars, if it wasn't the most exquisite form of torture, him taking his sweet time sucking bruises into her sensitive flesh, the pain and the pleasure forming a sharp, heady cocktail that made everything else melt away. She needed relief—needed it so badly that she felt like she was back in the desert, craving water to slake her parched throat. She closed her eyes and Jakku's sun burned in the darkness to the sound of string instruments emanating from the ballroom.

As the orchestra segued into the calenada, a dance that was as fluid as quicksilver and as light as air, Kylo's fingers latched onto the sides of Rey's panties, tugging so frantically that she was surprised he didn't rip them. She wiggled her hips to help, which probably looked more comical than erotic, but it got the job done.

Kylo was impatient, though—he'd only just managed to wrestle her panties out of one leg when he gave up and returned to the apex of her thighs. He afforded Rey no opportunity to be self-conscious, immediately sealing his lips over her and—

— and, Maker, it was gold, it was music, it was electricity, it was open sky—

She'd often wondered what this would be like ever since she'd first heard of such an act, but her imagination had fallen pathetically short of the real thing. His nose bumped into her clit as he licked away at her, long and deep, his lips pressing together at the end of every stroke so that it felt like yet another little kiss, each sensation sending out shockwaves that rippled through her entire frame until she was delirious with pleasure, whimpering and pulling at his hair and grinding against his sinful mouth. Sometimes it was too much and sometimes it wasn't enough but she didn't care, urging him on in a hushed, broken stream of there and yes and slower and more.

Her husband was blessedly quick on the uptake. When he worked out the rhythm that made her tick and set to it with a ruthless determination, she all but shouted, her spine arching, her head tipping back. And she saw herself in the antechamber's mirrored ceiling, her emerald skirts glittering in rivers of silk against the red velvet cushions of the chaise lounge, her lips parted and Kylo's dark head between her thighs, their two figures bathed in gold. Rey was suddenly glad he'd told her to keep the butterfly mask on; it added to the illusion of depraved glamor, she looked and felt like a goddess being worshiped, her hips writhing in time to the calenada as the orchestra played on in the next room.

Kylo pulled off of her with an obscenely loud smack, two of his fingers picking up the slack as they thrust into her dripping heat while he stared up at her with blazing, hungry eyes. "You're so wet, Rey," he gasped out, his fingers curling inside her. "Tell me you'll only ever get this wet for me—" There was a raggedness to his deep, mellow voice, a plaintive edge that nearly broke her heart. "Tell me I'll always be the only one, cyar'ika—"
The tender, unexpected endearment chipped away at the last of Rey's defenses, as did the increasingly urgent pace of his fingers bringing her closer and closer to release. "Yes," she choked out, and there was a certain relief when she said it because, no matter what the future held, this was the truth, here and now. "Yes, Ben, only you, always—"

Those words were all he needed to hear. He bent his head over her again, his tongue lapping at her slickness as he continued pumping his fingers, and it was almost too much to bear. Her body was caught between twisting away from him and chasing the bliss, and it finally decided on the latter when he wrapped his plush lips around her clit and sucked. Both her legs latched around Kylo to dig the points of her stiletto heels into his back and he groaned and redoubled his efforts. The calenada soared to its crescendo and so did Rey, her scream drowned out by the crashing symphony, her vision flashing white as she tipped over the edge and into what was quite possibly the fiercest, most glorious orgasm of her life.

Still on his knees, Kylo reached up to hold her through the aftershocks, his face buried in her neck. "Mine," he mumbled against her skin, sounding helpless for some reason, sounding like this was more her victory than his.

In her dazed state, Rey barely managed to card her fingers through his hair. "Yours," she whispered, and it felt damming and wonderful all at once. It felt like another point of no return.
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

I'M BACK! Thank you so much to everyone for the plethora of lovely comments on the last chapter, y'all certainly warmed my heart during the cold winter nights my friends and I spent freezing to death in our campervan as we braved the Southern Alps xD It has recently come to my attention that we've hit 9,000 kudos, too, and that's AMAZING. I'm so blown away. I just... *cries* YOU GUYS ARE THE BEST READERS IN THE WORLD, SORRY, I DON'T MAKE THE RULES.

This new chapter is dedicated, with all my love and gratitude, to ntantzen, bless_my_circuits, AshleyAshley, whybexcrupe, Susan, TheExpectantPatronus, blackeyedlily, Jinga, Jen, BrandyPestka, refined-by-fire, Kat, artelu, LadyBayba, heyloreylo, dmbo, KnightofJen, Circe87, Aionimica, riyuereylo, Bri, Robyn, soyeahso, Gabriela, all the wonderful anons, and anyone whose name I might have missed, who were so quick to lend a hand in my current time of need. Today's update would never have been possible without you and the glimmer of hope you gave me <3 For those who might not know, I posted on Tumblr that my phone line was cut and I won't have outgoing services, including Internet, until it's all sorted out. In fact, this update is brought to you live from Denny's lmao

Anyway, I'm so happy to be writing again, and I hope this installment makes up for the long wait. Cheers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His lordship Aleson Gray of Kavan chuckled quietly to himself as he walked away from the dance floor. While he maintained that Kylo Ren was the figurehead of an evil, despotic regime, it had been amusing to see the man charge towards him and Rey like the quintessential jealous husband. Aleson would never claim be the definitive authority on what was going on in the imperial relationship, but the Emperor and the Empress seemed to be rather in over their heads, and although common sense dictated that this situation would lead to nothing but grief in the end, there was a tiny yet sincere part of him that wished it wouldn't blow up too badly, for Rey's sake— he quite liked her, and the fact that she and her husband were warming to each other was no small cause for concern.

Deciding that a stiff drink was in order before relaying the Chume'da's message to the Resistance, Aleson swung by the buffet tables on his way out. As he deliberated over the vast selection of wines and spirits, a man in a flame lizard costume sidled up to him.

"Psst, Aleson! It's me."

Aleson frowned at the stranger. "Who," he loftily demanded, "is me?"
It wasn't long, though, before he was able to answer his own inquiry, his eyes widening as recognition struck. "What the hell are you doing here?" he hissed, grabbing Finn's arm and hauling him off to a far-flung corner of the ballroom.

"Long story short, your informant was right on the mark," Finn whispered back. "There is a plot to destabilize the Hapan throne and the conspirators are striking tonight. It's an assassination attempt, Aleson— they're going to try to kill Rey." He paused, then added in a markedly less invested tone of voice, "Oh, and Ren, too, I guess."

Aleson was already turning to urgently survey the crowd. "We have to warn the Chume'da."

"Yes, but there's a slight problem," said Finn. "Where is she?"

* *

Kylo reverently studied his wife as she reached up to straighten the mask on his face. Her cheeks were flushed beneath the butterfly wings, her lips curved in a soft smile. He could still taste her on his tongue, musky and sweet like sunlight, and that only made her even more beautiful to him as they attempted to fix each other's appearance, his hands shaking as he smoothed down her rumpled skirts, her fingers gentle as she combed through his hair.

"Am I presentable?" he finally asked.

"No." Rey bit her lip, still smiling, the pad of her thumb tracing the lower contours of his mouth. "The gold paint here is hopelessly smudged. We might have to summon Moliere for an emergency retouch."

"I look forward to your explanation as to how it came to be that way," Kylo replied with a straight face.

"Bold of you to assume I'll be the one doing the explaining. This was your idea." She lightly rubbed at his bottom lip, then shrugged. "No help for it. Everyone will just have to think you're a messy eater— Ben!" she exclaimed in horror, her blush deepening when he made a sound that was somewhere between a snort and a cough. "I didn't mean it like that!"
"Didn't you?" he couldn't refrain from teasing. "I shall endeavor to refine my technique—"

Mortified, Rey clapped a hand over his mouth. Kylo grabbed her wrist, regret flickering through him that he'd already put his gloves back on and thus could no longer feel her skin, and he pressed kisses to her palm and to the tips of her jewel-encrusted fingers, the inside of his chest curiously light and full of warmth.

She shivered at every brush of his lips. They had to go back to the party but, when she eventually withdrew her hand, it was with some reluctance, her hazel eyes glimmering with a shy, unspoken promise—*later, later*, and Kylo suddenly wanted nothing more than to have the whole masquerade over and done with so that he and Rey could spend the rest of the night in bed. *Their* bed.

He expected that she would tuck her hand into the crook of his elbow and let him escort her out of the antechamber as courtesy dictated but, instead, she slipped a slim arm around his waist when they walked back into the ballroom, pulling him close. He glanced down at her; she was grinning broadly from ear to ear, her Force signature all aglow, and this sort of bowled him over because he couldn't recall ever making anyone so happy before. It was an addictive feeling—he'd have to do *that* again sometime. Maybe in a few hours...

"*There* you are, Your Majesties!" Daemora AlGray fluttered over to them in a swirl of icy blue robes, a Pantran whitefang headdress perched jauntily atop her features. "The Ducha of Carlania had to leave your wedding reception early due to pressing matters on her homeworld, she would be honored to offer her belated congratulations, allow me to introduce you—"

Kylo and Rey resumed mingling with their guests and the evening wore on and she continued to be subtly affectionate, leaning just the slightest bit into his side whenever she conversed with other nobles and clutching at his sleeve every time she addressed him. Before long he was emboldened to reciprocate, his hand resting on the small of her back as they moved from one group to the next, his little finger idly intertwining with hers during each lull in the chatter that surrounded them. It didn't escape his notice that the more observant Hapans had started regarding them with a trace of bemusement, but it was so hard to care. The masks helped, preserving the illusion of anonymity in the lights that had once again been turned down low, their gazes meeting every once in a while like a secret being held, tightening the coil of anticipation in his stomach.

It was during a spirited debate on the merits of an organic labor force over one that was droid-based that Rey excused herself to grab a bite to eat. "Do you want anything?" she murmured in Kylo's ear, tugging at his doublet so that he could lean down and hear her over the clamor.

He shook his head, returning her smile with a small one of his own. And it was the most ridiculous thing but, as he watched her go, he realized that he missed her already.
Rey was walking on clouds as she made her way to the buffet tables. The little touches that Kylo had been showering on her, the soft look in his eyes... Her heart was full. She felt like the giddy teenager that Jakku and the war had never allowed her to be. It was so easy to forget everything else.

And it was strange how the universe worked, how it could sometimes be ironic in the most cruel of ways, because as soon as that thought rippled across the surface of her mind, a pair of strong arms wrapped around her waist and pulled her into one of the tiny alcoves lining the corners of the ballroom, and before she could so much as raise the alarm or put up a fight, she was looking into dark brown eyes she would have known anywhere in the galaxy, even set as they were in an iridescent, reptilian mask.

"Finn," Rey said blankly. "Oh, my God, Finn—" Her body snapped into autopilot, gathering him to her in a fierce hug. Over his shoulder she saw a woman in a tauntaun mask who took longer to place, but eventually— "Rose?"

Her relief at seeing her comrades soon evaporated into panic. She disentangled herself from Finn and glanced around wildly, seized by the crippling fear that someone— that Kylo— had noticed. But the entrance to the alcove was now blocked by a strategically positioned Aleson Gray, who surveyed the crowd with his arms casually folded in front of his chest as though nothing was amiss.

Rey started trembling. "You can't be here!" she burst out, staring at Finn in a confusing mixture of joy and despair. "He can't see you here— he can't—" The blood in her veins had gone cold and there was a thick knot in her throat. She was not the type of person to get hysterical but it engulfed her, this terror so piercing that she couldn't think straight, the world going dim at the edges. Ben can't know, please, he can't know what I've done, what I'm doing, it'll kill me, please, please, please—

"Rey." Finn's hands dropped to her shoulders, a soothing, steadying weight. Although he was obviously bewildered by the intensity of her reaction, he was quick to channel his efforts into calming her down "Rey. Breathe. Rose and I would never have risked coming here if it wasn't important. You have to focus."

"Right." She nodded and closed her eyes, letting air fill her lungs and seep out in a meditative rhythm as she strove to bring her heart rate back to normal. She'd signed up for this. Everyone was counting on her. She had to keep a level head.
When she opened her eyes again, it was a bit difficult to tell with the mask but Rose appeared to be giving her an odd look. Rey met the other woman's gaze with a determination she didn't entirely feel, rattled as she was by her own outburst.

"Rey, listen to me," Finn continued, squeezing her shoulders, his tone strained, "we'll tell you the whole story as soon as possible but, right now, I don't know how much time we have left before the attack. There's a group of Hapan insurgents who want to kill you and Ren. And they're planning on doing it tonight."

The music was too loud in Rey's ears all of a sudden. "How?" she asked, her pulse speeding up again despite her best efforts.

It was Rose who answered. "We don't know, exactly, but you need to get out of this castle. They could strike at any second."

"I can't just leave," Rey protested. "Everyone's here—" Ben's here— "I need to keep them safe—"

"Your Grace," Aleson muttered from out of the corner of his mouth, "the truth of the matter is that some of your guests are involved. We don't know who can be trusted."

"What about those who can be?" Rey shot back. "Look, I'll put my guards on the alert and declare an end to the festivities. That way, we can get everybody out before—"

And that was when the lights were cut and the ballroom was plunged into darkness, as if a heavy curtain had been dropped over the world.

A dozen hulking submersibles broke the obsidian surface of the Evernight, surrounding the now-dark castle and unleashing a barrage of red lasers that mowed down the guards stationed on the lower terraces and shattered the ballroom windows in one fell swoop. Fifty grappling hooks rose into the air, their metallic edges gleaming in the faint, cloud-obscured moonlight and latching on to Alqualonde's stone foundations, fibercords vibrating with the weight of each hooded assailant that scaled the walls.

Boethiah Ren had left her position on the tower and started hurtling towards the ballroom level the
moment the first submersible reared its head. She dropped down from one ledge to the next on sure and nimble feet, using the Force to keep herself steady, and she was midair when it happened— her connection to the Force was severed, so abruptly that it was disorienting, so sharply that it was as if she'd slammed headfirst into a brick wall.

She landed badly, on her side on the ballroom level's northeast terrace, dislocating her shoulder. The nearest assailant turned to her, blaster at the ready, and she spun on her good arm and swept their feet out from under them, wasting no time in plunging the dagger attached to her wrist into their chest as they fell. She stood up and, gritting her teeth against the pain, popped her shoulder back into place with a muffled curse before charging at the other figures on the terrace— four in all, rounding on Hircine.

While the older Knight of Ren was an expert in unarmed combat— and, indeed, he'd managed to take out two assailants, their broken-necked corpses crumpled on the floor— his movements were slower without the benefit of the Force. He was already bleeding from the stomach and cornered against the balustrade when his opponents fired again—

— and, because there was no other way, Boethiah leapt, tackling Hircine out of the path of the lasers, the two of them plummeting over the balustrade and into the sea below.

"That's all of them!" she heard a faraway voice shout right before she and Hircine hit the water.

They know there are only two knights planetside. Someone told them, she thought numbly, and then the Evernight closed in over her head and there was only the shadow and the cold.

The nobles surrounding Kylo gasped in surprise when the lights went out and the startled orchestra ground to a halt. Kylo stiffened, immediately on the alert, but the crowd was quick to start chuckling.

"My word," Lord Feara chortled, "is this part of the program? How very—"

The crimson glow of lasers pulsed in the distant gloom and the vast chamber rocked with a myriad explosions as every single glass window disintegrated, the broken shards raining down on the assembled throng.
Ambush situations were nothing new to the Master of the Knights of Ren. Years of training and the long war with the Resistance had equipped Kylo to deal with such emergencies but, in that moment, it seemed as if all his wits had fled. He was consumed only by one thought. By one name. A name that he found himself shouting over and over again as he pushed his way through the frenzied mass of screaming guests. There were figures clambering in through the broken windows, figures he could barely make out in what few rays of moonlight had managed to penetrate the overcast sky, but he paid them no mind, fear wrapping tightly around his heart as he headed in the direction that Rey had gone a while ago.

It was an uphill battle, in such a packed room. The night-blind Hapans could only jostle and shove and stumble away from the windows and the pulsing laser-light, their cries drowning out Kylo's ragged voice as sheer instinct repeatedly tore Rey's name from his lips. He removed his unwieldy mask, letting it fall to the floor along with so many bodies that had tripped or been knocked over in the stampede, and he tried to focus on the glow of her presence in the Force, tried to distinguish it from the tangle of hundreds of energy signatures all blazing with panic.

He'd managed to move forward perhaps about thirty feet when something in his soul snapped in half. The Force disappeared, leaving nothing in its place but an aching void. Kylo had felt this before, knew it at once for what it was—a ysalamiri nullification field. The effect set in harshly, causing him to stagger against a nearby pillar. Clutching on to it for support, he looked around in a belated attempt to make sense of the situation. As his eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness, he saw the horde of assailants moving purposefully through all the chaos, night vision goggles clamped to their heads. They weren't shooting indiscriminately into the crowd, a sure sign that this was no mere attack on the Consortium. Rather, they seemed to be looking for someone—and it didn't take long for Kylo to figure out who.

"Found him!"

The triumphant exclamation was in Hapan, the words translated through Kylo's PUT device, and the ballroom lit up red as a wave of blaster-fire zipped towards him.

After the initial shock of sudden darkness, Rey sprang into action at the sound of shattering glass. The lights and the castle's automated defense system had been deactivated but, reaching out with the Force, she registered that everything else was in working order.

"Take the turbolift to my suite," she told Finn. "Get the lightsabers on the nightstand." She reeled off the directions and her passcode, then turned to Rose. "Whatever was done to the lights and the defenses, find some way to reverse it. The tech center is on the third level, in the southwest wing." She remembered that Aleson was now effectively blind like the other Hapans, although he was
doing a much better job of keeping his cool, and added, "And get Lord Gray to his ship. There's no
time to waste— Poe and the others are still in danger in the Outer Rim, and he needs to warn General
Organa as soon as possible, regardless of what's happening on Hapes."

"What about you?" Finn asked.

"I'll meet you back here," Rey said in a tone that made it very clear she would countenance no
argument on the matter. "Go."

No sooner had Finn and Rose grabbed Aleson and ushered him away when Rey took off, throwing
herself into the commotion beyond the alcove. The comlink on her wrist flared to life, Major Moreem
Espara's static-tinged voice barely audible over the uproar. "Chume'da, we are entering the
ballroom, please state your position—"

"I can take care of myself!" Rey barked into the mouthpiece. "Find Prince Isolder and Ta'a Chume
and get them out of here— that's an order, Major!"

She ended the comm without waiting for Moreem's response, and that was when the Force left her.
Ysalamiri, she realized with a sickening clench that made her freeze— just for a moment, but enough
time for a swell of rushing bodies to knock her to the ground. Someone started using her torso as a
piece of flooring and it was sheer instinct that made Rey rear up and throw the other person off
before their weight could crack her ribs. Sorry, whoever you are, she thought with a twinge of guilt,
kicking off her stilettos and scrambling to her feet. She was upright again and—

— and she was staring down the barrel of a blaster rifle, gleaming silver in the faint moonlight—

Rey yanked off her mask and hurled it at the assailant. The man yelped as he was hit in the face by a
large, jewel-encrusted butterfly, and Rey immediately took advantage of his surprise to twist the
blaster around in his hands and fire it into his chest. The sound was echoed by several more in the
distance, red plasma illuminating the gloom at the periphery of her vision.

Ben! her mind cried out as she liberated her new weapon from the assassin's corpse and charged
towards the fray.
"I don't care what my daughter told you!" Isolder rarely raised his voice but he was now shouting at Moreem even as he and Ta'a Chume were ushered to the docks by several members of the Royal Guard. "You go back in there and get her out now!"

"We will, Your Highness," Moreem assured him, "as soon as we have seen you safely off. Her Grace will meet you at the Fountain Palace, you have my word."

Frustrated, Isolder turned to Ta'a Chume for help, but she grabbed his elbow and forced him to lean in close to catch her low mutter as they sped down the hallway. "Kira already gave her guards orders. This is her domain. Any interference with the chain of command at this point will only lead to confusion. Reinforcements will be arriving from the Per'Agthra soon, so calm down, Isolder!"

But he couldn't calm down. Not when the life of his only child was at risk. He shook off his mother's grip and raced away in the direction of the military hangar that contained Alqualonde's small air force.

"I'm taking command," he brusquely informed Captain Nu-ada Thorn. As the prince of the Hapes Consortium and the symbolic head of Ta'a Chume's military, he was well within his rights to demand such a thing; however, Nu-ada looked at him blankly and, with a muffled epithet, he pulled off the lion's head that obscured his features. The captain's expression cleared and she nodded at once. "We'll establish a defensive perimeter around the ballroom level," Isolder continued, "prevent any more of the attackers from getting in until ground troops from the Per'Agthra arrive—"

Someone else grabbed his arm. He whirled around, a sharp reprimand dying on his tongue at the sight of Luke Skywalker. "What in the name of—"

"There's no time for that," Luke cut in. The old Jedi appeared slightly grumpy. "Listen, Your Highness, there are several submersible craft in the waters around the castle. They're projecting some kind of Force nullification field—ysalamiri, if I had to guess, though somehow amplified. We have to take them out—"

"There he is!"

Several guards spilled into the hangar, some of them sporting blackened eyes and bruised jaws, all generally looking the worse for wear as they aimed their blasters at Luke.

"Step away from the prince!"
"I hate this day," Luke sighed, with feeling. "I really do."

Kylo ducked behind the pillar just in time. The stone reverberated with the fury of a dozen lasers and then he was off, disappearing into the mass of bodies scrambling for the faraway blue glow of the emergency lights that marked the ballroom's main doors. Common sense insisted that he head for those lights as well, but he wasn't leaving. Not without Rey.

More shots rang out behind him. Kylo used the shifting crowd to his advantage, going wherever it was thickest and most chaotic in order to put more obstacles in the way of his pursuers. He wasn't too worried about the other guests, as he doubted the assassins were keen to inadvertently shoot their bosses or their bosses' allies, but his method of using them as shields was not without its hazards.

He tripped over someone. The lady had fallen, and in his rush he wasn't able to distinguish her crumpled form from the shadowy floor. Kylo heard an affronted feminine Oof! as he himself landed on the tiles with a painful thud.

Knowing that the assassins would catch up to him at any second, he didn't bother wasting time by getting to his feet— instead, he crawled forward on his elbows, making his way to the dining area where most of the tables and chairs had been overturned in the havoc.

One such table was lying on its side. A slim arm shot out from behind it and hauled Kylo close with surprising strength, and he found himself in Rey's embrace, his cheek pressed to her chest as she littered the top of his head with frantic kisses.

"Are you— are you all right?" he croaked, running his hands over her body in the dark, hardly daring to believe that she was alive and in one piece.

"Better, now," Rey sniffed into his hair.

The staff members who had been on-duty in Alqualonde's tech center were all dead. Whoever slit
their throats hadn't stuck around after ripping out the circuitry panels. The ends of the tangled, disconnected wires sparked feebly in the gloom.

Not for the first time that evening, Rose cursed her ridiculous, heavy skirt as she clumsily picked her way through the dead Hapans. A cursory glance at the bodies told her that they'd been caught by surprise and hadn't been able to put up much of a fight—*Or maybe they thought they didn't need to defend themselves*, Rose surmised. *Could've been an inside job.*

She knelt by the eerily silent dashboard and, clamping her flashlight between her teeth, set to work.

Chapter End Notes

Pantran whitefang.

Carlania.

Submersible.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Early update because I'm apparently super productive when I don't have an Internet connection. This one is brought to you live from Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf :))

I forgot to update the chapter count last time, which understandably led to some confusion about how I could wrap up in only six more installments. That has been rectified and I am now eating crow because I once promised myself we wouldn't exceed forty chapters. Surprise, surprise, we are now aiming for the big five-oh! Let's just say I had some major epiphanies about the plot while on vacation.

Thanks a bunch to reylofanfictionclub and bb-8 for the gorgeous moodboard and art!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The crew of the lead submersible did not know each other's faces or real names. Better to be safe than sorry when the Queen Mother had eyes everywhere. They wore skintight black knit caps over their heads, with holes cut out in the appropriate places for them to see, breathe, and speak. They used code names plucked from the Hapan numeral system that varied with each new mission.

Currently, Jua was checking on the submersible's lone ysalamir, housed in a cylindrical glass tank hooked up to a bio amplifier that served the purpose of extending the reach of its Force-repelling bubble by hundreds of meters. The creature clung to its nutrient frame, tail flicking lazily as it eyed Jua with waning interest. It would fall asleep soon — that was the problem with the bio amplifiers, they sapped the ysalamiri's strength — and, if his comrades in the ballroom didn't hurry up and finish the job, Jua would have to press the button that would deliver a minor electrical shock to the little lizard's system, keeping it awake for a few more minutes.

He hoped it wouldn't come to that. Ysalamiri were valuable, as it was a difficult and time-consuming process to remove them from the Olbio trees on Myrkr and graft them to a nutrient frame without killing them. Even Ta'a Chume had only thirty or so of the creatures, amassed from decades of dealing with the Chiss.

The cabin rocked sharply to the side, its lights flickering as Jua fought to keep his balance. The ysalamir stirred feebly in its cage.

Jua made for the bridge, the bulkhead groaning dangerously with the aftermath of subsequent tremors. "What's happening?" he asked the rest of the crew.
"We're under attack," Se'h replied as she hastily keyed in the sequence that would divert more power to the shield generators. "The castle's deployed its air force."

Swearing under his breath, Jua retrieved his comlink and accessed the frequency used by the operatives in the ballroom. "What's taking so long?" he barked into the mouthpiece.

There was no immediate reply— only a brief crackle of static.

Followed by a garbled cry of pain, and then silence.

Jua swore again. He turned back to Se'h. "Fire up the cannons!"

*

After helping himself to the blaster of the assassin he'd smashed a chair over when they wandered too near the table and paused to fiddle with their comlink, Kylo darted back to Rey's side. The crowd had thinned out some as more people had made it to the exit, but that exit was all the way across the ballroom.

"Where are your guards?" Kylo demanded.

"They're getting Isolder and Ta'a Chume to the docks. Where are yours?" Rey shot back.

"No idea." He hadn't been able to reach Boethiah and Hircine on comm, and there was a burgeoning worry in his gut that he was trying to suppress.

Kylo peered out from behind the table. Another group of assassins was drawing near, and he began to take aim—

"What are you doing?" Rey hissed, sounding absolutely appalled. "If you fire now, they'll all know where we are."

"They'll find out soon, anyway," Kylo argued. "Going on the offensive is our best option at this
"I'd much rather prefer an offensive that doesn't end in our current location getting surrounded," she dryly remarked. "Here, I have a plan—"

A figure emerged from behind an overturned table and ran for the doors. Reacting on instinct, rattled by the appearance of Miy'til starfighters gliding past the ballroom windows, Lav pulled the trigger. He already knew that it wasn't either of the targets even before the blaster bolt hit its mark and the man crumpled to the floor.

"You idiot!" Tira snapped at him over the fresh burst of screams that rippled through the stampeding crowd. "You just killed Feara!"

Lav opened his mouth to defend himself— if this was to look like a normal uprising, at least a few random nobles had to die, anyway— but, before he could speak, a table that had been flipped onto its side suddenly rose up from the shadows and barreled into him and his troops, whoever was using it as both shield and battering ram blasting away.

Alqualonde's Miy'til starfighters drifted over the Evernight like a swarm of pale, gigantic wasps, their lasers raining down on the black sea in shards of emerald light.

The submersibles were far from easy pickings. The scarlet trail of their cannons blazed in the night, matching the aerial barrage in intensity and speed. Much to his chagrin, Isolder soon found himself the lone surviving pilot among those who had broken away from the main formation to dive-bomb the lead enemy ship.

He sped back to his fleet, dodging the streams of plasma energy that all seemed to zero in on him, but he failed to correct his flight after a hairpin turn and the sensors shrieked as another cannon aimed straight at the exposed underbelly of his starfighter. Isolder braced for the fatal impact, but what happened next was—

— an impact of an entirely different nature as Luke's starfighter sailed past and almost right into his,
their wingtips interlocking for a brief few seconds— enough time for Luke to haul Isolder out of harm's path—

"You're crazy, Red Five," Isolder couldn't help but laugh as he and Luke made an about-face to rejoin the fray.

Luke sighed over the shortwave frequency before plunging into another strafing run on the submersibles. "Honestly, Your Highness, I think you and I are getting too old for this."

It didn't take Rey very long to figure out that, when it came to fighting in the dark, she was not a fan. Her opponents had the advantage due to their night vision goggles and, although the ballroom wasn't as packed as it had been when the ambush started, there were still more than a few herds of panicked, flailing guests that she had to skirt around as she dodged lasers and returned fire and tussled with the assassins.

The table that she and Kylo utilized in their desperate opening volley had long since crashed to the floor, shot to pieces. One leg had broken off and Kylo was using it as a club, which would have given Rey pause had she not been similarly fighting for her life. He cracked skulls with it, swung it at vulnerable stomachs and kneecaps, put foes into strangleholds with it before finishing them off with the business end of his blaster rifle. Without the benefit of the Force, he fought like a barroom brawler.

Or a smuggler.

Rey knew that she and Kylo had virtually no chance of winning; they were half-blind in the dark and the Force was gone and they were vastly outnumbered, the rest of the assassins already starting to close in on their position from all corners of the ballroom. But her husband was as fierce and as defiant as a caged tiger and that, in turn, inspired her to new heights. She ducked for cover behind pillars and slid under furniture and emerged with rifle blazing, and she didn't shy away from using her fists, her elbows, and her teeth when at close range.

She left a trail of slumped-down bodies in her wake, but soon two of the assassins managed to outflank her, and she dropped to the floor the moment they opened fire. One fell victim to their comrade's blaster bolts, and she wasted no time in kicking a still-burning flower pedestal at the survivor— unlike the roses, they hadn't been doused in fire retardant, and there was a scream as the smell of charred flesh filled the air.
Sprawled on the floor, Rey looked up at the sound of a click. A third assassin stood a few feet away, taking careful aim at her—

— only to be engulfed in a ray of scorching white light from the cannon mounted on Moreem Espara's broad shoulder as the Hapan Royal Guard, fully armed and equipped with their own night vision goggles, marched into the ballroom.

"Fetharsi, Your Grace?" Moreem quipped into her comlink, referencing the same order to hold that Rey had barked when Kylo strode into the courtyard for their duel a few days ago.

"No." All the way across the ballroom, Rey snorted as she sprang to her feet. "Wreck them."

The turbolift doors slid open and Finn careened into the hallway, clutching the two lightsabers he'd found on the nightstand in the royal suite. His mind had momentarily blanked in sheer horror at the realization that Kylo and Rey were sharing a room, but he could always ask her about that later. Right now, he had to make sure she could defend herself. He'd hesitated before grabbing Kylo's blade as well, but in the end he'd figured that, the more assassins the Emperor took out, the lesser the chances of Rey coming to harm.

The lights in the hallway started flickering as Finn ran. "Rose Tico, you're a genius!" he whooped to no one in particular— perhaps to the universe at large— just as another turbolift came to a stop and the mechanic emerged.

"Thanks," Rose panted as she jogged beside him. "I had to rewire what was left of the defense system's motherboard into the lighting panel— couldn't save both— it'll take a few more seconds to power up the ballroom— now get those lightsabers to Rey's guards so you and I can get out of here!"

Finn started to protest, but thought better of it. If Kylo or his knights saw them, it would all be over for the Resistance. And he didn't even want to think about what sort of punishment would be in store for Hapes and for Rey.

The last of Rey's guards was preparing to enter the ballroom when Finn and Rose arrived. Finn tossed the two lightsabers at her, and then he and Rose were off, joining the crowd of nobles
speeding towards the docks.

* 

"We're three ships down," Se'h told Jua. "It's no good. We can't afford to lose any more ysalamiri."

"It's that pilot that's the problem." Jua narrowed his eyes at the lead Miy'til starfighter. "The formations he's putting the rest through— these aren't normal Consortium air force tactics."

"No, they're not," Se'h agreed. "So we save the footage and present it to headquarters for analysis—"

"And leave our comrades behind," Jua finished dully. "With no means of escape, whether or not they complete the mission."

"Jua." Se'h looked up at him in sharp, stern warning. "They know what they signed up for."

"Let's just try and take that pilot out," Jua bargained. "Concentrate all our fire on them."

The submersible's cannons swung as one to face the lead starfighter head-on as it hurtled towards them in the dark.

* 

Luke Skywalker waited until the transparisteel canopy lit up red with incoming fire and then pulled to the left— so hard that he was mildly surprised his neck didn't snap. He dove into a barrel roll to avoid the rattle of artillery from the next submersible and then, through the whirl of crimson plasma energy, he saw his chance, the top deck of the second submersible glowing faintly in the cold moonlight. The moment was so familiar, so ethereal, that he almost felt as if he could peel the years back and he'd be in that X-wing again, gunning for the Death Star's thermal exhaust port.

Like bulls-eyeing womp rats in my T-16, he thought. Oh, how Wedge bit his tongue at that one.

And then he launched the concussion missile.
"Retreat?" Se'h asked Jua. The rest of the crew watched in stunned silence as their neighboring submersible sank beneath the waves.

"Retreat," Jua spat out bitterly.

Despite the arrival of the *Chume'doro*, Kylo and Rey were still cut off from their immediate assistance by a ring of opponents. Kylo slammed his forehead into an assassin's, breaking the death grip the other man had on him as they both recoiled from each other in pain. The Emperor stumbled backwards and nearly crashed into Rey, the two of them meeting in the middle of the ballroom. There was another barrage of lasers and he tackled her to the floor, holding her for only the briefest of moments before they were forced to roll away from each other as blaster bolts scattered across the tiles.

"Chume'da!" one of the guards cried out.

Kylo looked over his shoulder to see two lightsabers sailing through the air, silhouetted in moonlight, and Rey diving to catch them just as the lights in the ballroom started flickering. Fleeting bursts of golden illumination pulsed in the gloom and he heard Rey cry out his name, and it was instinct that had him drop the blaster rifle and hold out his hand, fingers closing around the metal hilt that hit his palm. The chandeliers of Alqualonde flared to life, like a plethora of fiery suns, and, with them—

— the return of the Force—

The remaining assassins hurried to remove their night vision goggles before they could be blinded by the glare of the chandeliers. There were twenty-one of them still standing, and at first glance it seemed that they were more than a match for the ten *Chume'doro* and the imperial couple.

At least, that was what most of them thought until they heard a resonant, fine-toned hum pierce the
air, mingled with a jagged, grating shriek.

The assassins turned to the source of the cacophony. Beams of red light, beams of white light filled their eyes, held in the hands of their finely-dressed but disheveled targets, both of whom were now wearing identical, chillingly lethal smirks.

Rey charged at the first group of black-clad figures that she could see, their lasers bouncing uselessly off her saberstaff as she descended upon them with a vicious snarl. She cut them all down with a few quick slashes, then proceeded to the next group without missing a beat. She was furious, and the Force bent to her slightest whim almost as if it were a living thing that was happy to be reunited with her.

A grenade was lobbed in her direction. She extended her free hand to freeze it in midair, telekinetically jump-starting its detonation process before sending it flying back to its origin point. The resounding explosion made her heart quicken— stars, but this felt good, all the restraint that Luke had tried so hard to teach her vanishing in the face of her desire for vengeance. A different sort of darkness from the one she'd been enveloped in until a few seconds ago stirred in the corners of her mind.

The assassins fought with desperate abandon in a bid to complete the objective that was looking further and further out of reach with each passing moment. But it was no use; Kylo Ren gave them no quarter. Three men were lifted off their feet by an invisible energy that wrapped around their necks— two were instantly asphyxiated, while the third found himself shooting forward several feet, his torso soon impaled on the waiting beam of a scarlet lightsaber.

Kylo extinguished the blade, letting the corpse drop to the ground, and jabbed the butt of the metal hilt into the nose of another assassin with a sickening crack. He ignited his crossguard again as he rounded on two more figures who, apparently having decided that new tactics were in order now that the targets could redirect blaster bolts, holstered their rifles and lunged at him with curved scimitars. Red plasma scraped against songsteel— the same lightsaber-resistant material that comprised the blade Rey had given him as a wedding gift— and Kylo quirked an eyebrow at the attackers before sending one crashing into the far wall with a wave of his free hand, which he then curled into a fist by the second attacker's temple, using the Force to render him unconscious.

That was what he'd meant to do, anyway— there was some remaining splinter of logic in the back of
his mind insisting that at least one of the assassins be taken alive for questioning. But rage made him press deeper, brought him too far, and, before he knew it, his opponent was dead.

Kylo huffed in frustration, then stalked towards the next cluster of foes.

The battle lasted for only a few more minutes. Rey was too caught up in the maelstrom of stabbing and slashing to notice that the last remaining attacker had crumpled to the floor. Red light screeched at the periphery of her vision and she automatically swung around to meet it, and then she was staring up at Kylo through the haze of their locked blades, the snarl on her lips fading away as his fierce eyes widened in recognition at the sight of her.

They were standing in the middle of the ballroom, surrounded by the bodies of their fallen opponents, the floor a mess of bloodstains and burning petals and broken glass. Their chests were heaving and their elegant clothes were torn and they were both covered in sweat and bruises and minor cuts, adrenaline still chugging through their veins. The dark side roared insistently at the edges, reveling in the power that had been unleashed, the sense of dominion over chaos—yes, this, us, triumphant, always—

In the mood they were both in, they could have easily slit each other's throats. But he leaned down, over the intersection of their lightsabers, and kissed her instead.

By the time reinforcements from Ta'a Chume'Dan arrived on Nova-class cruisers and their Miy'til starfighter complements, the battle had ended and Alqualonde was eerily still. The troops took four surviving assassins into custody and scoured the castle grounds and the rest of the island for any stragglers, while Kylo and Rey were ferried off to the Per'Agthra under heavy guard.

They had a private compartment all to themselves, and they sat silently side by side as they listened to updates on the shortwave. Rey relaxed only when her ladies-in-waiting were all accounted for—they had made it to the capital on Lairelosse's ship, along with Mitaka and a few other nobles—and Kylo also felt a twinge of relief when scouts confirmed that Boethiah and Hircine had been found washed up on the shore, half-drowned but alive.

Rey leaned back, her gaze fixed beyond the viewport where Miy'til starfighters glided beside the
Nova-class, their ghostly white hulls shimmering in the dark as they kept pace with the cruiser to provide a first line of defense should another attack come out of nowhere while they crossed the black sea. She wrapped her arms around herself, shivering, and Kylo immediately removed his tattered cape, covering her scantily-clad form with it like a blanket. She flashed him a tiny, grateful smile, and he ran his fingers through her bedraggled hair before finally cradling her bruised cheek in his palm.

"They were targeting me," he said, already hating the way her smile disappeared at his statement. "I heard them talking."

Rey shook her head. "They were targeting both of us." Before he could ask how she knew that, she hurriedly continued, "They went for me, too. Chased me all over the ballroom."

She looked so thoroughly miserable that he could think of nothing else but how to make her feel better. How to see that smile again. "It seems that you and I aren't very popular, Chume'da. I can't imagine why— we throw the most unforgettable parties."

The corner of her mouth twitched upwards. "Oh, yes. They'll be talking about this one for years." She hesitated for a little while before leaning slightly into his space. It took Kylo a few seconds to realize what she wanted, and even then— even as he draped an arm over her slim shoulders and pulled her close— he did so tentatively, some part of him afraid that he'd misread the situation.

But Rey snuggled into his side, tracing the palm of his free hand with her fingers. "You fought well tonight."

The tips of his ears burned. He wasn't used to genuine praise, in the same way that he didn't know how to handle forgiveness with no strings attached. "You, too," he mumbled, brushing his lips over the crown of her head. And, because she'd sounded tired and her energy signature was drooping, he shifted position so that she could better use him as a pillow. "Sleep," he ordered gruffly.

As the Hapan cruiser and its escorts flew over the Evernight and his wife lay quietly in his arms, Kylo reflected on what had happened at the masquerade. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became. Why had security been so lax? How had the assassins managed to cut the lights? Where had they acquired the ysalamiri? With each moment that passed with no answer to his questions, Kylo's temper flared higher and higher— exacerbated by the fact that Rey felt so small in his embrace, stirring within him a helpless kind of protectiveness.

Stars, he had almost lost her.
Ta’a Chume’Dan was on high alert when Kylo and Rey arrived. A Battle Dragon hovered menacingly in the air above the skyline and the city's shields had been activated; Rey felt the crackle of static in her spine as their ship passed through the invisible barrier.

The marble tiles of the Fountain Palace were cold beneath her bare feet as she and Kylo were escorted from the hangar. Several fully-armed soldiers saluted them just outside the closed doors of the throne room, led by Einne Arkada, the captain of Ta’a Chume’s personal guard.

"Your Grace. Your Majesty." Einne's hand dropped back to her side. "Please surrender your weapons before entering the Queen Mother's presence.”

"No." Kylo spoke before Rey could, his expression stony. "That didn't work out so well for us a few hours ago, so forgive us for refusing, Captain."

Einne frowned. "Emperor Ren, protocol requires that—"

"I don't give a damn about protocol!" Kylo hissed. "My wife and I were attacked in our own home by people who were trying to kill us, and they almost succeeded precisely because we were unarmed. I am not about to walk into another enclosed room filled with Hapans while my lightsaber is out of reach, so you may kindly invite Ta'a Chume to shove—"

"Ben," Rey murmured in a low voice meant for his ears alone, touching his arm. He fell silent, fists clenched and glaring virulently at the soldiers.

"I'm certain my grandmother will understand why the Emperor and I would be more comfortable holding on to our blades, given the circumstances," Rey told Einne, injecting a note of steel into her tone. "Please inform her that we will enter the throne room armed, or we won't enter at all."

Einne held Rey's gaze for several long moments before offering a stiff nod and stepping away to conduct a hushed, hurried discussion on her comlink. Eventually, she nodded at the other guards,
who then flung open the doors and shifted aside to let Kylo and Rey through.

In stark contrast to the usual size of her court at any given time, Ta'a Chume was currently attended only by Lairosse and Daemora, all three of them still wearing their masquerade attires sans the masks. Of course, they hadn't been involved in a vicious, no-holds-barred skirmish, and Rey had to will herself to not feel self-conscious in her bare feet and torn skirts, clutching Kylo's cape tighter around her body like a lifeline.

It didn't take her long to notice that someone was conspicuously absent. "Where is my father?" Rey asked.

"Prince Isolder led the aerial defense," Ta'a Chume replied. "I expect that he'll be arriving shortly. In the meantime, do try to have some faith in the Per'Agthra's security measures. I can assure both of you that there will be no insurgencies under my roof tonight."

"That was no mere insurgency, Ereneda," Kylo snapped.

"No? I received word that Kalen's symbol was found on one of the bodies. What could this be, then, but the work of rebels who survived the war seventeen years ago—who decided that the Marauders' Masquerade would be the perfect opportunity to announce their return?"

"It's a cover-up," Rey said. All eyes turned to her. "They weren't firing randomly into the crowd and they zeroed in on us—"

"Not to mention," Kylo added, "that I heard one say they'd found me—"

"So they could be using Kalen's symbol to make it look like the beginning of another insurgency," Rey continued, "instead of an assassination attempt. Which it was, Queen Mother."

"Or it could be both," Ta'a Chume said. "After all, if I wanted to destabilize the Consortium, I'd jump at the chance to eliminate their heir and sever their ties to the Empire in one fell swoop."

"And they certainly came close to accomplishing all of that!" Kylo's voice rang out like a thunderclap, as if the lid he'd been keeping on his fury had finally been dislodged. "Why wasn't the castle equipped to deal with an amphibious assault? Why was there no backup generator for the lights—no, why was the tech center so easily infiltrated in the first place? Why didn't reinforcements
arrive sooner? And does Hapes have so little control over its own people that sensitive tech such as the ysalamiri cages can be disseminated among the populace like kriffing *souvenirs*? This is *not* how we do things in the First Order, Ta'a Chume! Your granddaughter—*my Empress*—could have died tonight, thanks to such shoddy security and *laughable* crisis response, and I demand answers before I bring my entire fleet down over your heads!"

Ta'a Chume's eyes narrowed. Her palm slammed down on a button embedded in the armrest of her throne and the doors slid open, her guards pouring into the room and surrounding Kylo and Rey, blasters at the ready.

"His Majesty might be Emperor of the First Order, but *I* am Queen Mother of the Hapes Consortium." Each word dripped from Ta'a Chume's dark lips like icicles. "No one raises their voice to me in my realm. No ruler I am at truce with threatens me with war in my palace. We will interrogate the prisoners and conduct an investigation regarding tonight's events and you will have your answers but, until then, you *will* remember who has power here!"

Rey knew that keeping her mouth shut was the most prudent course of action. The attack had shaken her grandmother to the core— that much was obvious from the uncharacteristically undiplomatic way this situation was currently being handled— and it wouldn't do to fan the flames. But she *had* to speak up. "Tell your guards to stand down, Ta'a Chume." The older woman's gaze flickered to her with a hint of disbelief— and Lairelosse and Daemora blanched as they watched from the sidelines — but Rey persevered, speaking as calmly and as resolutely as she could. "Your enemies lie in wait while you point your guns at your allies."

Ta'a Chume's features hardened, and a splinter of very real fear jolted through Rey's system. Eventually, though, her grandmother signaled to Einne, who in turn lowered her blaster rifle, the other guards soon following suit.

Figuring that she might as well press the advantage while she had it, Rey took a deep breath and offered up her proposal. "I think that the Emperor and I should stay here overnight to facilitate the interrogations. In the morning, we can return to Alqualonde and question the castle staff. Of course, there should be a security detail posted there to make sure that none of the accomplices escape during the night."

"And I must insist," said Kylo, "that my troops be included in this security detail, in addition to more being stationed at the perimeter of the Fountain Palace. I can put a communique through to the Heresiarch and have a few ships sent planetside."

Now it was Rey's turn to bristle at him. "There's really no need for that—"
"Hapan security has already proven itself *spectacularly* lacking," Kylo shot back. "I'm not going to put your safety in their hands for a second longer than I have to, Rey!"

Before she could issue a scathing retort, the doors burst open again and Isolder marched into the throne room. He shoved past the guards and enfolded Rey in his arms, smelling like smoke and battle. She hugged her father back tightly, the relief that he was alive enough to blot out everything else.

But good things couldn't last forever. After one last reassuring pat to the spot between her shoulder-blades, Isolder stepped away from Rey and turned to Ta'a Chume. "The assassins we captured were carrying suicide pills in their mouths," he grimly announced. "They crushed them during transport from Alqualonde to Ta'a Chume'Dan. They're all dead."

Chapter End Notes

All code names taken from *The Royal Hapan Library*. 
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

I'll catch up on everyone's comments as soon as I can, I promise!! Thank you to the always talented, always lovely kayurka, cloisismyfairytales, and shmisolo for the beautiful art and edits <3

The contents of this update may come as less of a surprise to those who've already seen the sneak peek I posted on my Tumblr and Twitter. @theporgsnest, you may want to, uhh, break out that Okinawan pineapple wine ;)

It's Friday here in my part of the world, so have a great weekend, friends. Would love to know your thoughts on this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was two in the morning by the time the Per'Agthra settled down— if one could call it that. Yes, the inhabitants had drifted off to their respective quarters, but Consortium soldiers and First Order stormtroopers alike patrolled the grounds while the Battle Dragon above Ta'a Chume'Dan was now warily sharing the skies with several Dissident-class light cruisers from the Imperial Navy.

The Queen Mother wouldn't let the stormtroopers anywhere near her private wing, but they'd fanned out at all other ingress points within the palace— including the garden outside Rey's old bedroom, where she and Kylo were holed up for the night. Well, she was holed up, anyway. Her infuriating husband was off inspecting the perimeter and dispatching communiques and generally acting like he had the run of the place. It was the Chume'da's initial support of Kylo's stance and all her talk about alliances that had backed her grandmother into a corner, unable to do anything but submit, however reluctantly, to the encroachment of First Order military in Hapan space, and Rey rather doubted that the old woman would let her forget it anytime soon.

She seethed quietly in the bathtub, her churning emotions causing the hot, scented water to ripple in odd ways even as it eased the pain in her overworked muscles. She'd dismissed her ladies— stars knew the girls needed to rest after the night they'd had— and she was all alone in the marble-tiled 'fresher, idly turning over the signet ring retrieved from one of the assassin's bodies in her hands. Isolder had brought it from the scene of the attack, confirming the engraved symbol to be Kalen's— a white caltrop on a silver field.

Ta'a Chume had ordered all memory of her traitorous firstborn expunged from the royal archives but, months ago, Isolder had shown Rey the lone portrait miniature he kept hidden in his study— him and his brother as teenagers, in stiff poses and even stiffer formal attire. In contrast to the golden curls of Isolder's youth, Kalen's hair had been dark brown and his eyes had been Ta'a Chume's, calculating and frosted green like jade.
"This painting is all that's left from better days," Isolder had lamented. "I loved him dearly. He was frighteningly intelligent, possessed of such a strong sense of righteousness—a bit aloof, but he always protected me and told me bedtime stories when we were children. He was, however, a completely different person in the end."

"Why did he do it?" Rey had asked. "Why did he rebel against Ta'a Chume?"

"There was a seed that took root in my brother's mind," Isolder had replied after a while, in a distant yet regretful tone. "It blossomed in him like a fever, consuming him utterly until he would do anything to see his vision come to pass."

"What was his vision?"

"No more queens." Isolder had returned the portrait to the bottom of his file cabinet, which he'd then clicked shut with a ringing finality. Rey hadn't pressed any further, stricken by the look of sorrow on her father's face.

She was definitely thinking about it now, though. Kalen was long dead, but his ghost had come back to haunt Hapes in the form of this signet ring. Rey had served with Alliance veterans; she knew how powerful a symbol could be. She knew that somewhere out there, beyond the Veil, in various far-flung regions of the galaxy, that same old starbird was still being flashed in secret, to give people hope, to rally them to the cause.

No more empires.

She heard the bedroom door open, followed by the sound of heavy footsteps plodding across the carpet. Kylo's energy signature was already fiery and jumbled even on the best of days, but tonight she wouldn't have been surprised if it exuded literal plumes of smoke. Ta'a Chume's soldiers must have given him a hard time, and Rey couldn't blame them.

But could she blame him, when it came right down to it? He was exhausted from the skirmish, frustrated by the lack of answers... and worried sick for her. She sensed that, too. And while she couldn't agree with how he'd handled the situation, perhaps she could attempt to be mollified by his reasons.

After all, what else was to be done until daylight? After the audience with Ta'a Chume, Isolder had
assured Rey in private that Luke, Finn, and Rose had made it out of Alqualonde and insisted that they could discuss the matter further once they'd both had a good night's sleep. "You look dead on your feet, my girl," Isolder had said, "and your husband isn't faring much better. Since you'll be sharing the same room for security purposes, try not to finish the assassins' job for them, all right?" Rey now had the choice of arguing with Kylo or just... just forgetting about it. At least for tonight.

"So much of marriage is learning how to pick your battles," Isolder had added, apparently noticing her conflicted expression. "I wish with all my heart that things were easier for you, but they're not." He'd sighed. "So just try not to make them any more difficult. You and Ren must both pull your weight in that regard."

"Well, why don't you tell him that?" Rey had grumbled.

Her father had smiled. "Perhaps I might."

When Rey emerged from the 'fresher, hair dried and a robe of soft gray silk hastily shrugged on over her white nightgown, Kylo was sitting in the armchair by the windows, shoulders slumped and face hidden in one bare palm. He must have showered somewhere else—perhaps in the guest chambers across the garden—because the ends of his hair were damp, curling loosely at his collar. He'd changed out of the fancy masquerade costume and into his usual nondescript black attire, most likely brought over from the Heresiarch, but he'd taken off his boots in preparation for bed. He didn't stir at Rey's presence but he spoke, the words mumbled into his palm. "You're angry."

"Maybe." Rey placed the signet ring on the mantelpiece, partly so she wouldn't have to look at him right away. The lights in the bedroom had been switched off and the curtains were drawn against the seven moons; the only illumination came from the resinwood fire that burned low in the hearth, suffusing the air with sweet amber fragrance. "Although I'm not exactly surprised. You always did take a mile for every inch."

"Funny. I used to say the same thing about you." She heard rather than saw his bitter, humorless half-smile, and she knew that he was talking about the war, when they would fight and she would relentlessly claim every bit of ground he gave and force him to surrender more. "In any case," he continued, "I've used up my apology quota for the month and I'd prefer not to exceed it by saying sorry for wanting to protect you."

She kept her back to him, swallowing a lump in her throat. "You told me I make it easier for you to apologize."

"Yes," he said quietly, "but I'm not a doormat, Rey."
It was the sound of her name in his voice, so gentle yet careworn, that made her turn around to face him. He was staring at her now, looking pale and resigned and, oh, so tired. The relief that he was alive hit her like a freight train; she'd been holding it at bay for the past few hours, distracting herself with myriad practical concerns in the aftermath of the attack, but now— now that relief crashed over her in waves so staggering that she was nearly brought to her knees.

Almost before she knew what she was doing, Rey started walking towards Kylo, who tensed up at her approach as if bracing for another altercation. She came to a stop in front of him and he held her gaze, a defiant yet weary set to his jaw.

_I don't want to fight anymore, Rey thought. I'm just glad you're okay._ She longed to tell him that, but she couldn't bring herself to speak.

Perhaps she could _show_ him, instead.

It somehow felt like the most nerve-wracking thing Rey had ever done, climbing into her husband's lap. Kylo certainly didn't help matters with the stunned look that crossed his features, his eyes widening in shock. He didn't move a muscle until she sat down on his thighs with both her legs tucked to one side and wrapped her arms around his neck, resting her chin on top of his hair— and then he crushed her to him, almost compulsively, in a tight grip that practically squeezed the air from her lungs, pressing his face to the sweetheart neckline of her nightgown.

Rey had no idea how long they stayed like that, just breathing each other in. She only knew that she started shaking when Kylo turned his head so that his ear was nestled against her chest and she realized he was listening to her heartbeat, soothing himself with the sound of it. That was when it truly hit home how scared he'd been of losing her; as far as epiphanies went, it was piercingly sweet and tragic all at once— sweet because she'd felt the same, tragic because they'd both already lost so much in their lifetimes, hadn't they? They both knew how bad it could get, and it didn't seem fair that they'd been subjected to the shadow of it once more.

"When the lights went out and I couldn't find you— _stars_, Rey—" Kylo's voice was a rough, broken murmur against the satin material of her bodice. "I don't know what I'd have done if— if—" Suddenly _he_ was shaking, too, this mountain of a man who'd fought like a holy terror a few hours ago and was now holding her so gently yet so fiercely, as if his very sanity depended upon it.

"It's all right," Rey said into his hair. "I'm all right, it's fine, we're alive." How good it felt to say those words. How exhilarating it was to affirm that they'd cheated death tonight. "We're okay, Ben."
Another shudder passed through him at her declaration, and then he was kissing her breasts through her nightgown— feverish, indelicate kisses, more brutally affectionate than overtly sexual. She could have cried at the thought that she'd come harrowingly close to never feeling those lips on her body again, and so she clung to him, in turn kissing his brow, his ear, whatever parts of him her mouth could reach in this position, her nails digging into his shoulders. It wasn't long before he wound her hair around his fingers and lightly coaxed her head back so that he could lay hot, open-mouthed kisses on her exposed collarbones and throat. She squirmed in his lap, the curve of his arm against her spine the only thing preventing her from falling out of the chair— but, no, he was strong enough to not let her fall, he was strong and brave and he was her husband and he was everything.

Despite the lush and lovely path of sensations that he was tracing up her bare neck, Kylo's lips only got so far before Rey decided that she couldn't wait anymore. She seized his jaw in her hands and directed his mouth upwards so that she could claim it with her own, taking the initiative in tangling their tongues together, in sinking her teeth into his bottom lip. Perhaps she was being overzealous but she couldn't help it— she recognized all too well the wild and frantic girl now living in her skin, reaching out from the sands of the past to take whatever she could get before it was snatched away.

She was so absorbed in kissing him senseless that she wasn't even aware of her body shifting position in his lap in an unconscious bid for closer and more; it was only when they reluctantly surfaced for air that she realized she was already straddling him and, had the circumstances been any different, it was entirely possible that she would have been embarrassed. But, here and now, there was no time for shyness, there was no time to waste at all, and she bucked against the growing arousal in his pants, gasping at the blessed friction against her damp, silk-clad core. A muttered curse escaped his lips and he pulled her close again, resting his forehead against hers, his question unspoken but somehow, somehow unmistakable.

"Yes," Rey breathed, eyes closed.

Kylo darted a quick kiss to the tip of her nose and then she was being lifted into the air, scooped up in his arms as he stumbled towards the bed. He would probably have gotten there a whole lot sooner if she hadn't succumbed to the utter need to once more slant her mouth over his after only a few steps, eliciting a sound from him that was part chuckle, part groan.

"If you keep doing that I'm not going to be able to walk much further," he warned against her lips. "It's difficult enough as it is."

"What do you m— oh." Thoroughly chastened, if a bit too exultant at how she could have such an effect on him, Rey contented herself with snuggling against Kylo's chest as he carried her over the last few feet to their destination, a hint of a smile playing at the corner of her mouth, over his racing heart.
It was the sound of that heart that brought her sense of urgency into full bloom. She reared up once more, slamming their mouths together in a graceless, frenzied collision, but Kylo had fortunately reached the bed at this point and they were still kissing when he laid her down on the mattress. The opportunity to hesitate, to go slow, was long since past. They’d clawed their way out of one danger and many more lurked ahead but, tonight, in this golden room, beneath these silken tapestries, they were alive and they had each other and that was all that mattered.

Rey helped Kylo yank his black tunic over his head. It was tossed to the floor, soon followed by her gray robe, which he peeled from her shoulders, kissing every inch of skin as soon as it was bared. Her nightgown was the next garment to join the pile, and then his trousers, the perfunctory act of disrobing hindered by the fact that they were loath to separate their mouths from each other's bodies for even the briefest of seconds.

The firelight flickered over Kylo's pale, sculpted torso as he knelt between Rey's spread legs, his dark gaze tracking the movement of his hand as he stroked up and down her inner thigh. He blinked, as if curious about something, and then the faintest hint of a roguish grin flickered across his face.

"No trace of the sparkly stuff anywhere," he remarked. "You were certainly very meticulous."

Now she blushed. Thanks to some miracle of the Hapan beauty industry, Kylo's face paint hadn't smeared overly much onto her skin from when he'd stuck his head between her thighs in the ballroom's antechamber, but the gold dust in his hair had been a different story. She'd had to scrub down in the sonic before getting into the tub.

"Less talking, more kissing," Rey commanded in the haughtiest tone that she could muster.

"As my lady wishes," Kylo rumbled, and her heart skipped a beat at being called his lady when they were in private, with no one around to hear, and the boyish glint of mischief in his eyes filled her world before he bowed his head to feast on her mouth once more.

Now that they were skin to skin, clad only in their underwear, the blur of kisses that followed was hungrier than ever before. Rey hadn't known it was even possible to feel this wanted, this wanting. She throbbed and ached with an emptiness that keened to be made whole and Kylo kissed her as if it was the last thing he would ever do in this life, his calloused fingers teasing her nipples into hardened peaks, his erection rubbing against her wetness through the last layers of fabric that separated them.

It took a few more minutes of clumsy fumbling and impatient cursing before they managed, between the two of them, to remove those layers. Clothing, Rey decided, was the worst thing that had ever happened to the galaxy. When Kylo tore away from her so that he could divest himself of his boxers
and wrestle her out of her soaked panties, she didn't know why, but she had to bite her lip to stop from begging him not to go. It was ridiculous, she was ridiculous, but he must have read something in her expression because he was quick to return to her, dotting the slope of her neck with fervent kisses as his hand wandered between her thighs.

She was wet enough to take two of his fingers with minimal difficulty, wincing only a little when he added a third. Even that slight discomfort was quick to abate when he thumbed at her clit and laved at her breasts, creating an intense circuit of pleasure that had her tugging at his hair and bucking her hips against the cupped palm of his hand. And yet, it wasn't enough—he started thrusting and she cried out but it still wasn't enough, she needed all of him and she couldn't wait anymore. They'd already wasted so much time.

Kylo lifted his head from her chest and kissed the corner of her mouth. "Need to prepare you," he rasped, as if sensing the direction of her thoughts. It was uncanny how they seemed to be reading each other's minds with no conscious effort, but they were both too far gone to dwell on it. His voice was as strained as she felt, shattered into pieces from the exquisite torture of waiting. "Don't want it to hurt—"

"You're here and we're alive and you're not inside me yet," she heard herself say, the words plaintive against the line of his cheekbone and all choked up with barely suppressed tears. "Nothing can hurt worse than that."

"Rey," Kylo groaned, and then he crushed his lips to hers. She kissed him back with all the yearning in her heart—no, in her very soul, an inferno that completely burned away the tiny flicker of trepidation she felt when his fingers left her, to be replaced by the smooth, blunt tip of him nudging at her entrance.

He slipped one arm between the mattress and her shoulder-blades, his other hand coaxing her left knee upwards to get a better angle. In doing so, he broke their kiss and she growled in annoyance, which startled a hoarse scrape of laughter from him, his smile flashing in the amber-hued firelight, so briefly that, by the time she registered it, it was gone. His lips caressed the spot behind her ear as his hand left her knee to wrap around the base of his shaft and, realizing that he needed to guide himself into her, she blindly reached down to help, her fingers closing over his. This was it, and perhaps it should have been frightening, but whatever fear she felt was soothed by the gentle kisses he was now sprinkling on her temple and by the heat of his body covering hers.

Kylo gathered her closer to his chest, the arm at her back nearly lifting her off the mattress as he worked his way inside. Rey's hand flew up their bodies to join the other one fist ed into the hair at his nape, and she swore she saw his eyes all but roll into the back of his head before he dropped his face to the crook where her neck met her shoulder and pushed forward another inch.
It was strange, more than anything else, at first. A burning sort of fullness. Her breath emerged in little hitches as he stretched her out, painstakingly slow, while she clung to his neck and adjusted to the sensation. She had no idea what to do, and yet it was instinct to wrap her legs around his waist, taking him deeper. He moaned against her skin, a tremor rippling through the Force as it hummed and swirled with the shadows cast by the flames dancing in the hearth, and he slipped in further and her spine arched and she’d been right the first time she saw it, he wasn’t going to fit—

— except that he did and it was— it was—

Rey exhaled once Kylo was buried to the hilt. She gazed up at the star-studded tapestries hung over the bed, letting herself get used to the feeling of being so—

— so vulnerable, so pinned in place, so—

"Okay?" He propped himself up on his elbows, tucking wisps of hair behind her ear in a gentle manner that belied how his muscular frame vibrated with tension, utterly wrecked by the effort of maintaining control. "May I...?"

— so cherished—

"I think so," Rey whispered, surrounded by her husband's warmth and scent and all that he was. "I think so. Yes."

Kylo’s eyes darkened. And then he was kissing her again, and then he began to move.

It had never felt like this before.

In the past, Kylo had always been careful about using prophylactics. The difference was negligible in terms of physical sensation but, somehow, because it was Rey, everything was... heightened. Sharper, and more terrifyingly glorious. And not just because there was no barrier to separate them. The few women before her, he’d taken them from behind or he’d been on his back— anything to minimize contact, anything to lessen the intimacy he’d so thoroughly shied away from. He’d certainly never kissed any of them outside of the necessary foreplay nor had he held any of them so close that it was nigh impossible to tell where one body ended and the other began.
This— this was how it was supposed to feel.

Rey was quiet at as he rocked into her with shallow thrusts, only the slightest gasps and sighs escaping her lips, and Kylo was all too eager to swallow them with his own mouth. She was more expressive with her hands, her nimble fingers everywhere at once— digging into his haunches, tracing the sides of his face and arms, scaling the ladder of his ribs, sometimes inadvertently worrying the bruises he'd sustained from the attack, each burst of pain a beguiling counterpoint to the pleasure that flooded his veins. Her energy signature sang as her initial discomfort seemed to ebb, giving way to an echo of what he himself was feeling, and he was half out of his mind with the tight, wet heat of her, and he didn't know how much longer he could hold back—

"Don't," Rey mumbled against his lips. "Don't hold back. Want you to do it, want you to—" She faltered for the briefest of moments, but soldiered on with an endearing kind of determination— "take me—"

Had he still been in possession of any form of rational thought, Kylo would have wondered at the ease with which she'd tapped into his mind. But, as it was, her words unlocked something dark and primal within him, and before he knew it he was pulling out of her and then slamming back in, to the root. Her mouth dropped open in surprise, her neck twisted over the pillow, her thighs clenched around his hips, and his hand drifted to her breast, rolling her nipple between his fingers as he sped up the rhythm of his thrusts.

"Ben." Rey whimpered his name, and then she moaned it, undulating beneath him as the slap of skin on skin filled the room, bringing a flush to her cheeks. How did he know she was blushing because of that, how did he know that she was both embarrassed and fascinated by the sounds they were making, so lewd and so sacred and so theirs— "Ben," she repeated, "it feels— it feels—"

He kissed her again, although it landed more at the corner of her mouth than on it. "Tell me, Rey," he breathed, he begged, needing to hear her say it, needing her voice to assure him that this was real.

"Feels g—good," she managed in barely more than a dazed whisper, her fingernails raking down his spine as he rewarded her with a particularly hard thrust. "Like I could do this forever—" She turned her head so that her nose was pressed into the side of his, her lashes fluttering over his cheek as she squeezed her eyes shut. "Like it will always be you and me—"

Oh, how his blood roared at that. How the twin strangleholds of possessiveness and protectiveness that he'd felt at different intervals this evening coalesced into some jumbled emotion that he couldn't name, something that was too big for his chest, something that lodged tight in his throat. All he could think about now was how close he'd been to losing her, how close he'd been to—
— being alone again, I was so afraid—

It wasn't that Kylo heard Rey think those words. He just—knew. The way he knew where the next strike would come from, the way he knew a missile would hit its mark.

The way he knew the Force.

He raised his head and gazed into her eyes, which were half-lidded in the firelight, glassy with desire. "You're not alone." He promised this as his hips snapped against hers, his tone unsteady but his movements swift and relentless.

She grabbed his hand, lacing their fingers together atop the rumpled sheets, running one digit along the curve of his wedding ring. "Neither are you."

It required every single ounce of willpower left in Kylo's system to not come right then and there when Rey started to boldly meet him thrust for thrust. He held her gaze for as long as he could before the—tight, hot, slick, unbelievable—slide of it made him see stars. Peppering her face with sloppy, haphazard kisses, he wrenched his arm out from under her so that he could reach down to where their bodies were joined, possessed by the need for her to hit her peak. She all but sobbed from the added stimulation of his fingers playing with her clit as she gripped his other hand like a vise, and then she was chanting his name over and over again, urging him on, pleading with him, trusting him completely to take her where she needed to go.

"Come for me," he murmured against the line of her jaw, not caring that it sounded broken and desperate, like a dying man's wish. "Come on my cock, Chume'da, let me feel it, cyar'ika, please—"

And, when she did, it was with her body going shivery-still beneath his, her spine arched, her lips parted in a silent scream, the flutter of her inner walls dragging him headlong into his own orgasm, into some blinding conflagration of radiance in the Force.

Kylo's vision went white at the edges, light and dark blurring together as his back bowed and he emptied himself into his wife, their fingers still intertwined with all the blazing, fierce, willful, magnificent certainty of two people who would never be alone again.

Chapter End Notes
Dissident-class light cruiser.

Resinwood.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

So blown away by the amazing response to the last chapter! I know that was a long-awaited development and I'm so happy and relieved that I was able to do it justice. I wrote like a demon this past week, I was so inspired by everyone's lovely comments as well as the beautiful gifts from benisolo (who made art and a moodboard), kayurka (who graced us with two absolutely magnificent drawings), do-reylo-mi-fa-so, and cloisismyfairytale. Thank you, dear friends! <3

The chrono on the nightstand buzzed a shrill, monotonous wakeup call, piercing the velvety layers of sleep that enveloped Rey's consciousness in a blissful haze. Reluctantly opening her eyes, she found herself in Kylo's embrace—crushed in it, to be more accurate. The man didn't know his own strength; his arms were wrapped around her waist, keeping her back snugly tucked against his chest, holding her as a child would a tooka doll, so tightly that it was difficult to breathe. She wriggled around as best as she could in an attempt to loosen his grasp but he was having none of it, muttering a faint, unintelligible protest into her hair.

Rey froze as her ineffectual movements brought her into contact with something hot and hard that grazed the curve of her backside. Kylo might still be asleep, but there appeared to be at least one part of him that was ready to face the day. She almost giggled, but then a memory crept up on her, bringing with it a twinge of pain that gathered in the bottom of her heart. That morning in Alqualonde when she'd woken up in this very same position, when he'd been angry and distant and hadn't held her afterwards. The errant tear that had dripped down her cheek, unseen by him as he got out of bed, leaving her feeling sated but used.

"That's over," Rey tried to console herself. Hadn't he been so good to her last night, hadn't she drifted off with his lips still pressed to her brow? But she couldn't shake it, the mark that had been left on her from that occurrence, the mark that she hadn't even really known existed until this moment, aching like a fresh bruise.

"Rey." Kylo stirred, not fully awake but dropping a kiss onto her bare shoulder like it was instinct. "What's the matter?" He sounded groggy and confused, slurring the words as his brain fought its way out of dreams. "I felt... your grief..."

She wasn't projecting, she was sure of that, but she determinedly clamped down on her emotions anyway, just in case. I won't ruin this, she vowed. Last night had been happy and they could continue being happy if she didn't say anything, didn't blow it all to hell by instigating yet another argument. "Nothing's wrong." She turned around, extricating herself from his arms and putting some
distance between them so she could look at his face, and the pain in her heart blossomed and
trembled at how soft his features were in the morning light. His dark hair fell across his forehead in
messy waves, his brown eyes beseeching, his full lips curved into a drowsy, puzzled frown.

*My husband,* Rey thought, trying to breathe out the sudden tightness in her chest. *When did I give
you the power to hurt me so?*

Kylo studied her for several long moments before *something* happened, something that Rey couldn’t
even begin to explain. He saw the memory of that morning in her mind. She *felt* him see it— which
— *how can you feel someone else see something*—? Acting out of self-defense, she hastily raised her
mental shields against whatever was going on. It was, however, too late. Understanding dawned on
Kylo's scarred face and, with it, a bone-deep regret that made him appear older than his years.

He grabbed her hand from where it lay against the pillow. She watched as he kissed each of her
knuckles with that desperate kind of tenderness she'd come to associate with him, his lips lingering
on the wedding band around her third finger. "I'm not a good man," he said hoarsely, "but I'll try to
be better. I'll always hold you from now on. After, and whenever you want. I promise."

Rey could only nod at first, too afraid to say anything. Too afraid, even, to believe in the future that
he was offering. Things that had seemed so certain last night in the dark were far more ephemeral in
the morning light and all the cold reality that a new day brought. But he was so quietly determined,
so sincere, that she eventually found the courage to speak. "Then hold me now."

Kylo folded her into his arms once more. It was reassuring, the heat of his naked body against hers
and the sheer width of his frame that was so much larger than hers, that made her feel so safe. She
sniffled into the hollow of his collarbones and he uttered a soft, despairing groan, his large hands
stroking her back in a bid to soothe. It wasn't long before she felt it again, that all-consuming need for
more closeness, for more of *him,* and without really thinking about it she slung one leg over his hip,
trapping his hardness between their bellies. His arousal had subsided somewhat, given the solemnity
of their recent discussion, but it was quick to rally when she kissed his jaw. The once steady rhythm
of his breathing wavered and, as he twitched against her stomach, she couldn't help but smile
slightly, still awed that she could coax such a response from him with nothing more than a chaste
brush of lips.

Of course, the fact that her breasts were currently pressed up against his chest was probably helping
matters along. Her nipples were already hard, demanding attention, and soon she'd guided his hand
to her breast, soon she was sighing as his fingers caressed her sensitive skin. He still had one arm
curled across her back, and it tensed around her midsection when her own hand drifted downwards.

The alarm on the nightstand buzzed again and Rey huffed in annoyance, reaching out with the Force
to deactivate the offending tech as she set about to kissing and biting at the smooth, pale slope of
Kylo's neck. There was a renewed sense of urgency to her movements; they didn't have long before they had to walk out of this room and into the real world once more, and she was hellbent on carving out this small pocket of time and tucking it into her memories to replace the bad ones. She was still tender from the previous night's activities but that didn't mean she and Kylo couldn't do other things, especially when she was already this wet, this frantic for him.

It was a bit of a learning curve, rubbing herself against him in a way that felt good and not just horribly awkward, but Rey was all too eager to power through it and Kylo helped her along, one hand gripping the base of his erection while the other guided her hips, murmuring filthy words of encouragement that brought a flush to her cheeks even as she clung to his shoulders and writhed and, oh, how delicious it was when she finally figured it out, her every nerve ending on fire, the currents of the Force warping and shifting all around them as she chased the bliss that shimmered so tantalizingly within reach. How electric it was when he started moving with her, his length soaked in her wetness sliding against her clit just right, until, at last—

Kylo reached his peak first, with a moan muffled against Rey's temple, the sensation of his come splashing onto her skin in thick ropes enough to set her off. She sparked and she burned in his embrace, pleasure rolling through her entire being in waves that curled her toes as their legs tangled together beneath embroidered stars and crescent moons.

He made good on his promise and didn't let her go, sprinkling reassuring kisses all over her nose and cheeks as she came down from her high content in the knowledge that, from now on, this morning would be what she remembered, whenever she thought about mornings and waking up beside him. After a while, he abruptly rolled over so that he was on top, smothering her into the mattress and startling a breathless laugh out of her that dislodged the splinter in her throat, dissolving it in warmth and light.

A holo flickered, somewhere in the vast depths of space. Sharp claws twitched in the powdery static field emanating from the projector. A large, bulbous head tilted to regard the message's hooded recipient with narrowed eyes.

"You failed," the rancor snarled in an eerily mechanical voice filtered through layers upon layers of scrambling. It wasn't a real rancor, of course; on the other end of the line, a holographic image disguiser was generating a pre-rendered template that shrouded the sender's actual physical appearance, and the effect was uncanny enough as to be grotesque. A beast that moved stiltedly in its own skin and spoke in a sentient tongue.

"Need I remind you that an all-out siege was hardly my idea of a good strategy?" the hooded figure coldly shot back. "I campaigned for poison. Fast, simple, and effective. It's not my fault that the
others couldn't resist playing with their shiny new toys— most of which are currently lying in pieces at the bottom of the sea, I might add! And now it's too late, for poison or for anything else. The royal family will be on their guard."

"It had to be a siege," insisted the rancor. "It had to look like anarchy. To cover our tracks."

"Well, that didn't pay off, either," the hooded figure took no small amount of vindictive pleasure in informing their cohort. "Don't ask me how, but they know it was an assassination attempt. Someone's spying on us, and we need to figure out who it is and neutralize them."

The rancor paused, its eyes glittering in the hologram light. "And then?"

"And then we try again," the hooded figure said resolutely. "Only this time, we succeed."

Still reeling—in a decidedly not unpleasant way—from two orgasms in the span of five hours, Kylo sat up against the headboard, watching lazily as Rey retrieved her robe from the floor and donned it. Although there was a part of him that protested at her body being hidden from view, he couldn't deny the lovely picture she made, chestnut hair rumpled, hazel eyes bright, the gray silk soft and luminous against her golden skin.

He also couldn't deny that there was something weighing on his mind. If the Force hadn't allowed him that brief glimpse into her memories, he would never have guessed why she'd woken up so sad. He would never have been able to make it up to her—and there was still that twinge of uneasy insistence in his gut that he actually hadn't, that she'd forgiven him too easily yet again. That all he would ever have to offer were scraps when she deserved the universe.

"My parents—" Kylo could only get that far before he had to pause, gathering focus and fortitude—"did not have a good marriage." Rey's hands froze in the process of tying the robe's sash around her waist, and then she sat back down on the edge of the mattress, waiting for him to continue with a tense set to her jaw. "Or perhaps it was good for a while, but it soured shortly before I left for my apprenticeship. They fought a lot and—and I also overheard a lot." He was a child again, cowering in his room as the clamor of raised voices and objects being hurled at the wall filled the house on Chandrila. "I could sense it in the Force, their frustration with each other, how the minor grudges they'd nursed over time were amplified. There were instances when I could also feel how badly one wanted to tell the other that they were hurting, that they were afraid, but they were both too proud to be honest with each other, to admit vulnerability to someone else. I just..." He shrugged, a bit helplessly, unable to meet Rey's gaze. "I don't want it to be like that between us."
"I don't think the talking thing is really our forte," Rey grunted. "We always end up fighting."

He swallowed. "I know. But we could try until we're better at it. Talking, not fighting," he hastily corrected, glancing at her to see the ghost of a smile peek out from the corners of her lips. "You offered me friendship, that first day in Alqualonde. Perhaps I could take you up on that—" *Stars, are you scheduling a brunch meeting with her, you dolt—* "I mean— I would... very much like if that were to happen..."

Kylo trailed off, his thought process tripping all over itself as he became much too conscious of several things at once— his nakedness, the dried spend on his stomach, the way Rey was now staring at him as if he'd grown a second head, her neck littered with bruises in the shape of his mouth. This was quite possibly the worst time to ask his former nemesis, his wife by marriage treaty, if she wanted to be friends.

"Two months ago, you told me that you had no desire for my friendship," Rey mused.

There was a tiny, treacherous corner of Kylo's mind that questioned if she was deliberately leaving out what he'd said about her love as well, but he pushed it away before he could examine it too closely, as it made something in his soul ache. "In that very same conversation, *you* said you wouldn't sleep with me if I were the last man in the galaxy," he retorted before he could think better of it. "It would appear that rot crow is on the menu for breakfast— for both of us."

Rey scowled, and Kylo very nearly bit through his own tongue in aggravation. It hadn't even been five minutes since he suggested they ought to work on their communication skills. Why did he always have to antagonize her, why did he always feel this destructive need to get the last word in—

It took a while to occur to him that her scowl lacked its usual bite. He dared to peer more closely at her, and this time it wasn't because of the Force acting up at random intervals the way it had been since last night but, rather, something in her expression that— he just knew—

"You're thinking about breakfast," he said, in a tone laced with both accusation and incredulity.

Rey bristled. "Well, it's been ages since I last ate. Didn't even make it to the buffet, did I, before the assassins struck—"

A reluctant grin tugged at Kylo's lips. He felt much the same way he had when he walked into the
kitchens of the Reef Fortress and found her covered in pink cake batter. Endearing. She was so endearing. "Very well, let's get you bathed and fed. We can talk some more afterwards."

Rey made to stand up again, but the act sent an obvious jolt of pain through her body. She winced halfway to her feet and automatically plopped back down on the mattress.

Brow furrowing, Kylo was about to open his mouth to ask what was wrong, but Rey spoke first. "I'm sore," she complained, shooting him a look of deepest betrayal.

And it was ego—it was sheer, unadulterated, ludicrous, *male* ego—that caused Kylo's faint grin to widen, unbidden, into a full-fledged *smirk*.

"Really," he breathed, all higher brain functions momentarily fizzling out in the swell of utterly beastly pride that *his wife was sore because of his cock*. He wanted to beat his chest in triumph, he wanted to howl at the moon—

Rey grabbed the nearest pillow and bumped it against his face in a gentle facsimile of lobbing it at his head. He let her, because he deserved it, and then he scrambled out of bed and scooped her up into his arms, carrying her to the 'fresher despite her half-hearted protests. *Least I can do*, he thought with an uncharacteristic spring in his step.

The intercom crackled to life as Kylo was halfway to his destination. "Emperor Ren." It was one of the stormtroopers posted outside the *Chume'da*’s solar. "There are some girls here saying they need to help the Empress get ready for breakfast."

"'Girls'?" Janassa's indignant voice piped up in the background.

"Um. Some ladies," the stormtrooper corrected himself, sounding besieged.

Kylo and Rey looked at each other, and then she squinted over his shoulder at the chrono on the nightstand. "We're expected at the dining hall in thirty minutes," she said ruefully, wiggling out of his arms and sliding down onto her feet, leaving him feeling, in all honesty, a little bit lost. "You should probably shower in the other suite. To save time."

Kylo nodded. He'd had a vague idea of them showering together, but it wasn't something he could
bring up now. Was showering together even a thing people did? In any case, they were behind schedule and her ladies were terrorizing his stormtroopers and she probably wanted him out of her hair while she got ready...

Rey stood up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. "Pick me up in twenty?" she murmured. "So we can walk to breakfast together?"

"Of course," Kylo replied, his heart lightening somewhat. He gave her one last squeeze around the waist and then pulled away to start putting on his clothes before he gave the guards permission to let Rey's ladies into the bedroom.

Esli, Janassa, Niobe, Vanya, and Sayl were post-processing last night's deadly turn of events with typical Hapan aplomb— which was to say, they were acting like it had never happened at all. They chattered on about inconsequential matters as they zipped Rey into her gown and styled her hair and applied her makeup, working faster than usual so that the Chume'da wouldn't be late for breakfast. Rey was thankful for the girls' frivolity; it meant that she could, for a little while longer, hold back what promised to be a stressful day of interrogations and subterfuge.

However, as she sat at her dresser and stared at her reflection in the mirror, she found that she couldn't abstain from dwelling on the graver aspects of her and Kylo's conversation just a while ago. He'd asked if they could start being more honest with each other, more open. But that was impossible as long as there was still one more secret between them— a secret that would shatter their newfound peace if it was ever brought to light.

_Could I tell him?_ Rey hadn't dared contemplate such an option before, but now she _wondered_. He was a different man when removed from Snoke's shadow, far kinder and more human than she'd once thought him capable of being. _Could I risk it all?_ Surely not, that would be the height of folly, but...

She'd already lied to his face about not knowing the Resistance's location. The longer this charade went on, the angrier he would be when the day of reckoning came. She shouldn't have let it get to this point— hadn't she vowed their first day together in Alqualonde that she wouldn't surrender to their mutual attraction because that would be tantamount to using him?

But her body had betrayed her. Her foolish, lonely heart had let itself be led straight into his arms.
"The Emperor was not himself today," Vanya remarked as she combed out a particularly stubborn tangle in Rey's hair. "When he swept past us as we entered the room, he seemed a bit lost in thought, didn't he?"

"Yes, and he actually nodded when we curtsied," Sayl was quick to add even though she was in the middle of the surgical task of applying kohl to Rey's lids. "Men are so much nicer when they're exhausted, I've noticed. Last night must have really sapped his strength— oh, Your Grace—" Sayl clucked her tongue, grabbing the makeup remover from her array of tools— "please don't fidget so!"

Niobe, who had bent down in a precarious position beneath Vanya's elbow in order to dust color onto Rey's cheekbones, double-checked the palette she was using with a frown. "I could swear this is coral, why is Her Grace turning beet—"

"It's— it's a bit warm in here, that's all," Rey faltered. "The shade's fine, Niobe. Please continue."

Janassa, meanwhile, was puttering around the bed, rearranging the blankets and pillows even though it wasn't technically her job and muttering about how the mess was driving her crazy. "Esli," she said, "be a dear and fold that for me, won't you— what is that stain?"

This is it, Rey thought, watching helplessly in the mirror as, behind her, Janassa pointed at the blanket that a currently unaware Esli was holding up in her outstretched hands. This is how I die. From sheer humiliation. She'd taken very great care to toss her crumpled nightgown and used panties into the laundry hamper, but she'd forgotten about the kriffing sheets—

Niobe, Vanya, and Sayl had whipped their heads around at Janassa's shriek. No sooner had they done so when Esli shrieked, dropping the blanket like it had scalded her. Every single lady-in-waiting then turned to look at Rey, their eyes wide.

Assassination, Rey decided as she smiled weakly at the girls in the mirror, would have been preferable to this.

Lieutenant Dopheld Mitaka would be the first to admit that he was far from privy to the inner workings of Kylo Ren's mind. He had, however, served under the man long enough to be familiar with the usual bents of his mood, and thus he felt at liberty to proclaim— quietly to himself, of course— that the Emperor was far too cheerful this morning, not just for someone who had survived an
Mitaka observed his liege as best as he could from his place near the end of the long table laden with deviled eggs, sweetmeats, fresh fruit, and cheese. Even though Kylo was several seats away, the absence of his trademark glower was strikingly apparent. It wasn't that he was smiling— in truth, Mitaka doubted him capable of such an act— but his expression was carefully neutral as he bowed his head towards Rey and listened to whatever she was telling him. The look in his eyes could almost be called gentle, although Mitaka would need to come closer to make sure...

He was jolted out of his scrutiny by dainty, bejeweled fingers patting his arm. "The dear lieutenant was so very gallant last night," Niobe gushed to Daemora AlGray. "He protected us as we made our exit, brandishing a candelabra. He was positively chivalrous!"

"Indeed," Janassa purred. "What would we have done without him?"

Mitaka flashed an uneasy smile. The girls' compliments would have held more weight if he hadn't witnessed with his own two eyes Janassa taking down an assassin twice her size with a well-placed knee to the groin.

As the conversation continued to flow around him, Mitaka's attention drifted back to the head of the table. Ta'a Chume was frostily silent, speaking only to Isolder every once in a while, but Kylo and Rey— they looked like they were in their own little world. They weren't even talking that much, but there was just— something. The way their shoulders brushed as they sat in their respective chairs, the way their hands on the breakfast table seemed to gravitate closer and closer without ever actually touching, in a kind of strange dance. Whatever that something was, it was worlds away from the forbidding masked figure whose wrath had spiked at the mention of the girl who'd foiled all his plans. Worlds away from the explosions of raw Force power and the screech of crossed blades as two evenly-matched opponents collided, time and time again, on various battlefields. Mitaka wasn't even sure he was watching the same two people.

Although— in Kylo's case, that was more or less true, wasn't it? The Emperor of the First Order was not the same temperamental Master of the Knights of Ren who had been both feared and reviled among the ranks. He'd been relatively subdued ever since assuming the throne, and even more so after his marriage.

Common sense told Mitaka that it was high time to turn his thoughts to other matters before Kylo picked up on them. He shifted in his seat to strike up a conversation with Niobe, although one last impertinent suspicion snaked through— the suspicion that, regardless, the Emperor wouldn't have been able to do any mind-reading at the moment, anyway. He was too preoccupied with looking at his wife.
Rey's plate was almost cleared of food— her third helping, to be perfectly honest— when Ta'a Chume asked her what time she planned to go to Alqualonde for the investigation.

"As soon as possible," Rey said. It occurred to her that the Queen Mother had actually asked instead of setting a time herself, which meant— "You're staying here, then."

"My security advisors will go into cardiac arrest if I were to return to the scene of the attack so soon," Ta'a Chume dryly replied. "I assume that you are more than capable of extracting what information is to be had from the castle staff. However, I would like a word with you in private. See me before you leave."

Kylo insisted that they ride in one of the Upsilon-class command shuttles deployed from the Heresiarch. "It's more capable of defending itself than a consular vessel and faster than a battle cruiser," he explained to Rey on the docks, his tone firm in a way that indicated he wasn't going to change his mind.

Although the sight of so many First Order ships and troops in the Consortium's seat of power made Rey's skin crawl, she knew that Kylo had a point. She nodded, and he blinked as if startled by her easy acquiescence.

She left him to wait in the shuttle as Isolder escorted her to Ta'a Chume's salon. "Your grandmother is not well," he told her hesitantly during the long walk there.

_Oh_, Rey thought. That explained why Ta'a Chume wasn't accompanying them to Alqualonde—she'd never once struck Rey as the type who'd bow to her advisors' wishes.

"I suppose it's to be expected, what with her advanced years and the stress of last night's events," Isolder continued. "Her physician was summoned in the early hours and it's apparently nothing to worry overly much about. She just needs her rest."
"Then she didn't have to come down for breakfast, surely?"

"She cannot show weakness. Especially now." Isolder lowered his voice to avoid being overheard by the guards stationed at regular intervals along the hallway. "The official story we're putting out is that it was a terrorist attack, as there's really no concrete evidence to prove otherwise. If Ta'a Chume's political enemies suspect that she's anything but at the prime of health, they'll come circling in like vultures. And, make no mistake, Rey, they'll try to sink their claws into you."

"Because I am She Who Will Come After," Rey said dully.

Isolder nodded. They had reached the doors of the salon by now, and he reached out to squeeze Rey's hand and pressed the bell for her before returning to the docks.

* *

Now that Rey knew what to look for, it was easy to spot the things she hadn't noticed during breakfast. Beneath the heavy court makeup, there was a grayish pallor to Ta'a Chume's face and the lines around her eyes and mouth seemed more pronounced. She gripped the armrests of her chair tightly, as if that was the only way to stop her fingers from spasming.

Rey's begrudging concern must have shown on her expression as she sat down, because Ta'a Chume gave an elegant snort. "Your father worries too much," she told Rey with a hint of disdain. "It is but a passing spell."

"As you say, Ereneda." Rey nodded even though she wasn't convinced. "What did you wish to discuss?"

"Lord Feara's body was recovered from the ballroom after the attack. His funeral will be held five days from now, on his homeworld of Wodan."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," Rey said quietly, remembering the kindly old lord who had regaled the table at that long-ago banquet with the anecdote of Isolder panicking while Teneniel was in labor. "He was a good man."

"He was also invaluable," Ta'a Chume groused. "He didn't agree with me on a lot of things but he was able to keep the rest of the opposition in line. I need you to be particularly attentive to his
daughter and heir, Cynthisa, at the funeral. Offer her the friendship of the Royal House. Perhaps this way we can finally bring the Wodan system into our fold."

Rey frowned. "It seems to me that we should give the Lady Cynthisa time to mourn—"

"Chume'da." The Queen Mother's tone was harsh and clipped. "There is a shadow faction out there that wants to kill you. You need all the allies you can get. Do not count on your husband, as you have already committed the grave error of staying in touch with the Resistance during your time at Alqualonde."

Rey blinked. And she shouldn't have, because that was when Ta'a Chume struck like a viper going in for the kill.

"Luke Skywalker was at the Reef Fortress last night. He flew with the Miy'til squadron. Did you think you could keep this from me?" Despite her illness, the Queen Mother's eyes bored into Rey with all the sharpness of jade flints. "Our soldiers are loyal and would never willingly divulge information to Ren or his lackeys, but some of the assassins' submersibles got away. Obviously, they will analyze their video feeds to see where they went wrong. Whoever they are, you had better pray, Kira, that they won't recognize Alliance fleet maneuvers—or, if they do, that they aren't so desperate to overthrow us that they would strike a deal with the First Order." A visible tremor of pent-up fury rippled through Ta'a Chume's bony frame, hidden away by multiple layers of fur and velvet. "I should have listened to my instincts and clapped Aleson Gray in chains, but I let him be because you would only have resorted to more dangerous methods to contact your friends. Little did I know that this would be the most dangerous method of all."

"It was you, after all," Rey whispered, her heart pounding. "Your agents were the ones listening in on Venomfang."

"Of course. Nothing in the Hapes Cluster happens without my knowing," Ta'a Chume snapped. "And don't take that tone with me, Your Grace. You're the one conspiring with a known enemy of the throne behind my back." Her every word was steeped in bitter disappointment. "I took you in and sheltered your band of rebels ten months ago because I thought you would be the one to save our dynasty, but now it appears that everything will come to an end, anyway—thanks in no small part to your foolishness."

"The moment she decides you're more trouble than you're worth—" Aleson had warned Rey at the masquerade. She'd told him that she was more than aware of Ta'a Chume's fanatical pragmatism, but she hadn't truly realized until this moment that this woman—her own grandmother—wouldn't hesitate to cut all ties if her reign was in peril. *I never asked for this.* Rey didn't even realize she was crying until she blinked and she felt a few stray tears drip down her cheeks. *I wanted a family. I wanted to keep my friends safe. I thought I could have both.*
"Kindly collect yourself," Ta'a Chume said stiffly, and Rey flinched. "It's too late for tears. Now we must devise our contingency plans for when worse comes to worst."

"Ereneda," Rey croaked, "perhaps it doesn't have to— perhaps I can just tell him—" In her despair, she clung to the memory of Kylo's gentle hands on her body, his faint smiles earlier this morning, how fiercely he had worshipped her last night. "You're not alone, you have my son," Leia had said on Stalsinek IV so long ago, and maybe that was true, maybe it could be true—

Ta'a Chume let out a cruel, disbelieving laugh. "Tell him?" she echoed, sounding almost amazed. "Tell the Emperor of the First Order that you have been lying to him all this time, that you are actively working with his greatest enemies? Child, he would have you executed on the spot if he doesn't kill you himself."

"He won't," Rey insisted furiously, albeit through a stab of fear. "He's not what we thought, he's—"

"Kissing you on the beach?" Ta'a Chume interrupted, and something inside Rey withered upon hearing what had been so special and precious dragged out into the open with such a contemptuous smirk. "Even sharing your bed, I take it? That's enough to make you forget all that he has done to you and yours, all the blood that he has spilled across the galaxy? You think he would forgive you for this treason just because you have lain together, you think you know a man's heart because you're on the receiving end of what's between his legs? Stars, Kira." The Queen Mother's painted lips curled in disgust. "I never expected my own granddaughter to lose her head over a pair of pretty eyes. Frankly, it's disgraceful."

It was pride alone that stopped Rey's tears from falling even more freely. She was thankful for that, if nothing else. It was also pride that kept her shoulders from slumping in defeat as she held Ta'a Chume's stare across the space between them and remained silent. What else could she say? The older woman had callously exposed the doubts that she'd been trying to suppress. There was a very high likelihood that Ta'a Chume was right about everything— and Rey could never risk billions of lives, both Resistance and Hapan, on the off-chance that she wasn't.

"Consider this a wakeup call, Kira," said Ta'a Chume. "You may not be particularly fond of me at the moment, but the time will come when you'll be grateful that I brought you to your senses before it was too late."
There was something off about Rey when she entered the *Upsilon*-class shuttle's private cabin. Kylo couldn't put his finger on it, but her natural radiance was more subdued—although she had been in audience with Ta'a Chume for almost half an hour and he supposed that was enough to test any reasonable person's spirits.

Rey flashed a smile as she plopped down beside him on the black leather couch. It was her court smile, the one that didn't quite reach her eyes. Brow creasing, Kylo reached out to tuck a lock of chestnut hair behind her ear, and she leaned into his touch with an almost pained expression on her face before turning slightly to press a kiss to his gloved palm.

"Is everything all right?" Kylo asked once they sat back as the shuttle's repulsorlifts hummed to life and it smoothly peeled away from the docks.

"Lord Feara was killed in the attack," Rey said after a brief pause. "I didn't know him very well but it's still sad all the same. And I'm worried about how my father is handling the news—they were good friends."

Kylo glanced out the viewport, beyond which Isolder's *Miy'til* starfighter was keeping pace with the command shuttle. "My condolences. I assure you that we will get to the bottom of this and that the organization responsible for Lord Feara's death will be brought to justice."

Rey nodded absently. There was a fair amount of distance between them on the couch, a distance that Kylo longed to close up by draping an arm over her slim shoulders. He wasn't sure, though, if she would welcome it in her current mood, and in any case there was something he had to ask, something that had been weighing on his mind ever since it had occurred to him while he waited in the cabin.

"*Chume'da,*" he began, taking refuge in formalities as he was wont to do when feeling ill at ease.

Rey quirked an eyebrow but replied with a good-natured, "Emperor."

"Last night, when we—" He stumbled, a flush of warmth creeping up his neck. "I mean— um—"

"Um"? his brain yelled at him. *Are you the ruler of the galaxy or a blushing schoolboy?*

Rey's eyes suddenly widened. "You're wondering if I have the contraceptive implant because you
can't remember when yours expires.” Now it was her turn to blush, and to falter over her own words. "Oh, yes, don't— don't worry about that— I'm, er, good for a couple more years—"

Kylo's relief was overshadowed by his bewilderment. "How did you know—"

"I just—" Rey shrugged. "I just knew."

They were silent for a while as their heavily armed convoy cleared the coast. Rey spoke again only once there was nothing but the Evernight beneath the shuttle for miles and miles. "Ben." She sounded terrified. "What's going on? Why is the Force doing this?"

"I've no idea." That wasn't exactly true— Kylo had his suspicions, but he would need to research further. The phenomenon he was thinking of was an exceedingly rare thing, rare enough to be a preposterous notion that he didn't dare bring up until he was absolutely certain. "We'll figure it out in due time."

Rey still seemed worried, though. He couldn't blame her. "Get out of my head," she'd spat at him once, hazel eyes glinting like daggers amidst the cold metal of the interrogation room on Starkiller Base. A spitfire of a scavenger, so angry and afraid.

A pang shot through Kylo's stomach at this remembrance of past sins, and he was overwhelmed by the need to reassure himself that things were different now. He grabbed Rey's hand, their fingers lacing together over the chiffon tangle of her skirts in a way that was uncannily similar to how they had fleetingly held hands after their wedding, on the journey from the Starlight Tower to the Fountain Palace.

He half-expected Rey to tug free of his grasp, but she didn't. Her fingers tightened around his as they sailed over the black sea.

Deep in the Unknown Regions, on a ship the size of worlds, a pale mouth cracked open in a mirthless sneer.

Chapter End Notes
Holographic image disguiser.

Rot crow.

Thanks to pythia for answering my question re: the drying time of... certain bodily fluids, and 1989anonym who inspired the "last man in the galaxy" callback dialogue!
Thank you very much for continuing to support this story! I've been incredibly busy this past week but all the thoughtful comments motivated me to write whenever I had free time. I'm sorry about not being able to reply to everyone yet, but y'all are great and I'd love to know your thoughts on this newest chapter as well <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Major Moreem Espara and Captain Nu-ada Thorn were astonishingly composed for two people who had the unenviable task of walking the most powerful man in the galaxy through every single security flaw that had led to him fending off a murderous horde with a table leg. Rey was impressed by the Hapan officers' ramrod-straight postures, the unflappable expressions on their beautiful faces, and the calm way they replied to each question that Kylo threw at them in Alqualonde's main conference room.

"Your Majesty must understand that, prior to this year, the Reef Fortress was a summerhouse rather than a permanent residence for members of the royal family," Nu-ada was saying. "When Her Grace Kira Ka Djo moved in a month ago, we relocated fifty starfighters and a couple of ground platoons from Ta'a Chume'Dan to serve as her protection. Any more than that would have severely crippled the Per'Agthra's own defenses, while reassigning soldiers from elsewhere within the Cluster would have required the approval of the Hapan Royal Court."

Kylo shot Rey a puzzled frown and she clarified, from her place beside him at the holotable, "The Queen Mother can't move the Armed Forces around without a majority vote in favor from the Court. They normally go along with whatever she wants but, in this case, the nobles were reluctant to put a dent in the troops patrolling the borders of the Transitory Mists as well as their own respective domains. There's only so many soldiers to go around, you see."

Kylo's brows drew together. "Then why didn't you request the First Order's help? Our alliance features a mutual defense pact among all the other things. I would have sent men to your borders, or wherever else they were needed..." He trailed off, his frown deepening. "Unless it was us that you wished to guard yourselves from."

"Your ships already infiltrated Hapes once, with the sub-hyperspace drives plowing through the Veil that had kept them safe for thousands of years," Rey carefully reminded him. "Being no strangers to the fickle nature of alliances, most of the nobles still feel threatened. But," she hastened to add when she saw him gearing up to argue, "hopefully last night's attack has made it clear to them that we have a common enemy and that the true danger lies from within instead of beyond the Mists."
"Those of them who aren't conspiring with the aforementioned common enemy, anyway," Kylo retorted. He turned to the officers once more, and Rey had to suppress the urge to make a face at him behind his back. "So that explains— albeit less than satisfactorily— the lack of soldiers on-site. What of the defense systems— what happened there?"

It was Moreem who answered. "Aside from standard shielding and anti-aircraft guns, we have always relied on the fortress' isolated location and the surrounding maze of barrier reefs to deter attackers. In hindsight, we were too complacent. Our sonars should have detected the approach of the submersibles once they punched through the reefs, but someone jammed the early warning array minutes before the attack. Most of the tech center staff who were on duty last night were found dead except for three people who are presently unaccounted for— we can only surmise that they're the ones responsible for murdering the others, disabling the sonars, and cutting the lights and the castle's shielding." Moreem flicked a button on the holotable and three personal dossiers that had obviously been taken from Alqualonde's staff registry were projected into the air. "Daynar Landala, Ylenia Maru, and Sorn Cah. They must have slipped away during the chaos, but we're running extensive background checks on them now and trying to get in touch with their families, who might know something."

"Are those even their real names?" Kylo demanded.

Moreem and Nu-ada exchanged a look. "All applicants to positions in the royal households are thoroughly vetted," the latter finally said, "but, yes, we suppose it's possible they could have been using fake identities."

Bile rose up in Rey's throat as she stared at the faces in the holos. "Daynar's lived here ever since he was a child. His late mother was the head chef," she pointed out. "I rather doubt he's been hiding behind an alias all this time, or even that he had anything to do with it. Ylenia and Sorn, on the other hand, were the castle's newest hires. They started not long before I moved in." And they had been so nice to her, too, always smiling and eager to please. Ylenia had even helped her engineer the code for the masquerade's shifting celestial holograms.

Kylo was once again focusing that puzzled frown on her. "You knew them?"

"Apparently not very well," Rey muttered. "But of course I knew them. They're my— our staff."

He blinked like he'd never seen anything like her before in his life, and then he shook his head slightly before turning back to the Hapan officers and changing the subject. "How were the assassins able to get their hands on ysalamiri? And how could they have completely surrounded the ballroom with the nullification bubble, given that each cage can only project a bubble that's ten meters across?"
"That we don't know yet," Moreem admitted. "However, we're currently in the process of dredging up the sunken submersibles, and we are hopeful that we can glean some more answers from the wreckage."

"My knights will assist you," Kylo said. "Boethiah and Hircine are still a bit worse for wear, but Clavicus and Jyggalag should be arriving from the Outer Rim any minute now. Between the four of them, I'm certain they can manage to levitate the more unwieldy debris onto shore."

Rey quashed her initial twinge of annoyance at the fact that even more Knights of Ren would be showing up on her doorstep. Alqualonde was technically Kylo's doorstep, too, and at least he was still acceding to her wishes that Meridia and Mephala stay away from Hapes. As Isolder had said, marriage was about picking one's battles. It was about compromise.

If Moreem and Nu-ada had any objections to working so closely with Force users, they didn't show it. "That concludes our report," said Moreem, switching off the projector. "I acknowledge that I have failed in my duty as head of the Chume'da's Royal Guard. I accept full responsibility—"

"No, she doesn't," Nu-ada interrupted, her gaze never leaving Rey's face. "As captain of Alqualonde's squadrons, the fact that this attack almost succeeded is my shame to bear. I submit myself to Her Grace's judgment and I accept whatever penalty she wishes to bestow."

"As do I," Moreem declared. Nu-ada did glance at her then, some unspoken tension passing between the two officers.

Rey thought of Antares Elerron, the former general who, after failing to defend the capital from Kalen's forces, had been demoted and exiled to the Corsair Outback. Moreem and Nu-ada were obviously expecting the same fate, or worse. She thought of small lives tethered to someone else's whims by virtue of loyalty to what was, at its core, the idea of what made a nation.

*I am not Ta'a Chume.*

"The two of you did your best," Rey said. "Without the Chume'doro, the Emperor and I would have been overwhelmed in the ballroom and, without the Miy'til squadron, we would never have regained the use of the Force. There is no penalty to bestow— only praise." She inclined her head towards the officers with a small but sincere smile. "And gratitude."
Once Moreem and Nu-ada left to fetch the castle staff for questioning, Kylo shifted in his seat so that his body was more or less angled towards Rey. "That wasn't at all how I would have dealt with that," he mused.

She cocked her head. "You think they should have been stripped of their ranks for not being able to repel an attack no one saw coming?"

He shrugged, draping an arm over the back of her chair. It was a casual gesture but it filled her heart all the same. "We do not tolerate incompetency in the First Order."

"And you don't fraternize with the staff either, it seems," she said, reflecting on how surprised he'd been that she knew the rogue technicians. "Although I suppose the Citadel is so much larger than Alqualonde."

"Plus the fact that most of my staff lack the capacity to care whether or not I fraternize with them." His large, gloved fingers toyed with a stray lock of hair that had escaped from her chignon. "You've been in Hapes too long, Chume'da. You've forgotten that, everywhere else in the galaxy, most of the grunt work is undertaken by droids. Even in regular households."

"Did you have—" she started to ask, and then stopped. His had been no regular household, and bringing up the past would only lead to anger. On his part, and perhaps hers as well.

Kylo looked away, her lock of hair still wound around his fingers. "There was Elsie and Beex," he tersely replied, as if every word was a struggle but he was also set on making good on his promise that they get better at talking. "Elsie was a T-2LC unit, a protocol droid, who also served as my—caretaker—"

"Your nanny," Rey said, unable to suppress a grin.

"Caretaker," Kylo insisted with a hint of disdain. "Beex, meanwhile, was a class 3 culinary septic droid. He made caf a lot, and he also watched me when Elsie was busy with senatorial work."

"Is that where you got your fondness for caf? From Beex?"
"Not the swill that passes for caf in this sector," Kylo groused, "but, yes, I suppose so. I'm not exaggerating when I say Beex was *always* making caf."

Rey remembered the child in the holo Leia had shown her on Stalsinek IV a little over a month ago. The chubby boy with the dark curls and the sweet smile. She imagined this child toddling after a kitchen droid, sippy cup clutched in fingers like tiny sausages, and something in her chest constricted into a dull ache.

Almost before she knew what she was doing, her hand dropped to Kylo's knee. He appeared to savor the touch, his Force signature giving off a contented hum, and he slowly resumed playing with her hair. She was mildly surprised that they'd managed to have a peaceful albeit brief conversation regarding his childhood, but she also knew that she had to change the subject before the amiable silence now settling over them manifested in his father's ghost.

"I made a droid once, you know."

Kylo didn't say anything, but the look of interest he gave her urged her onwards. It was a quiet but strangely hungry kind of interest, as if he wished for nothing more in that moment but a story about who she'd been before Hapes, before the war, before they met.

"He wasn't much, just cobbled together from parts I hadn't traded in yet. Typical junk droid," Rey said. "The brain module was mostly from an R5-series astromech, with an L-1g general purpose processor and data from an XT-2a, all crammed into the shell of one of those ancient dismantler units, the ones with the claws?" Kylo nodded intently, and she continued, "He was a confused, rusty old thing. I think I just wanted to see if I could do it."

"How old were you?"

"Thirteen, probably. No, no—" She let out an awkward laugh when his features softened in something like amazement. "Don't be impressed, he broke down after a few hours. I think sand got into his circuits or something."

"I see." Kylo's hand fell from her hair to her shoulder and gave an instinctive, comforting little squeeze. "You were unable to fix him?"

Rey bit her lip. "I wanted to, but I knew he'd only break down again. The *X'us'R'iiia* was raging
something fierce that week. And—" Now it was her turn to look away. "And, to tell you the truth, I was relieved that he was gone. Because then I could sell the parts to Plutt and not feel guilty about it."

But she had felt guilty, hadn't she? That little junk droid had puttered around her bolt-hole in an attempt to make himself useful, whirring and clicking and easing her loneliness for the fleeting handful of hours that he was active. She hadn't even come up with a name for him yet before he ground to a halt.

"I needed the rations," Rey whispered.

She was so caught up in her memories—so immersed once more in the gloomy hollow of her AT-AT while starvation gnawed at her stomach and the weather storm howled outside—that she barely felt Kylo's lips brush her forehead, his hand tightening on the round of her shoulder.

"You will want for nothing ever again," he murmured fiercely. "Food, companionship, a home—you have all of that now. And you will never lose any of it. It's all yours forever, Chume'da."

But I did find a home, and I did lose it. The thought sprang up before Rey could stop it, and she felt the moment it leapt from her mind to his as the Force flared again in that odd, random way it had been doing as of late. I lost it because of you.

She slammed her shields back into place, but it was too late. Kylo recoiled as if she'd struck him, chair legs scraping harshly against the floor.

They stared at each other.

Rey felt cold all of a sudden, her heart hammering from the near miss. Had she allowed her thoughts about the Resistance to stray any further, unguarded, Kylo would have seen through her deception. It would all have been over.

Before either of them could speak, Moreem poked her head into the room. "Your Majesties, are you ready for the inquest? Shall we begin with the castle steward?"

Rey found her voice first. "Yes, Major," she said, unable to look away from Kylo's shattered expression. "Send him in."
It wasn't going well.

Every staff member that entered the conference room did so pale-faced and trembling, and most of them left in tears. Nu-ada was in charge of keeping the queue moving; it wasn't long before she started to feel like she was sending the employees to their deaths. Which, in some cases, it was all too feasible that she was.

The men were significantly more rattled, as women could not be executed under Hapan law, but a life sentence on the prison moon of Eremandu was still an unsavory prospect for anyone who would not be able to prove their innocence. And Emperor Ren certainly wasn't cutting people any slack in that regard.

"He's a m—monster," stuttered one of the cooks, nearly tripping over himself in his haste to escape out into the hallway.

The cleaner who was next in line cast a beseeching look at Nu-ada, who sighed and firmly motioned for her to go through the doors.

"Did he yell at you?" one of the technicians asked the cook. "Did he use that— that thing, that power —"

"He wanted to," the cook gasped, still hyperventilating somewhat. "I felt— claws— reaching into my brain— but the Chume'da stopped him, and then she yelled at him."

The technician buried her face in her hands. "I'm going to get clapped in chains," she moaned. "I was supposed to be on duty at the center last night but I was feeling ill, they're going to think I had something to do with it, I will die on Eremandu—"

"No one who is innocent is dying, or getting shipped off to the Iron Hells, for that matter," snapped Nu-ada. "Just answer the questions honestly. Her Grace has proven herself kind and fair."

At the mention of the Chume'da, the remaining staff appeared to relax, if only slightly. Kira Ka Djo
was engagingly witty and competent and treated them like they were her equals, but they had all borne witness to the courtyard duel, and those who had been serving in the ballroom during the skirmish had spread the word fast. She wasn't as prickly as her husband, but she was also a force to be reckoned with when the mood struck her.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Kylo was all too aware that he was taking his bitterness and frustration out on people who didn't deserve it, but he couldn't help himself. It had been going so smoothly with Rey, until the sobering reminder that, in spite of the new direction their relationship had taken, she hadn't forgotten— and perhaps she never would. They'd have to talk again later but, stars, he hadn't counted on how exhausting talking could actually get. In the space of a few short sentences, he'd been transported back to the house on Chandrila, to the voices in his head and the waiting for one parent to come home. It was a time he didn't like to think about, a time that had pained him to recollect, and it had all been for naught anyway because now he and his wife were further apart than ever.

As yet another shaking janitor fled the room, Kylo told himself that some of the staff did deserve it, for conspiring to kill him and Rey— he just couldn't figure out who. And every minute that passed with him not being able to figure it out fanned the flames of his temper until he wanted to scream it out of his system, to push sound against the acrid taste of wrath on his tongue.

Damn the Hapes Cluster. Damn its noble houses whose viperous brand of politics had led to Rey eking out a meager existence in a desert wasteland for fourteen years. Damn the war between the First Order and the Resistance that would always be a wrench in his fraught marriage. Damn this whole sorry mess.

He and Rey were on their feet, having moved about so that they were now facing each other across the table as Moreem eyed them cautiously from her post by the door. Instead of immediately buzzing in the next staff member to be questioned as usual, the captain had evidently decided it would be wiser to allow the imperial couple a few moments to regroup.

“People are trying to kill you,” he reminded her instead, through gritted teeth.

“We don't know if that includes any of the people here—”
"At the rate this inquest is going, we'll *never* know—"

"This is my household as much as it is yours," Rey said stubbornly. "I brought it to you as my dowry and that means the staff are under my protection and I have to look out for their well-being. Can't you see how scared they are?"

"That can hardly be helped," Kylo scoffed, his tone dismissive. "We won't be able to get to the bottom of this by coddling those who might possess valuable information even if they don't realize it —"

"What kind of man are you," Rey burst out, "that you think it's *coddling* someone to treat them like a *person*?"

Ignoring her, Kylo rounded on Moreem. "Proceed."

The captain hesitated, glancing at Rey for confirmation, and Kylo saw red. He *actually* saw it, throbbing across his field of vision as the dark side fed off his rage and emitted a sickening croon of delight. He extended one gloved hand and the doors slid open as if of their own accord, and the person waiting on the other side was hauled in by invisible currents, crying out in terror as they were bodily slammed into a sitting position at the chair at the head of the table.

Rey was shouting something, but Kylo barely heard her over the blood pounding in his ears. He could barely even register that the hapless employee was little more than a boy— no older than seventeen, at most— before he broke into his mind, tearing out a name and a designation— *Crix Sheplin, junior technician*— and an image that lay at the forefront of the whirl of thoughts and memories.

An image of Daynar Landala, one of the three missing technicians, tears streaming down his weathered face as Alqualonde's staff gathered around a holoscreen and watched Ta'a Chume announce her granddaughter's betrothal to Kylo Ren, setting the foundations of a new alliance between the First Order and the Hapes Consortium.

"*You're— hurting— him!*" A pair of hands fist into Kylo's tunic, shaking him out of the trance. His gaze lowered to Rey's virulent hazel eyes. "Stop it! *Ben!*"

Kylo released his hold on the boy's mind, his jaw clenching. *You're so desperate to paint me as the*
villain? he thought, returning Rey's glare even though he was all too aware that his fury was misplaced. *Fine, I'll be the villain—*

"Please." The weak, piteous whimper broke the couple's impasse, and they turned as one to its source. Crix was shaking, was sobbing, slumped down in the chair. "I don't know anything, I swear, I knew he wanted revenge but I didn't think he'd go this far— have mercy on me, *Chume'da*, have mercy, Emperor Ren—"

"Who are you talking about, Crix?" Rey's voice was strained with the effort of gentling it. "Revenge for what?"

"D—Daynar," Crix gulped out. "Lance Corporal Jantsk was his— his nephew— his sister's son—"

Rey glanced at Kylo, but he was just as bewildered as she was. "Who is Jantsk?" Rey asked the boy.

Crix hung his head. "One of the soldiers killed on Stalsinek IV," he mumbled.

Kylo stared at the boy as realization set in— and, with it, the dull and hollow ache, the slow and burning numbness. *My fault.* According to the personnel records, Daynar was a senior technician, which meant he'd had the override codes necessary to deactivate the systems if given the right incentive— an incentive that Kylo had handed to the assassins on a silver platter when he broke out of the Mist Patrol's garrison the day Rey learned she was the heir to the Hapan throne. *It was my fault all along.*

**

Moreem escorted Crix from the room, placing one heavy, gauntleted hand on the sniffling boy's shoulder in what passed as a gesture of comfort among the *Chume'doro*'s stern ranks. Kylo braced himself for Rey to tear into him the moment they were alone, knowing for a fact that it wouldn't be anything he didn't deserve.

Instead, she merely sighed, and tapped something into her datapad. "I think Sorn and Ylenia were plants from the very beginning, and they recruited Daynar once they learned of his grievance."

*Grievance.* That was such a... *kind* way to put it. Kylo didn't even have any idea which of the Hapans he'd slain had been Jantsk. But Rey soon answered that for him— she held up her datapad
and he flinched. On the screen was a dossier of Lance Corporal Obran Jantsk, KIA two years ago on Stalsinek IV— almost three now, give or take a couple of weeks. A red X slashed across the file but it didn't obscure the man's photo, and Kylo quickly recognized the soldier who'd opened the door to his cell. He'd wrestled Jantsk's blaster out of his hands and shot the ysalamiri cage to pieces, and then he'd used the mind technique to get Jantsk to lead him to where the lightsabers were stored. The young lance corporal hadn't even had the opportunity to scream before Kylo speared him through the chest with the scarlet blade.

Rey set her datapad down on the table, studying Kylo's face as if searching for something. And whatever she found made her say, "I think I'll take it from here. Why don't you go oversee the rest of the investigation?"

Kylo didn't want to leave. He'd seen his father walk out on his mother countless times with arguments still unresolved— sometimes Han had stormed off even while Leia was in the middle of a sentence, and the look of betrayal on her face on those occasions had haunted Ben Solo throughout the years. No, he didn't want to leave this room when things were still bad between him and his own wife.

But what would be the point of staying? He was still the monster that he'd been on Stalsinek IV. The way he was handling this inquest so far had proven that.

"I'll see you in a while." There was a ring of finality to Rey's tone as she gestured at the doors.

Kylo could only nod, and exit the conference room as he was bid.

Isolder found him much later, in the salon. It was dusk, quiet and faded, the light pouring in through the windows glossed by Hapes' first faint stars. Kylo didn't look up from his surly examination of the carpet's wine-and-bronze patterns as his father-in-law retrieved a bottle of brandy and two crystal snifters from the liquor cabinet, placed them on a silver tray, and sat across from him.

"After last night and the day we've had, a stiff drink would be just the ticket, wouldn't it?" Isolder poured himself a generous inch of the spirit, which was such a warm brown hue that it seemed almost red. "The Zadaria system produces the best brandy in the Hapes Cluster. Perhaps in the galaxy, at that. Care to join me?"
Kylo hesitated. Alcohol would be a welcome comfort in the mood he was in, but...

He glanced at the chrono hanging above the mantelpiece. Dinner was a good couple of hours away; he had time to savor a glass, sober up, freshen his breath. Rey would never have to find out—

— and with that thought came a burst of vindictiveness, sharpened instead of tempered by a shard of guilt. He was already a monster in her eyes. One drink wouldn't make any difference.

Before he could change his mind, Kylo grabbed the empty glass and held it out to Isolder.

* Ta'a Chume had made a mistake. Rey didn't realize it until after the inquest and, when she did, she all but ran to her private office, practically trembling with anticipation. The Resistance had so far abstained from using Venomfang because they didn't know who was slicing into it, but now that Rey had incontrovertible proof that the culprits were Hapans, it took her little more than an hour to program an encryption module that would shield the frequency from Consortium surveillance tech. It was a rudimentary code and it probably wouldn't hold up once the eavesdroppers figured out that they were being blocked and rewired their sensors, but it would do for now.

Leia's holo appeared less than enthused. "Are you sure about this, Rey?"

"Trust me, General." Rey spoke fast. They didn't have a lot of time. "Everyone get back all right?"

"Yes. What about you and—" Leia faltered. "Are you both okay?" At Rey's nod, the older woman allowed herself a sigh of relief and continued in a more businesslike tone, "Finn, Rose, and Aleson didn't have time to tell you this, but the group that wants you dead— they're called the Heritage Council. Aleson has someone on the inside, who warned him that an assassination attempt was in the works. They've been fiercely against the Consortium's alliance with the First Order from the very start, but I wouldn't be surprised if their motives were rooted in... a less recent event."

"Kalen's rebellion."

"Exactly. If I were you, I'd be more careful around nobles hailing from the Rifle Worlds and the Lorelli Reach. Ta'a Chume stripped your uncle's allies of their lands and titles, but I'm sure you've learned how regionalism works by now."
"Not all of the houses that took power after the rebellion were fiercely loyal to the Queen Mother," Rey said. "Some were neutral during the conflict, while others defected once it was obvious that Kalen was losing. No matter what they say now, there will always be some lingering shred of the rebellion's ideas in those two quadrants."

"Very good," Leia said quietly. "But you wouldn't have set up such a risky comm just to check in and review political science with me. So, what's going on?"

Rey swallowed. "General, something's happening with the Force. Ben and I are getting glimpses of each other's thoughts and feelings. It seems to be random, and that's what makes it so dangerous— I almost slipped earlier today. Could you ask Master Luke if he has any idea what's going on and how to stop it?"

To Leia's credit, she took this news in stride, her calmness serving as a reminder that she was Force-sensitive and thus no stranger to its mysterious ways. "I'll talk to Luke. But something tells me that there won't be an easy fix for this, and that means—"

She hesitated, and it was Rey who filled in the silence through a certain tightness in her own chest. "Yes, General. It's time for the Resistance to get moving. You can't stay here anymore."

"As it happens, we're almost ready to strike," Leia said thoughtfully. "Our allies are waiting in the Outer Rim. But with the new information you gave us about the tracking nets, we'll have to come up with a new way to contact them. Rose said she might be able to—"

Rey leaned forward in a sudden panic. "Don't tell me anything! No plans, no locations, nothing. I might— I'm compromised—"

Leia looked stricken. "Right. Of course."

"I'll send word through Aleson once the Heresiarch returns to Coruscant and the coast is clear for our ships to go. That shouldn't take any longer than a few more days. After all, Ben's already been on Hapes for two weeks— he has to return to his empire soon."

Leia didn't say anything at first, but the line of her mouth softened. In the way that her son's sometimes did. "You're calling him Ben," she finally pointed out, tentative and amazed all at once.
"I..." Rey trailed off, and then could do nothing more but offer a forlorn shrug.

"What we discussed on Stalsinek IV— do you think he can be turned back to the light? Do you think there's a chance?"

"I don't know. Sometimes he is— gentle with me," Rey faltered, because she wasn't about to tell Kylo's mother what they'd been up to. "But then he does something that makes me remember who he is. What he's done. So— I'm not sure yet. That's all I can say for now."

"And that's more than I could have hoped for, once," said Leia. "Thank you, Rey. Stay safe."

"May the Force be with you." Rey watched the General's holo blink out of existence, and then she stared into the empty space for several long moments, unmoving.

* 

His Royal Highness Prince Isolder of the Hapes Consortium and His Imperial Majesty Emperor Kylo Ren of the First Order were— as the common folk would say— three sheets to the wind.

"Two sheets," Kylo corrected his own thoughts out loud. "Perhaps one and a half." He was, after all, still in full control of his senses, even if the aforementioned senses were drifting further and further out of reach with each sip of fiery Zadarian brandy.

Isolder's brow creased as he poured himself another helping. "Beg pardon?"

"Nothing." Kylo looked his nose down at the shimmering droplets that Isolder had clumsily spilled on the floor. "You're quite inebriated."

Isolder snorted. "You're the one going on about blankets apropos of nothing, my good man."

Kylo finished off the remnants of his fourth drink, hissing through the burn in his throat as he placed the empty snifter on the table with a dull thud. "I'm not a good man."
"Certainly not good enough for my daughter," Isolder cheerfully agreed. "But you make her happy, stars know why, so I suppose I ought to give you my blessing."

"I don't require your blessing," Kylo declared with a hint of smugness. "I already married her."

Isolder rolled his eyes. "Just take the damned compliment, Ren, before I change my mind."

"You just told me I wasn't good enough for your daughter."

"That was a compliment." Isolder took a long pull of his brandy and, not to be outdone, Kylo poured himself another. "At least, the second part was."

Kylo blinked down at the reddish-brown spirit cascading into his glass. He could see his hand holding the bottle, but he strangely couldn't feel it. Utter madness. "You're mistaken," he told Isolder. "I don't make Rey happy."

"Ah. The two of you are fighting again?"

"Yes." Kylo watched his disembodied hand switch out the bottle for the snifter. "No." He reclined in his chair, holding his new drink. "I don't know."

Isolder guffawed. "Welcome to married life, then!" He wagged an unsteady finger at Kylo. "One thing I can tell you— resentment builds up overnight. Subconsciously, so that things always seem worse the next day. Don't let her go to bed angry."

"Oh." Kylo mournfully stared into the depths of his glass, reflecting on the night he'd slept on the couch of the royal suite— and before that, when he'd slept on the floor of Rey's bedroom. And before that, the engagement and the war and all of it. "I've already done that a lot."

"Well, just don't do it again. Now you know." Isolder exhaled, slowly and loudly, and shook his head. "You poor kids."
Before Kylo could ask him what he meant by that— before he could even parse how exactly a solemn discussion on the possible origins of the tech retrieved from the Evernight had morphed into his father-in-law giving him *relationship advice*— he heard the doors slide open, and he felt the sun walk into the room.

"What are the two of you doing?" Rey asked, sounding as mystified as if her husband and her father splitting a bottle of brandy was the most peculiar sight she had ever witnessed in her twenty-two years of existence.

Kylo automatically rose to his feet. It took more effort than usual, as did the act of turning to face his wife. His very beautiful wife. She was wearing blue today, a silvery, powder-soft turquoise, the autumn sky all gathered up in her gauzy sleeves and flowing chiffon skirt. She made his world spin.

No— scratch that— the room was *actually* spinning—

Rey hurried over to him, stopping only once she was near enough to subject his features to intense scrutiny. She had to tilt her chin up in order to do so, and Kylo found that adorable.

He smiled at her.

She reeled back in shock— which, in all honesty, hurt his feelings a little, surely his smile wasn't *that* bad— and then glared at Isolder. "You got him *drunk*?"

"Nonsense!" Isolder boomed, still lounging in his chair and nursing his brandy. "He's sober as a clawclam. Big lad. High alcohol tolerance."

"Yes," Kylo agreed, because that seemed like the intelligent thing to do.

Rey's lips pursed. She looked distinctly put out, and also extremely kissable. Kylo didn't think he'd be able to plant one on her and live to tell the tale— not when her father was in the room— so he settled for putting an arm around her slim shoulders. She didn't shrink back from his touch, and he was so **relieved** that he bowed his head to nuzzle at her temple.

"You smell good," he mumbled, closing his eyes. He could fall asleep like this, on his feet and breathing in the scent of honeyed peaches and wild rose and warm, gorgeous wife.
"And you smell like a distillery," she retorted. "Let's get you sobered up before dinner. And you—"
She scowled at Isolder as she started leading Kylo away— "you sit there and think about what you've done."

"I shall ruminate on my sins!" Isolder happily exclaimed.

His eyes shooting open as Rey ushered him out of the salon, Kylo darted one last look at the Hapan prince over his shoulder. Isolder grinned, raising his glass at the retreating couple in a silent toast.

Chapter End Notes

Elsie and Beex are the Organa-Solo household's droids in Last Shot.

R5-series astromech droid.

L-1g general purpose droid.

XT-2a surveyor droid.

DTS-series dismantler droid.

Eremanu is from Tolkien's legendarium.

Zadarian brandy.

Encryption module.

Clawclam.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Early update 'cause you guys light up my life <3 Thank you to cloisismyfairytale for another fantastic moodboard!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Rey left her office to fetch Kylo for dinner, she'd been prepared for another nasty fight, or another round of cold, strained silence. She'd been prepared to have to take measure of her husband once more and resign herself to the fact that he was still, in so many ways, a ruthless man who thought nothing of using the Force to inflict harm.

She definitely hadn't been prepared to catch him in the act of getting drunk with her father.

Security at the Reef Fortress had been kicked up a notch due to last night's attack. The hallways were lined with Hapan soldiers and First Order stormtroopers alike, all keeping close watch by the many windows and balconies that punctuated the castle's stone facade. Rey was grateful for the military training that ensured none of them batted an eye at the sight of the Chume'da ferrying the Emperor to the turbolift with his arm slung over her shoulders and hers securing him by the waist.

Kylo was... well, he was managing to put one foot in front of the other, she'd give him that. He moved like he was torn between leaning on her and not letting her take all his weight, his brow knitted with sheer effort. He was a considerate drunk, at least—and a quiet one, too. It wasn't until they'd made it into the turbolift that he finally spoke.

"Rey," was all he said, the sound of her name caught between a whisper and a sigh.

"Ben," she evenly replied as the small metal cabin glided upwards.

When he remained silent, she slanted a quizzical glance in his direction, only to find him already squinting down at her. As their gazes met, he smiled again—the same lopsided, tight-lipped smile that had taken her by such surprise in the salon. It was bashful and boyish, crinkling the corners of his eyes, and her stomach went all... swimmy. Stars, what was she going to do with herself if he actually outright grinned—with teeth—one of these days? She'd probably expire on the spot.
"I merely wished to say your name," he told her.

"Oh, kriff," Rey muttered. The man was a *sappy* drunk.

His silliness was good for one thing, though— it lessened the underlying nervousness that tended to flicker in the back of her mind around people in their cups. Her time with the Resistance had taught her that not everyone acted like Plutt when they overindulged, but it was still difficult for her to let go of past associations— to quell that same irrational dread she'd felt when she met Kylo for breakfast a couple of months ago, his cheeks reddened and his demeanor snappish after the second glass of champagne cocktail.

Although, come to think of it, if two glasses of diluted champagne had left him flushed, then surely three-fourths of a bottle of potent Zadarian brandy, split between him and Isolder, *should* have reduced him to an unconscious mess.

"You have a higher tolerance for brandy than for champagne, I take it?" Rey asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

Kylo didn't appear to have the slightest idea what she was talking about at first— and then his dark eyes widened, in memory. "About that." He cleared his throat. "I was lying. I'd dreamt of you the previous night and you showed up to breakfast in this lovely dress that was almost the color of your skin and it made me think about your skin in my dream and I—" He stopped, as if belatedly aware that he was babbling, and then his hand drifted to her face, his leather-clad knuckles skimming along the curve of her cheekbone before dropping limply to his side. "It wasn't the champagne," he confessed hoarsely, his fiery, magnetic gaze rooting her to the spot. "It was you."

A wild surge of hot pleasure flooded Rey's chest, trickling down to her core. The turbolift coasted to a stop and she looked away from Kylo with some difficulty, tugging him by the wrist into the royal suite. First things first— she'd get him a chilled bottle of water from the conservator, maybe even brew him a cup of the so-called *swill that passes for caf in this sector*, and then they'd head back downstairs—

"Cyar'ika." He murmured the endearment so pleadingly that it caught at her heart, slipping his wrist free of her grasp so that he could lace their fingers together instead. "I don't want to go to dinner."

Rey huffed out an exasperated breath but, on second thought, it was probably for the best that he remained here. "All right, I'll tell everyone you're indisposed—"
"I don't want to go to dinner with you," Kylo elaborated. "That is to say— I want us to not go to dinner together." His bottom lip jutted forward in what couldn't be called anything other than a pout, and this man— this ridiculous, impossible man— took a stumbling step in the general direction of the bedroom, still holding on to her hand.

Rey stayed where she was so that the distance between their bodies was spanned by the stretch of her arm. Kylo's eyes bored into hers, soft and beseeching, and she knew that she shouldn't let this happen, she knew that it shouldn't count if he was nice to her but cruel to others. The events of today had been a grim reminder that this situation was untenable, that this relationship was doomed. Ben Solo did not exist outside of these little moments they shared. Until Snoke was gone and the First Order was destroyed, he would always be just another dream.

"We— we don't have to do anything," Kylo suddenly blurted out in a more uncertain tone of voice, and Rey realized with a jolt that she must have been staring blankly at him for ages. "We can just sleep." Even though he was in the middle of trying to persuade her, his grip on her hand loosened, as if he already knew that she was going to let go, and he cast out his next words with all the defeated valor and the solemn, far-flung hope of a last stand. "I sleep better when I'm with you." He paused. "I sleep, period."

And Rey thought of green blade-light mirrored in a frightened boy's brown eyes as he looked up at the face of the uncle who would have murdered him in his bed.

What is one more night before the reckoning? she asked herself as she studied her husband's scarred, gentle features. What is kindness? He was abandoned just like me. He was so lonely for so long, as I was.

What is mercy?

She stepped towards him. He pulled her close, crushing her to his chest, and, when she untangled herself from him after several long moments, it was to take his hand and lead him to their bedroom.

Kylo was hard-pressed to continue denying that he was well and truly sauced. The world had taken on a surreal, faded quality to it, and sensation in his extremities was little more than a theoretical concept at this point.
"Your father," he gravely pronounced as Rey coaxed him into a sitting position at the edge of the bed, "is a miscreant."

"He takes after his son-in-law in that regard," she retorted, kneeling between his legs.

Kylo nearly choked on his own tongue. Stars, she couldn't just drop down into that position without so much as a by-your-leave— it made him think of— of—

There was a brief tug from down below. Rey had yanked off his left boot and was now unfastening the other, her head bowed mere inches away from his lap. He thought of how he'd bury his fingers in her glorious hair, mess it all up while she—

She rose to her feet, and he thanked whatever higher powers existed that his embarrassed blush could feasibly be ascribed to the alcohol. He then tried to help her wrestle off his gloves but he wasn't of much use, his arms were too heavy, they were made of lead. His poor little Empress was doing all the work, and the only way to make it up to her that he could conceive of in his addled state was to swing her around and tackle her onto the sheets once she'd finished removing his gloves.

Rey squeaked as she fell back against the pillows. Kylo landed on top of her, trailing loud, messy kisses down the elegant slope of her neck. She smelled delectable, she felt so soft and warm, and he could just curl around her forever, let her soothe the jagged edges of this life.

"Ben," she protested through a breathless giggle when he began nipping at her throat. "You're lucky I know how to Force-heal."

He pulled back to admire his own handiwork, the carnelian bruises that now dotted her golden skin like stray rose petals. "I wish you wouldn't heal them," he admitted. "I realize it's necessary for you to do so, but—" He ran a fingertip over one mark, careful not to press too hard and cause undue pain. "It's something of mine that can stay with you. So you don't forget what we do when we're alone." He fumbled around the bed for her hand and then brought it to his face, tucking his scarred cheek into her palm. "Like this," he rasped. "This is yours. At first, I told myself that I kept it as a reminder of my failure. That it was a symbol of the grudge I held against you. But the truth is..." He turned to kiss her palm the way she'd kissed his earlier this morning as they journeyed across the Evernight. "The truth, which I refused to acknowledge for the better part of two years, is that I wanted to remember the look in your eyes from the forest. You were magnificent in all that snow. I'd never met anyone like you before."

"Two years?" Rey echoed. "You thought of me— even before? Back when we were still—"
Kylo almost told her then. About the brothels, about the women who resembled her, about all of it. The confession rolled easily onto the tip of his brandy-loosened tongue. But fear rose at the last second, stoppering his words. He didn't want to hurt her any more than he already had with his actions over the last three years—and, somehow, he knew that it would hurt her, if he brought up past indiscretions while they lay in their marriage bed. He was a fool in many ways but not in this.

And so he nodded instead.

She looped her arms around his neck, pulling him in so that their lips could meet.

For Kylo, time passed in even more of a haze than it usually did whenever Rey's mouth was attached to his own. He'd never kissed a woman while drunk before, and it was a lush, heady experience. She was so sweet beneath him, letting him take what she gave, sighing and smiling and her Force signature alight in his arms.

The more they kissed, however, the more the guilt threaded through his system like an ominous current lurking beneath the tide of pleasure, until at last he was consumed by the burning need to make amends. She'd been his first in other ways, and he sought to relive that now, wrenching his mouth from hers so that he could put it to other uses. Unfortunately, it wasn't a smooth transition—there were multiple layers to her skirts and the sudden switch from being on top of her to kneeling between her legs left his alcohol-soaked mind quite disoriented. Maker, he couldn't even find her thighs, they were hidden away by clouds of chiffon...

He felt Rey peering down at him as he wrestled with the yards of fabric. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Want to eat you out," he sullenly mumbled, groping around for—ah, yes, here was her knee, and he kissed it in relief before attempting to free the leg it was attached to from the tangle of her skirts. "Want to go down on my wife's pretty little cu—"

"Ben," she half laughed, half groaned. He darted a glance at her face and it was the most fetching shade of pink. "When you say things like that, I—mmph!"

Kylo had managed to grab hold of her skirts, triumphantly pushing them away from her legs. In his impatience, he'd tossed them over her head and, when he looked up again at her muffled exclamation, it was to see her batting numerous chiffon veils away from her mouth.
Stars, he was a bumbling idiot. He began to utter a stricken apology, but he realized with a jolt that she was laughing for real, her shoulders shaking and her hazel eyes sparkling with good-natured humor.

Are you happy? he longed to ask. Your father told me I make you happy, was he right, please let him be right—

But the loveliness of her unabashed mirth rendered him speechless and, in any case, she spoke first. "You're too drunk," she said through another burst of giggles, rearranging her skirts over her thighs and then holding her arms out to him. "Come back here. Sleep it off."

There was a part of Kylo that wanted to protest. They still hadn't resolved their earlier conflict, and Isolder's advice was fresh in his mind. He wasn't so drunk as to be unaware that his actions during the inquest weren't easily forgivable, and there was also that greater sin overshadowing all the others — the fall of the Resistance that Rey blamed him for. Although she herself seemed to have forgotten all about it, with that tender expression on her face...

The sneaking suspicion occurred to Kylo then that his wife was very good at compartmentalizing. At lying to herself, and adjusting to whatever the situation demanded— even if it meant putting a lid on darker feelings. It was not a talent that boded well for... for this, for what he was trying to build between them.

But perhaps it had always been a losing battle, building something on foundations the only ironclad part of which was the treaty that had prevented another war by binding them in marriage. The rest of it was shaky. Ephemeral.

And he was tired and overwrought and one slip of willpower away from falling into an alcoholic stupor.

What was one more night?

Kylo crawled back up, resting his head on Rey's slight chest. She wrapped her slim arms around him and he closed his eyes, nuzzling at the valley between her breasts while her fingers carded through his hair.
"Give that to me again, slower," Finn said.

Rose's upper lip curled with an impatience he'd learned not to take personally. She was just wired that way, her mind flitting from one idea to the next unfettered by trivial concerns such as waiting for other people to catch up. "All right," she said, gesturing animatedly with the hydrospanner she'd been using on the Sphyrna-class corvette's underbelly, to ascertain that it was spaceworthy in preparation for the Resistance's flight from the Hapes Cluster, "so we can't send direct communiques to Poe's squadron and our allies in the Outer Rim because the First Order's tracking nets will be able to locate the origin point and investigate it quickly using ships powered by their sub-hyperspace drives."

Finn nodded, leaning forward so that he could hear her over the clamor that other mechanics were making in the hangar bay. "Right."

"But hundreds— if not thousands— of innocuous broadcasts are transmitted to the Outer Rim everyday," Rose continued. "Personal messages, advertisements, news, holodramas, and so much more. What we can do is piggyback on these transmissions— that way, our messages will slip through the First Order nets undetected and our friends can decrypt them on the other side." She beamed, watching understanding dawn on Finn's face. "It's called a ghostwave. Experimental tech developed by the New Republic that never quite got off the ground before the Hosnian system was destroyed. I've been studying the plans, though, and I think I can get it up and running."

"Okay," Finn said, his heart racing with some spark of intuition, that constant pull that he now ascribed to the Force, telling him that this could work, that there was hope, "okay, but we still need to inform Poe and the others so that they'll know what specific transmissions to decode."

"That's what we have Aleson for."

The sun was setting on Kavan, its red-gold light transforming the twisting, labyrinthine city known as the Serpent's Trace into a river of fire that, true to its name, snaked along the mountainside, culminating in an assemblage of silver towers that crowned the summit.

A black shuttle made planetfall, silhouetted against the burning sky like a gigantic vulture before it eased its way between the towers and onto the landing pad hidden in their midst.
Several minutes later, Procyon Kantale, the young Lord of Stormhold, walked into Aleson Gray's private drawing room. A bottle of Hapan gold had been laid out in preparation for his arrival and he helped himself to a glass, lounging insouciantly on the leather couch as his tawny eyes watched Aleson seal the tower windows with the press of a button.

Once all of the metal panels had slid into place to shut out prying eyes, Aleson took a seat opposite his friend. "Have you got any names for me?"

Kantale shook his head. "The Heritage Council doesn't trust me enough to let me into their inner circle yet. I think Thane and Galney are a given, though."

"I'd wager a tidy sum on that as well," said Aleson. "I thought for sure that Feara had something to do with it, but..."

Kantale snorted. "Feara was too much of a traditionalist. He would never have shaken up the status quo like that. His daughter, on the other hand, is an entirely different story."

Aleson nodded. There was a brief silence as the two men considered Cynthisa Varless. Her mother had been second in line to the rulership of K'Farri, where the prized crystals grew, and there were rumors that she'd poisoned her older sister to gain control— a plan that had backfired when the dying Ducha used her last moments to legitimize her bastard infant daughter, Osira, with strict instructions that Osira not be left under her sister's care. The aforementioned sister had gone on to marry Jobal Feara of Wodan, and it was no secret that the child she'd had with him had inherited the chip on her mother's shoulder.

Kantale let out a long, slow whistle. "Poor Cyn, if she's involved— imagine plotting to assassinate the Emperor and the Chume'da and not only failing, but also getting your father murdered in the process. Tough break."

"I never liked her much," Aleson mused. "She was horrible to Lairelosse when we were children."

"She was," Kantale gravely agreed. "By the way, speaking of the Ducha Yliri, is she the one who put you up to this?"

"No. I have a life debt to Kira Ka Djo, remember?"
Kantale tilted his head, patient as a cat. "And...?"

Aleson sighed. "And by protecting the Chume'da, I can protect those closest to her. An upheaval in the succession now would leave Laire out in the wash, since she has so firmly allied herself to the current Royal House."

"There he is." Kantale smirked. "There's the impetuous romantic we all know and love." He held out his wine glass. "Cheers, my lord."

Aleson rolled his eyes but dutifully clinked his glass against the other man's. He hadn't told Kantale about the Resistance yet— the fewer people who knew, the better— and Lairelosse was, for all intents and purposes, a convenient excuse.

Even so, Aleson felt a twinge of guilt, because she deserved to be so much more than that.

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In Alqualonde, Kylo Ren woke up with a blinding headache.

The bedroom was dark— security protocol had dictated that Rey keep the balcony doors shut and the curtains drawn over the glass, but a single beam of moonlight had penetrated through a gap in the luxurious fabrics, bright enough to make Kylo wince. His discomfort was mildly alleviated by the fact that Rey was still beneath him, holding him as she slept in much the same way that he was holding her, their arms so tightly wrapped around each other that there could never be any intention of letting go. If not for the peaceful line of her mouth and the contented hum of her Force signature, he would have worried that she was being crushed under his weight.

Yes, he really could have stayed like this forever, but his head was killing him and his mouth was as dry as dust. A cursory glance at the chrono on the nightstand revealed that it was eleven in the evening. They'd missed dinner.

On cue, his stomach growled. It was a nauseating sensation, to have the body demand food while also feeling like he was one sudden movement away from vomiting.

*I am hungover,* Kylo realized with no small trace of incredulity.
His splitting migraine and parched throat soon became unbearable, and he extricated himself from Rey’s embrace. She stirred in her sleep, muttering a faint protest, and he pressed a dry, apologetic kiss to her temple before clambering out of bed.

There was food on the table in the suite’s dining area—Rey must have commed the staff to have it sent up. After guzzling an entire bottle of blessedly cold water, Kylo greedily wolfed down a plateful of cold dru’un slices, kodari rice, and picked blackbeak egg, and he was feeling almost human again by the time Rey padded into the room, all disheveled chestnut hair and rumpled chiffon dress.

She sat down and silently ate with him, her appetite matching his as if instinctively compensating for the dinner she’d missed. He watched her, stricken, remembering the past that he’d seen in her mind. *I will never make you do that again,* he vowed. *You will never skip another meal because of me.*

"I apologize," Kylo announced into the stillness of the dining area. "I know you dislike it when I drink. I shouldn't have."

Rey paused, cheeks bulging as she contemplated him from across the table, and when she swallowed he had to bite his tongue to refrain from admonishing her to chew her food. "In all honesty, that didn't bother me as much as how you treated our staff during the inquest," she said. "It reminded me of my own interrogation at your hands."

He flinched. "I had no wish to hurt you. Even then."

"But you hurt Crix today," she pointed out. "And you hurt Poe Dameron. He told me about it once. You left a wound in his mind that... lingered for a while." She glanced away for a second, as if lost in memory, and when her hazel eyes flicked back to Kylo they were wide and plaintive. "Ben, I don't want to be the exception to the rule. I think leaders should be judged by how they treat their people, and that the Force judges us by how we use it. I— I would appreciate it if you could find it in your heart to understand where I'm coming from."

"I will," Kylo said, utterly thrown by her gentle earnestness, which he hadn't expected and which he wasn't sure he deserved. "I'll try."

Rey flashed a tremulous smile at him before turning solemn again. "And, just to put it out there, I don't blame you for the assassination attempt."

He blinked. "You don't?"
"You shouldn't have killed Jantsk or any of the other soldiers at that garrison," she said slowly, "but Daynar Landala also shouldn't have killed his coworkers and put all those lives in the ballroom at risk. I think it's up to us, as individuals, how to respond to violence—whether we continue the cycle or put an end to it." She seemed to be trying to tell him something else, she seemed to be getting at something else, but he couldn't grasp the shape of it, there were still so many things left unsaid. "So, no, I don't blame you."

"You blame me for other things, though."

Rey's gaze dropped to the table, and something shattered in Kylo's chest. "I need to know," he quietly continued, "if you will ever be able to separate me from the war, or if it will always be a distance between us. And I also need to know if you think it's unfair for me to ask that of you in the first place."

"I don't have any answers for you yet," she finally admitted after a long silence. "All I'm certain of at this point is that I wish you and I had met some other way."

Her voice was thick and faltering at the end, as if choked with pent-up tears, and, stars, perhaps it was the hangover, but Kylo could also feel a stinging in the space behind his eyes.

* *

Rey disappeared into the en suite after their late dinner, emerging with her hair down and her face scrubbed clean, wearing another one of her endless parade of nightgowns that seemed to have been designed specifically for the purpose of torturing Kylo. She slid under the covers without looking at him, and he beat a hasty retreat to conduct his own nightly ablutions. He brushed his teeth even more thoroughly than usual, making sure to eradicate the last traces of alcohol from his breath. As he did this, he tried to avoid his own gaze in the mirror for fear that he'd find his father staring back at him, bleary-eyed and piling on the mouthwash and the aftershave. "I try not to go to bed reeking of booze, kid. It's disrespectful to your mother."

Now that he'd gotten some food into his stomach and staved off dehydration, Kylo was able to marshal a surge of healing energy. His headache vanished, like a breath that had been exhaled at long last, and he allowed his shoulders to momentarily sag in relief. When he returned to the bed in his sleep pants, the Rey-shaped lump beneath the duvet was lying on her back instead of on her side, which meant she hadn't fallen asleep yet. She didn't resist when Kylo tentatively tugged at his half of the covers, pulling them up to his waist as he stretched out beside her.
"How did you learn to heal?" she surprised him by asking, her voice muffled by the layers of silk and eiderdown thrown over her head. She must have felt that distinctive flare in the Force through the walls. "I thought it was a light side ability."

Kylo recalled the night of his duel with Aleson Gray, how Rey had come to his room afterwards, offering to take care of his wound. She'd been startled to find him all sewn up and none the worse for wear. He told her now what he hadn't told her then. "The light sanctifies, yes, but the darkness also nurtures. They're two sides of the same coin as far as Force-healing is concerned, and perhaps even in other areas. Your master never taught you that because he feared the other side all his life."

"He was your master, too, once."

"And did he tell you what happened, the night I destroyed his temple?" Kylo mustered a careful, level tone over the roil of anger and betrayal that any mention of Luke Skywalker always elicited. "Did he tell you what he did?"

Kylo realized soon enough that the answer was yes. Rey stayed silent for far too long for it to be anything else. But he waited for her to speak and, when she did, it was after poking her head out from underneath the duvet, so that he was looking into her moonlit eyes when she said, "Yes. And he told me he was sorry."

Now Kylo couldn't help snapping at her. "It's far too late for that."

Rey tensed. "What I said while we were eating, about how it's up to us whether to end the cycle of violence or to continue it, that applies to you as well."

"You speak of rebuilding, of new eras. Sometimes the only way to make that happen is to tear down all the old things," Kylo retorted. "That includes Skywalker and the Resistance. And when I find them and deal with them accordingly, the question is— where will you stand?"

It wasn't until the words left his lips that he became fully aware of just how much he had dreaded asking her that. After all, she'd declared two months ago, onboard the Heresiarch, that she wouldn't hesitate to join the rest of the galaxy once they denounced First Order rule. A lot had changed since then but, when it came right down to it, their respective ideologies couldn't have been any more different.

Rey turned over to one side, facing away from him. "I'd rather not do this now," she said coldly.
"Then when, Rey?" Kylo growled. "Sooner or later, my forces will find the Resistance hideout, and you are going to have to choose."

She didn't say anything, and he knew that the conversation was over. At least, for tonight. While he chafed at her stubbornness, pushing her into decisions she wasn't ready to make would only aggravate their complicated situation.

An idea occurred to him as he lay seething in the dark. If he brought her to Coruscant, she would see for herself the improvements he was trying to make in the galactic structure, some of which had already started to take effect. Perhaps that would convince her that he was in the right. He needed to get her away from the Hapes Cluster, anyway, while the assassins were still at large. She would be safe in the heart of his empire, and perhaps her own heart could be turned. Two birds, one stone.

But first things first— don't let her go to bed angry.

Rey stiffened when Kylo reached out to clutch at her shoulder, nudging her to face him once more. The silvered parts of her expression that weren't cloaked in shadow seemed resigned, almost sad. He hauled her up against him and kissed her gently in an attempt to show her that what they had was good, that it could be good despite everything else.

It took a while for her to relax in his arms. He didn't let up— he refused to let up— pecking at the corner of her mouth, nibbling at her bottom lip, pouring all the tenderness he felt for her and all the desperation with which he wished to overcome the hurdles in their path into the kiss.

Eventually, she responded, opening her mouth to him as her fingers tentatively caressed the line of his jaw. It was almost a given that they'd fight again tomorrow, when he brought up them retreating to First Order territory, but for now—

"Good night, Rey," he mumbled against her lips.

She broke the kiss, burrowing her face in his chest. "Good night, Ben," she whispered against the beat of his heart.
Deep within the fortified walls of the Per'Agthra, a noblewoman curtsied to the Queen Mother in an otherwise deserted throne room. She wore a velvet gown adorned with iridescent feathers and she walked with a slight limp, her left leg having been replaced with a prosthetic after its battlefield amputation during the Hapan civil war.

"My hand will be forced soon," Ta'a Chume curtly informed her. "We need to speed things up. Can you do that?"

The other woman smiled, dark and gleaming. "Yes, Ereneda."

Chapter End Notes

Heritage Council, for reference, but very spoiler-y.

Conservator.

Special shoutout to Cosmognika and Melusine11 for helping me choose the appropriate onomatopoeia for "Rey getting something in her mouth, no, not that!"

I envision Rey's outfit in this chapter as a less flowery version of this gown linked to me by beautifulmonsterseverywhere.

Sphyrna-class corvette.

Holodrama.

Ghostwave.

Baked dru'un slices in fish sauce.

Kodari rice.

Pickled blackbeak egg.

It's been a while so, as a refresher, Procyon Kantale was one of the lords who sided with Aleson at the banquet, while Osira Varless was one of the ladies who visited Rey in Chapter 25.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait, I had some financial problems going on that were stressing me out and I even ended up dogsitting two good good baby poodles for that good good extra cash, but I'm really proud of this chapter and I hope you guys like it, too. Comments would be greatly appreciated!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Isolder tottered into the dining room for breakfast, wincing at the scrape of chair legs against the tiles as Rey's ladies-in-waiting, Mitaka, and Captain Edrison Peavey— a First Order officer who had arrived yesterday with troops from the Heresiarch— stood to greet him. He winced again when he took his seat and everyone followed suit— more scraping, even the slightest of discordant sounds piercing the tender, throbbing base of his skull. Drinking always seemed like such a capital idea until it wasn't but, even so, this was the worst hangover he'd ever experienced in his life.

Luke had been right. They were getting old.

"It's a shame we missed you at dinner last night, Your Highness," Vanya remarked. "The chef served your favorite Fromirian roast queg— with the horseradish cream?"

"Pity," Isolder grunted. "I was indisposed."

He reflected on the previous evening as he reached for the caf, that most blessed, most miraculous of beverages. He'd only meant to get the Emperor to loosen up so he'd quit antagonizing everyone during the investigation, but time had flown and, before Isolder knew it, they were both drunk off their asses.

It wasn't all that terrible, the Hapan prince admitted. There'd been some moments of genuine rapport, the wheels greased by the Zadarian system's gift to the galaxy. After all, he and Teneniel had not had any sons...

Isolder belatedly noticed the two vacant chairs. "It appears that our hosts will be late."

To his consternation, the ladies giggled. "They barred the doors of the royal suite," Janassa coyly
explained. "And they're not answering our comms."

"They had dinner sent up last night, too, instead of eating with us," Sayl added. "But we'll keep some plates warm for them. They'll certainly be hungry later."

"Positively famished," Niobe piped up, and the girls broke into a fresh round of titters, while Mitaka and Peavey looked like they'd have given anything to be somewhere else in that moment.

The flash of good will he'd been feeling towards his son-in-law eroding, Isolder exhaled a long-suffering sigh.

* *

Rey drifted out of sleep with a profound sense of loss. She stared blankly at the wall as she tried to identify the reason, which dawned upon her after a while—she was not being held in her husband's arms.

*It's terrifying,* she realized, *how quickly I got used to waking up like that.*

But when she rolled over onto her other side, she was mollified to find Kylo still in bed with her. He was sitting up, the sheets gathered at his bare waist as he squinted down at his datapad.

Rey shuffled closer to him, too groggy to guard against the neediness of such an act. Preoccupied with whatever he was reading, Kylo absentmindedly patted her rump through the duvet and, satisfied, she closed her eyes again, nosing at his hipbone as she chased a few more moments of precious slumber.

Her respite was brief, though.

"We're leaving for Coruscant today."

Rey started, her eyes flying open at the sound of Kylo's voice. He remained glued to his datapad, looking for all the world like he was talking about the weather. "Right, then," she said, mustering a flippant tone to disguise the illogical hurt she felt—of course he couldn't stay in Hapes forever, she'd
told Leia as much yesterday, she was being stupid. "Clear skies."

Kylo's dark gaze flickered to her. "We are leaving," he repeated slowly. "As in, you and me."

Several protests rose to the tip of her tongue all at once. I don't want to. You can't dictate my life. I have to go to Dathomir. The sooner I go to Coruscant, the sooner I'll have to betray you. She clamped down on all of them, meeting his declaration with nothing but stony silence.

Kylo sighed. Setting his datapad aside, he joined her under the covers. She turned away from him but he was persistent, slinging an arm across her torso and tucking his chin atop her shoulder, pressing an apologetic kiss to the slope of her neck. "I've been here three weeks," he mumbled. "That's too much, Rey. I have other responsibilities aside from you, and I can't keep on neglecting them. But I can't just leave you here when we've yet to neutralize the threat on your life."

"I have responsibilities here, too." Her words came out softer than she'd intended, because he was holding and kissing her so very gently. It was hard to stay mad when her heart craved each touch. "I have to attend Lord Feara's funeral on Benduday. My absence would be a grave insult."

"Surely your subjects will understand why a public appearance so soon after the attack would be inadvisable—"

"Lord Feara died in this castle, at a party I was hosting. Paying my respects to his family is the least I can do." Rey ignored the Queen Mother's voice in her head, lecturing on the importance of securing the Wodan system's loyalty. This was about what she wanted to do, what she felt was right. "Besides, if I don't show up because I've withdrawn to First Order territory, the conspirators will think they've managed to scare me off. I have to stay in the Hapes Cluster, Ben."

"Rey." He held her tighter, his tone almost pleading now. "It's dangerous."

Then stay here with me, she wished she could tell him. Protect me. Don't go.

When she didn't say anything, Kylo switched tactics. Even with her shields up, she could sense how he struggled to compromise. "Come to me after the funeral," he bargained. "That's four days from now. That's enough time for you to have presented a strong front to Hapes, and you holding court on Coruscant is part of the marriage treaty, anyway, so—"
He broke off abruptly, and she wondered if it was for the same reason her stomach had dropped—the reminder that what they had was built on something so clinical and so cold. "I'll think about it." It was the smallest Rey had ever sounded in her life.

Kylo released a frustrated huff against her skin. "Fine." His tone, his entire bearing, terse. Almost petulant. But he didn't argue any further, and it occurred to her with a pang that he might have no desire to spend their last day together in a fight.

She tentatively closed her hand over his, where it lay curled at her waist, and they stayed like that, in silence, until the first comm from the investigators came in and they couldn't put the rest of the day off anymore.

* *

Boethiah Ren leaned idly against the wall, surveying the conference room where Hapans and First Order alike had gathered for the results of the investigation. A night in the bacta tanks had patched her and Hircine right up, and she was eager to turn her blade towards vengeance.

But the findings were abysmal, to say the least. They'd recovered from the dark depths of the Evernight the wreckage of what appeared to be some kind of amplification device, which the Hapans theorized could have possibly been used to extend the ysalamiri's nullification fields. And that was it.

"It's not a lot to go on, but it's all we have so far," Nu-ada concluded. *Stating the obvious,* Boethiah abstained from sniping. "I recommend sending the parts to Charubah for analysis."

"Charubah?" Peavey queried.

*Oh, dear,* Boethiah thought. *Someone didn't do their homework.*

"The tech heartland of the Hapes Cluster," Rey explained.

"Which you should have known, Captain Peavey," Kylo growled, "since familiarizing yourself with your allies' society and astrography is the bare minimum of prep for entering their jurisdiction."
The erstwhile officer went pale. "I apologize, Your Majesty."

And then the most unbelievable thing happened. Instead of tearing into an incompetent lackey any further, Kylo Ren... did not. Or, to be more accurate, he looked like he was about to say something else, but then he snapped his mouth shut and merely nodded.

From her vantage point, Boethiah saw that, under the table, Rey had placed a soothing hand on Kylo's knee.

Kriff, the man was whipped.

The imperial couple wrapped up the debriefing and dismissed everyone save for Isolder and Boethiah—much to the surprise of Boethiah herself. She hung back, still glued to the wall, waiting to see what the next few minutes would bring.

"I don't know how I feel about trusting Ducha Surrel's people with this," Rey said once the door had shut behind the last officer to depart. "Charubah is part of the Rifle Worlds."

"The Lady Silara was neutral at the onset of Kalen's rebellion," Isolder pointed out. "She called her banners towards the end and fought for the throne. Ta'a Chume rewarded her for that with a lucrative arms manufacturing deal. I doubt she will betray you."

Rey didn't appear convinced, but tapped something into her datapad. "I suppose we can give it a shot, but let's hedge our bets and just stay on our guard in the meantime, instead of putting too much faith in Charubah handing us any easy answers."

Isolder nodded and took his leave. Rey's gaze shifted to Boethiah, and then to Kylo, in a silent question.

"I'm leaving in a few hours," Kylo told Rey. "But Boethiah will stay with you until you join me on Coruscant."

Boethiah was not informed, the knight sarcastically retorted in the safety of her own head, but she bowed, anyway.
"I have my own guards," Rey said.

"None of whom can use the Force," Kylo countered.

Rey's eyes flashed. "I can use the Force."

"Rey." He said her name so strangely. Firm, like a warning, but oddly beseeching at the same time.

Boethiah had only ever heard Kylo say someone's name that way once before in her life. It had been hers— her old name, the one she'd been born with— as they stood among the ruins of Luke Skywalker's academy, as she hesitated to board the ship that would take them to the Unknown Regions. Of course, he had been Ben Solo then, and she was more than a little surprised to realize that echoes of that boy apparently still lingered.

Or perhaps he'd been resurrected.

"Fine," Rey grudgingly conceded. "But I am not to be followed around everywhere. I need my own space."

"As long as she stays by your side whenever you're out in public," Kylo readily agreed.

Boethiah was getting rather tired of being talked about like she wasn't even in the room, but the Emperor and the Chume'da were in their own little world at this point. Under the table, his hand reached out to the one of hers that hadn't left his knee, their fingers tangling together, and the look on Rey's face was so sickeningly calf-eyed that Boethiah wanted to throw up.

It's not a one-sided thing, she thought in disgust. They're both whipped. Force help us all.

Kylo had been going through the motions in a state of quiet panic the whole morning. Although he tried his best to suppress it, retreating behind a calm facade, he was still besieged by doubt. If Rey decided not to go to Coruscant— and there was nothing stopping her from sending his knight back alone— he'd have no idea when they could see each other again. He couldn't force her to leave with
him without causing a diplomatic rift, and neither could he allow himself to stoop so low as to beg. He'd done enough futile begging in his childhood to know that, once someone had made up their mind to not be with him, that was the end of the matter.

And even if Rey went to Coruscant after Feara's funeral— that was still four standard day cycles without her. Four days without her impertinent wit, her lovely smile, her atrocious table manners, her magnificent defiance.

Four days without her in his bed.

You could stay. The treacherous notion intruded upon Kylo's thoughts as he watched the last of the staff leave the royal suite, carrying his bags to the docks where his shuttle waited for him to depart. His mind conjured a fantasy of living here for good, in this castle by the sea. He pushed away the ache of such wishful thinking, sternly reminding himself of his duties— his officers were getting antsy, their questions about the estimated date of his return more pointed. Just this morning, Natasi Daala had sent a list of meetings that required his presence, meetings that could no longer be put on hold. And he'd received a transmission from the Supremacy, too— Snoke wished to speak with him. In person.

Rey emerged from the alcove she'd retreated into after lunch. A sharp pain stabbed at Kylo's chest as he drank in the sight of her. While he'd realized by now that his wife was blissfully unaware of her own appeal, the outfit she was wearing today seemed like it had been chosen specifically to punish him for leaving. The chersilk bodice clung to her trim figure like liquid bronze, its wide neckline slashed low enough to afford the most tantalizing glimpse of cleavage. Her chestnut hair was loose, framing her face in soft waves, and her makeup was strikingly minimal to offset the luxurious metallic sheen of her gown— light sweeps of mascara, berry-stained lips, the faintest hint of a creamy pink blush. The overall effect was rumpled and intimate, whispering to his subconscious, This is what you'll be missing. Kylo wasn't entirely convinced that the infernal teenagers who waited on her weren't evil masterminds.

"I'll walk you to your ship, my lord," Rey said quietly, eyes downcast. The formality was like a bucket of cold water being dumped over his head; it was as if she was trying to put distance between them once more. His instincts told him that this was another one of her coping mechanisms, but it still rankled. He was seized by the need to hear her say his name— the birth name he had once so resolutely disowned, the name he would now give anything to have drip from her lips.

But he would not beg. A man could still have his pride even when he had nothing else left.

They entered the turbolift with her hand on his arm, as was proper. White lights flickered and shifted as they descended from one level to the next. He breathed in her scent, soaking it all up in preparation for the days without her, and he didn't know which of them moved first— perhaps they
did it together in silent, tentative agreement, perhaps she slipped her fingers out of the crook of his elbow at the same time that he blindly grasped for them. Her touch burned through the leather of his glove as they stood side by side, holding hands, gazes fixed straight ahead.

They made it all the way down to the second floor of the castle before Kylo's pride— and patience— ran out.

His free hand slammed on the button that caused the turbolift to screech to a halt and the doors to slide open. Rey made a sound of protest as he all but yanked her out into the deserted hallway— a sound that he was quick to stifle with a bruising kiss.

She melted at once, swaying against him as he slipped his tongue into her mouth, gasping against his lips as he ran his hands down her body, each caress a memory he could hold up to the lonely nights that lay ahead. "Supply closet," she managed to say in between fervent kisses. "There— to my right —"

He hurriedly walked her backwards to their destination, their lips still locked, his legs tangling in the flowing bronze panels of her shimmering skirts. It was a miracle they didn't fall over— or maybe it wasn't, maybe their footwork was uncannily in sync, maybe this was a sweet battle or a violent dance, maybe they were always meant to move together like this—

They stumbled into the supply closet as its motion-activated glow-panel flared to life, frantically shutting the door behind them and kicking aside hydromops and repulsorbrooms and plastifibe agitators until he had her pressed up against the wall, marking his way down her throat with a slew of inelegant, desperate, biting kisses as he clawed at the neckline of her gown. Once he'd freed her breasts from their chersilk casing, he wasted no time in latching his mouth onto one rosy nipple, sucking hard while his large, leather-clad fingers toyed with the other.

Rey cried out, her blunt nails digging into the shoulders of his black coat as she arched into his ministrations, wrapping one slim leg around his waist. Her response was even more enthusiastic than usual and, urged on by a sneaking suspicion, Kylo scraped the rough seam of his glove against her skin, his heart leaping into his throat when she shuddered and canted her hips.

He did it again, this time with both hands on both breasts, and she sobbed. Dwarfed by his thumbs, her nipples jutted out from the overstimulation, hardening with each brush of his leather gloves. "Want to rub these raw," Kylo rasped into her ear, possessiveness heating his tone. "Want to spend hours on them, until you couldn't take it anymore, until you're in tears— would you let me, I wonder, Chume'da?"
Rey flushed, dark and so, so becoming. But they didn't have hours, and she must have realized it as well because she pulled him down to her for another kiss, during which he started fumbling with the fastenings of his pants, driven only by the basest of instincts to have her now, just one last time, before he left.

Rey was quick to wrap her fingers around his erection once he'd worked it loose from his pants and underwear. He groaned at the feeling of her small hand pumping him the way he'd taught her and, even in the midst of this hurried tryst, the furrow of deepest concentration wrinkling her forehead almost made him smile. He brushed his lips over that spot before focusing on the equally enjoyable task of slipping his hand under her skirts and tugging her panties to the side, his gloved thumb skimming her entrance.

"Oh." Rey's grip on his cock tightened even as her pace faltered. "The leather feels different—"

Kylo nipped at her earlobe. "A good different?" He kissed her cheek, softly. "Or bad?"

"Um—" Her breathing hitched as he circled her clit in slow strokes. "Good, I think. Please stop teasing me, I—" Her sentence dissolved into another throaty cry of both shock and pleasure as he slid a finger inside her, barely giving her time to adjust before adding a second.

"My gloves are going to smell like you, Rey," he quietly told her as she whimpered and bucked into his palm. "I'll be going about my day on Coruscant— attending meetings, signing documents— with your scent on my fingers reminding me that I fucked you with them, that I had you like this, that you were so wet for me—"

She came. He saw it on her face, he sensed it in the Force. Her energy signature roared and washed over him in waves of light. If he hadn't been wearing his thick gloves, he would have felt her walls spasm around his fingers. If he'd been a more experienced lover, he probably wouldn't have been so absurdly pleased, so bashfully proud.

He withdrew his hand, the leather coated in her slick. "So responsive, my darling," he hummed, kissing her gently while she clung to his neck. From there, it was the easiest, most natural thing to lift her up, arranging her other thigh around his waist as well, and slide into her, muffling a groan against her temple at how good she felt, how hot and tight and positively dripping all over him.

The comlink attached to his lapel buzzed. They froze, staring into each other's eyes in dismay. In all likelihood, it was either Peavey or Mitaka, comming to ask where he was. They were all waiting for him down on the docks. He had to go...
Without breaking eye contact, Rey's hand slowly rose to Kylo's chest, switching off his comlink with a decisive click. She flashed him a small, challenging smirk, and he growled, swooping in to kiss it right off her lips.

Shelves full of cleaning equipment rattled above their heads as Kylo started thrusting in earnest, his hands braced on Rey's sides and her skirts bunched up between their bodies, her exposed breasts bouncing and the lewd, wet slap of sex filling the tiny space. She was louder than she'd been the first time, and he wondered if it was because of the frenzied, illicit nature of this act—they were in a supply closet, for kriff's sake, with scores of his troops and her retinue waiting one floor below. He wondered if she was just as turned on as he was by the fact that they were so hungry for each other that they didn't even bother taking their clothes off, and he filed it away for future reference—although, if truth be told, it was still up in the air when the next time would be.

The sobering reminder caused him to pick up his pace in a burning need for her to feel him between her legs long after he was gone. "Want to come again?" he murmured. His voice sounded odd to his own ears—too tender for such a question. Perhaps it had to do with how small she felt, caged against the wall by his own frame, stirring up a protectiveness inside him that was completely at odds with how he was all but ramming into her.

Rey nodded limply, her face buried in the side of his neck, and Kylo shifted the angle of his thrusts so that the tip of his cock hit the deepest, most secret places inside her. His own orgasm was drawing near, heightening his desperation for her to reach her second peak, and more words spilled out of him, egged on by very recent memories of the effect it had on her when he grunted obscenities against her skin. "I'll be thinking about this moment," he promised her fiercely. "I'll be thinking about how you took me so well, the sounds you made for me—how you looked with your tits hanging out of your pretty dress—"

"Fuck," Rey whined, momentarily raising her head to peer at him with pupils blown wide with lust. "Maker, I—" She gasped when his gloved palms closed over her breasts, squeezing hard, the leather rubbing against her sensitized nipples as she clamped down on him so hard that he nearly saw stars before he inevitably had to return his hands to the wall so he could maintain their current position.

"Every day that we're apart, I'll think of this," he continued, his voice breaking as he realized just how much he meant it. "But first we're going to the docks, where you'll send me off with everyone watching and having no idea what we just did." She bit down on his shoulder at that, so forcefully that he wouldn't be surprised if her teeth left a mark even through the material of his coat. The pain was more potent than any aphrodisiac, feeding the darkness inside him. "You're going to say goodbye to your husband with his come dripping down your thighs."

"Ben!" Her nails raked through his hair as she finally gave him what he wanted—the sound of his
name all wrapped up in a hoarse scream of passion. His knees almost buckled in relief. It was the most beautiful sound in the galaxy, practically a kind of grace. "Ben— so close— don't stop—"

And he didn't. Not even when she crashed into that second orgasm, her eyes shut and her garbled cries weak as he continued pummeling into her throughout her aftershocks. He didn't stop until his own climax barreled through him and he spilled inside her with her name on his lips.

* *

They basked in the afterglow, Rey sitting between Kylo's legs on the closet floor, her back pressed up against his chest. They'd tucked themselves into their clothes but he was still idly groping her breasts through the bodice of her gown, running the pads of his fingers over her abused nipples. It hurt, but in a good way, somehow. Her own hand was busy, stroking the lean muscles of his thigh, and he was lavishing her temple and cheek with chaste, soothing kisses. She liked that, she decided. She liked the gentleness after the rough way he'd taken her and the dirty words he'd spouted. She liked this quiet, affectionate little moment after the storm that had consumed them both.

It was her comlink's turn to buzz, the sound piercing harsh and unwelcome through the blissful haze. Her heart sank. Right. He was leaving.

They reluctantly got to their feet, fixing each other's hair and clothes as best as they could. Rey's mouth went dry as she felt Kylo's come seep into the crotch of her silk panties. She would definitely have to wash that herself, later.

"Would you like me to heal these for you?" he asked, his fingers lightly caressing the trail of lovebites along her neck. Even now, the texture of the leather glove still managed to send a shiver down her spine.

Yes, thank you, was what she should have said. Or, I can take care of them, don't worry. But something about the way he looked in this moment— with the supply closet's overhead light glinting through the tousled waves of his sable mane and sharpening the scar on his face while the softness in his dark eyes filled her with a yearning that had nothing to do with sex— made her say, "No. Leave them."

She did, however, make sure that the ends of her hair were gathered in front of her chest so that the marks would be obscured from view. She wasn't totally uncivilized.
All gazes snapped to the Emperor and the Chume'da the moment they walked out onto the floating docks of Alqualonde. A stiff breeze stirred the obsidian surface of the Evernight, froth-capped waves lapping at the pillars supporting the grid, the tang of salt stinging the air.

A company of stormtroopers had broken off from the main formation to stand near the Hapan ranks. "These are the men I'm leaving with you," Kylo told Rey. "They will escort you to Feara's funeral on Wodan, as well as guard the castle whenever you are planetside." His tone was matter-of-fact but his posture was strained, as if he were already bracing for an argument.

*You're lucky you just gave me two orgasms in the span of twelve minutes,* Rey silently groused, but this wouldn't have been the time to fight, in any case. Not when every step that they were taking was bringing them closer and closer to the Upsilon- class that would ferry him away while she—

— stayed behind—

It didn't even occur to her that she'd stopped walking until she felt herself being tugged forward, her hand at Kylo's elbow. As soon as he became aware that she'd halted in her tracks, he made to do the same, but Rey determinedly forced her feet to move, one after the other, repeatedly chanting in her head that this was not— that this would not— be the same as watching that horseshoe ship leave her on Jakku. For one thing, they were surrounded by the sea, by more water than she could ever have once imagined. For another, this departure would not consign her to a life of starvation and servitude. And, lastly, she was letting him go of her own free will.

Wasn't she?

"Rey," Kylo said, low and bewildered, "you're shaking."

Her palms had gone clammy all of a sudden and it was difficult to breathe. The Upsilon- class loomed before them, a black-winged beast silhouetted against gray sky and a sea of night. To make matters worse, Boethiah, Hircine, Clavicus, and Jyggalag were waiting by the shuttle's ramp; a few more steps and she would be near enough for them to notice that she was falling to pieces in front of all the soldiers and the household staff who had assembled to see the Emperor off.

*I'm not that girl anymore.* She'd told Kylo that once, hadn't she, as they stood amidst roses and moonlight? *I have walked the Jedi path, I carry the heart of the desert, I am Isolder's daughter and*
Ta'a Chume's heir. Rey willed her emotions to calm, drawing strength from the Force that was all around her and from the solid warmth of Kylo's body next to hers, and she continued striding towards the ship, matching his pace. I am She Who Will Come After, and I am the Empress. My husband looks at me like I am every star that ever was. If he leaves, it is because I let him. If he leaves, it is because he knows he will see me again.

I have power here.

They reached the foot of the ramp. Kylo turned to face Rey, the fingers of his free hand curling around her wrist to gently extricate hers from the crook of his elbow. He peered down at her with a solemn expression and, despite the bravado she'd mustered, it was all she could do to refrain from begging him to— Smile at me again, just one more time, before you go.

"I..." Kylo started to say and then trailed off, as if at a loss for words. Instead of finishing the sentence, he kissed her on the forehead, in full view of everyone—a fleeting brush of his warm lips against her skin that was over before she even really registered that it was happening.

And then he was turning away to ascend the ramp, followed by his knights—with the exception of Boethiah, who went over to stand beside Rey, maintaining a courteous distance. Rey watched Kylo disappear into the black shuttle with a lump in her throat and the breeze whipping at her hair. She could not allow herself to lose composure, not here, not now, but, when his ship and its escorts glided away from the docks and disappeared into the clouds that amassed over the Evernight, the sight was—strangely blurry.

Chapter End Notes

Edrison Peavey.

Fromirian roast queg.

"Clear skies" is a GFFA phrase used to wish someone a pleasant journey.

Benduday.

Chersilk.

Hydromop.

Repulsorbroom.

Plastifibe agitator.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to wewantreylo for last chapter’s incredible cover art as well as to reylowarrior and thebrightest-starfell for these pretty moodboards.

This might be the last update until mid-October because I'm heading to Europe in a couple of weeks. I will actually be celebrating my birthday in Amsterdam! (✿◕‿◕) But, as always, I'll try to squeeze in one more installment before I leave.

There's a tw this chapter for sexual harassment in the first paragraph and for physical and psychological abuse during the Snoke scene. Please be guided accordingly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Like most other cantinas in the Outer Rim, the Sarlacc and Loaded on Molavar was a grungy, poorly-lit, ill-ventilated hive of drunkards, gamblers, mercenaries, and small-time criminals. The ringleader of a gaggle of such denizens whistled at a slim, feminine figure entering the smoke-filled establishment—only for said figure to smack him upside the head as she walked past their table.

"Hey!" The man rose to his feet, but the woman’s companion—who had been trailing after her—suddenly appeared at his elbow, and an arm was draped around his shoulders at the same time that the business end of a blaster was discreetly shoved into his ribs.

"Wouldn't try it if I were you, buddy," the woman's companion advised, his pleasant tone belying the glint in his dark eyes.

Sulking, the offender settled back into his chair, and Poe Dameron doffed an imaginary cap in a mock salute before sauntering over to Paige Tico, who'd made her way to the bar and was now ordering drinks.

"See him anywhere?" Poe asked once two mugs of black Thuris Stout had been plunked down in front of them.

Tugging back her sleeve, Paige glanced at the cloaked binary beacon on her wrist as idly as if she were checking the time. "Southwest corner."

Poe sipped his drink, casually looking around until his gaze fell on a caped figure sitting alone in the
quadrant Paige had indicated. He tore away from the bar and she followed suit, and soon they were joining Aleson Gray at his table.

"Who the hell drinks wine in a cantina?" Poe blurted out by way of greeting.

"This is Maldovean Burtalle, which the famed vintners of the Maldovea system age to full potency in special moagwood casks," Aleson informed him. "It's almost impossible to come by outside of the Brema sector— only a fool would pass it up when it's available. Or fail to recognize its distinctive hue altogether."

Poe was pretty sure that the glass of mulberry-colored liquid was the most expensive item on the Sarlacc and Loaded's menu. He was also pretty sure that Aleson was calling him a fool but, before he could retort, Paige spoke up.

"I'm more of a beer drinker, myself."

Aleson smiled at her. "In Hapes, we have a very nice spiced ale. Perhaps one day, when all of this has blown over, we can knock back a few."

"Sounds good," Paige said, returning Aleson's smile.

Poe struggled not to roll his eyes. "So what brings you to the Outer Rim Territories, your lordship?" he demanded pointedly. "I gotta say, we were surprised when your beacon went off. Did something happen?"

Aleson leaned forward. "General Organa is ready to make her move," he murmured underneath the lively strains of cantina music. "The attack will begin here in the Outer Rim, launched simultaneously from all possible sectors. A circle pushing inwards. You have three weeks to determine staging points and get your allies ready— you'll be sent regular updates until then."

Poe's heartbeat quickened. This was what he'd been waiting for, after almost eleven months of hiding and preparing. But there was a catch. "And just how will we be receiving those updates? The First Order's tracking nets are everywhere."

To Poe's surprise, Aleson smirked. "I hope your squadron likes holodramas. Because the Resistance will be attaching coded messages to each episode of the *Ryloth Place* rerun as it's being transmitted."
Paige chuckled. "This has my sister's doing all over it. She knows that show's my guilty pleasure."

"There are also advertisements that you have to watch out for and run through the decryption sequence," Aleson continued. "The FSI-200 Fear Stick from Sabrashi Bio-Chemical Deterrents, the Model 6 modular backpack from Adventure Hiker and Hunter, and the Xeno furniture line from Affodies Crafthouse of Pure Neimoidia. Ryloth Place only broadcasts twice a week so, if there's a particularly urgent communique, it will be coursed through the ads for any of those products."

"Copy that," Poe said, any annoyance he might have felt towards Aleson vanishing as far more important matters occupied his thoughts. He frowned, pondering the logistics of what would basically be a full-scale invasion. "But I don't think there's enough of us here in the Outer Rim. We'd need ten thousand ships, at least, and that's a conservative estimate."

"That's what you have three weeks for—to muster up some more troops," said Aleson. "However, don't forget that General Organa's forces will be joining you as you drive further Corewards, and she's also going to use the allotted time to try and broker some last-minute alliances. You might not need ten thousand, exactly—just enough to punch into the Mid Rim and the Expansion Region."

"If the Consortium fleet were to join us..." Paige started to say, but Aleson shook his head.

"I know Ta'a Chume. She will only break the alliance with the First Order if it becomes apparent that the Resistance is winning."

"What about the sub-hyperspace drives?" Poe asked. "They put Ren's forces at a distinct advantage. We ought to find a way to neutralize those if we're going to have a fighting chance."

"General Organa is working on that," said Aleson. "For now, just concentrate on amassing the ships and soldiers we need, Commander."

Elsewhere in the galaxy, Rey was spearheading a medical mission on Lovola, her grandfather's homeworld.

Or, to be more accurate, she had no idea what the hell she was doing, but Isolder stayed by her side,
helpfully steering her towards the right decisions by pointing out nuances and technical concerns she was missing.

They'd set up administrative tents, supply lines, and several medbay pods in Erde, one of the remote towns that, while serving as a central hub for most of the farming settlements in the area, was still a good five hours' voyage by shuttle from the capital city of Iavas. People queued up to receive medicines and treatment, shooting nervous glances at Boethiah and the stormtroopers all the while. "Don't mind them, they're just my guards, they're here to keep us safe" became Rey's oft-repeated mantra as she and Isolder moved amongst the townsfolk, making small talk and seeing to the needs of those with more serious conditions.

At first, it seemed like the people of Erde and its neighboring settlements were baffled by Rey's presence. "The Queen Mothers of Hapes have always been cunning and capable rulers," Isolder explained, "but none of them have been particularly hands-on or accessible to the masses. Ta'a Chume signs the decrees granting state-sponsored health-care, but she leaves me to see that they're carried out— or, well, me and you, now," he corrected, beaming at Rey like there was nowhere else in the galaxy he'd rather be than running a medical mission in these backwoods with her. "In the time before, when your grandmother was still Chume'da, she also made the rounds while Ni'Korish stayed on Hapes Prime. It's not a rule, per se. More of a tradition."

"But why?" Rey wanted to know. "It sort of— makes no sense? Shouldn't a leader be more in-tune with what her people are thinking? Are feeling?"

"She has agents for that," said Isolder. Spies, you mean, Rey thought. "And you've been present at some of her meetings with the heads of labor unions and trade associations, where they air out the concerns of their members. You see, my dear, when the Chume'da ascends, she not only ascends to the throne, but also to a certain state of divinity. And gods do not walk among their people— not very often, at any rate."

Rey mulled over her father's words as he walked away to speak with a group of older townsfolk. She wasn't sure she could rule like that— on the outside, looking in, or perhaps above, looking below. But, then again, was she even going to rule? She'd only been Chume'da for eleven months, give or take. The notion still seemed preposterous, like it was a future meant for somebody else.

Rey forced her thoughts back to the present. She would deal with that when the time came. Right now, she had a job to do, which entailed seeing to it that the people of Erde received the care they needed.

"Your Grace." The childish lisp was followed by a tugging at her skirts. Rey peered down at a positively angelic face, with wide blue eyes and a halo of golden curls.
"Hi," Rey said, somewhat uncertainly, to the girl who looked no older than six. She didn't consider herself very good with children— back on Jakku, the little gremlins would team up, ambushing her with sticks in a coordinated effort to steal the junk she'd worked so hard to acquire. "What's your name?"

It was the girl's mother who answered, rushing up to them with a sharp, "Aeshi!" The woman curtsied to Rey as she attempted to pull her child back towards the queue for medicines. "I apologize, Chume'da. She's getting bored with the long wait—" The woman froze as it belatedly dawned on her that her words could be taken as an insult. "Not that— not that we mind," she stammered. "We are very grateful, of course— I meant no offense—"

Kriff. Ta'a Chume had really done a number on these people. "It's quite all right," Rey assured the woman, "um..."

"Dasha, Your Grace." She curtsied again. "And this is my daughter, Aeshi."

"I saw you on the HoloNet!" Aeshi proudly announced. "Amilye and me, we watched your—" Her brow crinkled as she sounded out the next word with an endearing carefulness— "nuptials. You looked pretty!"

Rey couldn't help but blush. While she'd been complimented on her appearance often enough these past several months, it was more sincere coming from a little girl who knew nothing about politics, who had nothing to gain from buttering her up. "Thank you, Aeshi." She turned to Dasha, who was casting anxious glances at the queue as it started moving again. "Why don't you go back to your spot? I can bring her over later."

Dasha's weathered features crumpling in relief, she murmured effusive thanks to Rey and warned her daughter to behave before returning to the queue. No sooner had she left when Aeshi started talking again. "The Emperor was very scary, wearing all black like that. And a face like—" She narrowed her eyes and twisted her mouth in a passable imitation of Kylo's scowl, and Rey burst out laughing while Boethiah, who had been silently shadowing her all this time, emitted a hasty cough that sounded suspiciously like a disguised snicker.

Aeshi preened. "But he looked less scary when he saw you walking down the aisle," she continued. "And he held you when he kissed you!"

"Well, yes," Rey said, taken aback by the sudden pang in her chest as she relived that memory, as
she thought of her husband and their first kiss. "He's not so bad once you get to know him."

"All bark and no bite?" Aeshi queried.

"Um." Rey couldn't outright lie to a child, could she? "Maybe a little bite."

It wasn't long before more children, emboldened by Aeshi’s success, tore away from their parents and clustered around Rey, pelting her with questions and touching the luxurious material of her skirts. "It's all right, I can watch over them for a bit," Rey called to the flustered adults.

Some of the braver children made to approach Boethiah as well, but the knight quickly nipped that in the bud by crossing her arms and tilting her masked head at them in an intimidating pose.

"It's okay, don't be scared," Rey told the crowd of pint-sized Hapans. "That's just Boethiah."

Encouraged, the youngest of the bunch—a little boy who was practically still a toddler—stumbled forward, throwing his chubby arms around Boethiah's shin and clinging tight.

Feeling Boethiah glare at her from behind the mask, Rey smirked as she patted Aeshi's blonde curls. Perhaps kids weren't so bad, after all.

When the medical mission wrapped up in the early afternoon, Rey and Isolder and their retinue absconded to the royal family's property in Iavas—the palatial estate that had been the boyhood home of Nelanas Aldanae, Lord of the Shadowgreen and Ta'a Chume's consort.

"By virtue of her marriage, your grandmother owns a quarter of the agricultural land covering this planet," Isolder explained to Rey as their shuttle glided over vast tracts of fields and orchards. "All of these will, of course, be passed on to you."

Rey fidgeted in her seat. "We really don't have family here on Lovola?"
"My father was an only child," said Isolder. "There are a few distant cousins, including the ducha of this world, but that's all." The expression that came over his face then was too hard, too cynical, too at odds with the man Rey knew him to be. "That's what made him such an attractive prospect for my mother, I believe. Aside from gaining a foothold in the Rifle Worlds, there was also no one to squabble with over his properties. But that backfired on her in a sense, because she was an only child, too— the Royal House is the smallest it's been in centuries, and so the succession came into jeopardy when you disappeared. It didn't help that Lord Aldanae was never able to give Ta'a Chume any daughters. Instead—" And here Isolder's wry smile turned self-disparaging— "she was stuck with Kalen and me."

Rey didn't know how to respond to that, and so they lapsed into silence, during which she gazed out the viewport at the sprawl of verdant lands below. Lands she would soon own, and yet— she would have traded all of it, in a heartbeat, for a family that loved one another and remained undivided by political strife. She would have been happy with a smaller life if it had meant warmth and a place that felt like home.

For some reason, her mind strayed— almost idly— to thoughts of her husband. Kylo had left the Hapes Cluster yesterday and she hadn't heard from him since. Not that she was expecting him to comm when there was nothing urgent to talk about, but...

*Out of sight, out of mind, my dear,* whispered a snide voice in Rey's head.

---

Kylo's comlink buzzed, shattering the solitude of his private cabin as the *Upsilon-* class shuttle made its approach on the brightest stars in the Unknown Regions. He pressed a button and the empty air before him lit up with a missive in glowing blue Aurebesh.

*The Empress' charitable little field trip went smoothly,* Boethiah had typed, and Kylo could practically feel the sarcasm. *We've arrived at the Shadowgreen.*

A second missive filtered in through the HoloNet, tacked onto the first one like an afterthought. *Did you know your wife stands to inherit one-fourth of an entire planet?*

Kylo snorted. There was little about Hapan excess that could take him aback at this point. Still, it was somewhat discomfiting to be reminded that, in terms of personal property, Rey was far wealthier than he was.
He'd married up. Just like his father.

Kylo pushed the unsavory thought aside. Without bothering to respond to Boethiah, he donned the black helm and readied himself to enter Snoke's presence.

The polished obsidian floor of the *Supremacy*’s throne room reflected the scarlet hue of the opaque curtain veiling the chamber's walls. Entering the place always felt like stepping inside of a beating heart, veined black, and the uneasy situation was in no way alleviated by the weight of the Praetorian Guard's alert, canny stares from behind their inscrutable red helms.

Kylo dropped down on one knee before Snoke and bowed his head, awaiting judgment. It wasn't long before the gold-robed figure on the black throne spoke in an icy, sonorous drawl that filled the room like blood seeping through the arteries of the heart.

"At last, His Imperial Majesty has deigned to answer my summons."

Kylo had been prepared to apologize. To grovel, if need be. Instead, he found himself saying nothing, and it took him a while to figure out that it was because he had nothing to say. Resentment bloomed within him in the spaces of his self-imposed silence, ugly and dark. "You are the Emperor and I am the Empress," Rey had said as she held him in her arms, "and that means we have no more masters."

If Snoke was taken aback by Kylo's lack of response, he didn't show it. "I was very concerned when I heard about what transpired during your little party. It seems to me that I should have heard it from you, however."

Kylo's lips remained sealed. But he didn't actually have a death wish, and so he kept his head bowed in a nominally subservient position.

"Well?" A hint of annoyance finally crept into Snoke's tone. "Have you discovered the identity of the perpetrators?"

No longer able to maintain his silence in the face of a direct question, Kylo said, "It appears to be the work of a Hapan group fanatically opposed to the alliance between the First Order and the
"And why, precisely, is the First Order not cracking down on Hapes as we speak? Your life was put in danger, Emperor Ren. Surely this is a violation of the peace treaty. Your troops should be swarming all over that sector as we speak."

"The treaty was made with the Consortium, Regent Snoke," Kylo replied. "This group attacked a gathering attended by the Queen Mother and the Royal Court, and they tried to kill the Chume'da as well. It would therefore be safe to conclude that they are operating not only outside of the state but also against it. The Hapan government is fully cooperating with the Empire—"

"You don't need cooperation, you need compliance!" Snoke roared, slamming a fist down on the arm of his throne. "You need people to see that acts such as this one will not go unpunished! You need fear to keep the galaxy in line!"

Kylo looked up, startled by this uncharacteristic outburst from a man who tended to employ the slightest of wordplays. Snoke's already wrecked features were distorted even further by a kind of rage that Kylo had only ever seen him display when things weren't going according to plan.

Snoke appeared to collect himself at the exact moment that Kylo arrived at this revelation. "Or perhaps," he continued in a softer yet no less deadly tone of voice, "there is someone keeping you in line, hmm, my boy? How was your honeymoon?"

A chill shot down Kylo's spine. Before he could respond, a searing pain bored into his skull as his mental shields were destroyed with an efficiency that only the man who had taught him how to construct them could manage. Memories from the past three weeks were yanked to the surface and inspected as coldly as if they were specimens mounted on plates. The kiss on the beach, the first time, how Rey blushed at his wandering hands and how she cried out under his tongue. It was unbearable, and he—

— fought back—

Snoke recoiled as he was pushed out of Kylo's mind by a strength that Kylo himself had not realized he was capable of. The Praetorian Guard immediately drew their weapons, but their master raised a pacifying hand, his frosty eyes narrowed at his kneeling apprentice.

It was sick and it was twisted, the shame that flooded through Kylo in the aftermath of his moment of
defiance. He couldn't bring himself to apologize but he hung his head all the same.

"I see what's going on," Snoke said in little more than a whisper. "You think you don't need your master anymore. I raised you up, gave you the power to change things, and you no longer have any use for me now that you have everything you've ever wanted— including the Jedi girl warming your bed. Where did I go wrong with such an ungrateful child?"

"That's— that's not true, Master," Kylo mumbled. His resentment had ebbed, giving way to a feeling of smallness. Of failure. "I will always need you. I am grateful."

"But you are a child," Snoke emphasized coldly. "You're no Vader. You're just a child in a mask."

Kylo flinched. "I've given everything—"

"Take," Snoke interrupted in a terse growl, "that ridiculous thing off."

Kylo operated on autopilot, his hands shaking as he removed his helm and placed it on the floor. The dull clang echoed throughout the room.

Snoke rose to his feet and quietly stalked over to Kylo. "Yes, there it is," he muttered almost to himself, studying the upturned features that were now bared to him. "Your father's heart. I thought I told you after Starkiller Base that you needed to guard against such weakness. Whatever guise she assumes— scavenger, Jedi, Chume' da— the girl always brings out the worst in you. And what do you have to show for it? No trace of the Resistance, and only the minutest of concessions from Hapes. I think it is time I have a chat with her."

"No," Kylo croaked, frozen into place by the ice spike of sheer terror that shot through his entire being, filling his bones with lead. "Master, there is no need for that, please—" He thought of Rey's warmth, her fire, her sweet, shy smiles, and her spirited irreverence. All the things that Snoke would not hesitate to crush. "She's coming to Coruscant soon. I'll make her see the way of things," he bargained desperately. "I'll keep her there, keep an eye on her—"

Snoke stared down at him with something akin to revulsion. It was abhorrent that the Master of the Knights of Ren would be reduced to begging— Kylo could see that sentiment written all over the pale old face.
And then Snoke sighed. "Very well. Let it not be said that I don't grant second chances to those most loyal to me. Or third or fourth, in your case. But now..." His hand cradled Kylo's scarred cheek, his fingers cool and dry and leathery in a caress that was a parody of affection. "Now, my dear, confident Emperor, I believe it is time you remembered that there is still so much for you to learn, yes?"

Unable to tear his gaze away from those beady arctic eyes, Kylo nodded, swallowing a lump in his throat.

*

Pain was instructive. He had told Rey this, once. It never ceased to amaze him how there was always something new to learn. As the dark side ripped fresh wounds over his scars and licked tongues of fire along his every nerve ending, he was struck by the terrible beauty of how much more could be inflicted upon him, and of how much more he could endure.

He would not think of her. In this state, he was not strong enough to safeguard her in his mind, to keep her hidden from Snoke. And, in any case, it was oddly freeing, to let go of her and to just give in to the dark.

*That's where I went wrong, you know.*

There it was again, that voice he did not recognize but was familiar all the same. It glimmered through his consciousness, beneath the shadow of the agony, and then it was gone.

*

It ended as abruptly as it began. Snoke retracted his powers and Kylo's shoulders sagged in relief. He had successfully maintained his kneeling position and he felt a sense of pride in that, blinking up at the figure towering over him through a haze of red and black.

A strange little smile grew on Snoke's face. "You did well. You passed this lesson."

"Thank you, Master," Kylo attempted to say— an automatic response, if nothing else— but he couldn't summon the will to speak. He was too drained. He wasn't even sure if he could still move his jaw, and he was too afraid to find out for certain.
"Upon further consideration, your newfound relationship with your wife might have its advantages," Snoke mused. He seemed markedly more cheerful after Kylo's demonstration of unflinching obedience. "An Emperor needs an heir, after all. And a teacher could always do with another student whose bloodline is strong in the Force."

Despair clawed at Kylo's throat, taking shape in the form of bile. It cracked his soul in half to hear those words. Bleeding and broken at Snoke's feet, exhausted beyond all measure, he could only look up numbly at that gruesome, grinning visage and think— in the last, tiniest, most secret corner of his mind—You will not touch my children.

Oblivious to what had just transpired within his apprentice, Snoke returned to his throne. He dismissed Kylo soon after.

Once he was inside the turbolift that would take him back to the hangars, Kylo sagged against the wall for support. His knees were buckling and blood was seeping through his clothes. There would be no Rey to heal him when he returned to Coruscant this time. No Rey to kiss it all better and to hold him through the night.

He stared down at the mask in his hands.

"You're no Vader," Snoke had said. Like it was the greatest disappointment of his long life.

Maybe I don't want to be, Kylo thought in a sudden burst of helpless, mutinous rage. He slammed his mask against the wall. It shattered into several pieces, littering the floor in a rain of black metal.

Set amidst hundreds of acres of lush gardens, the Aldanae mansion was a graceful arrangement of clean white lines that lay mostly open to the sky, its dozen verandas adorned with profusions of greenery. The fertile earth of Lovola could grow anything, and so the air was honey-sweet with the respective fragrances of thousands of species of flowers—some of which were rare elsewhere in the galaxy, while others still had already gone extinct on their homeworlds. The heady mixture of various scents crept indoors, perfuming the alabaster hallway where Rey and Isolder stood, gazing up at a portrait of Ta'a Chume and Nelanas in their late twenties.
The Queen Mother’s hair had been reddish gold in her youth, but her eyes were the same hardened jade flints that she sported now, her red lips drawn into a thin line. By contrast, her dark-haired, blue-eyed consort regarded the viewer with a relaxed, almost mischievous demeanor. It was easy to spot even at first glance which parent Isolder had taken after.

"He was good for her," Isolder reflected. "They didn't love each other but they were friends—which, I think, was more than she expected or was prepared for, because marrying for pragmatic reasons was something that had been drilled into her head from an early age. He was the only one who could ever get her to lighten up, even just for a while."

"He certainly seems lighthearted," Rey ventured.

Isolder nodded. "He had an adventurous streak, too. I was around ten years old when he took me camping on the ocean planet of Dreena, while Ta'a Chume was off visiting the Rim Worlds. Our ship was washed away by a tidal wave and we were stranded for a couple of days until the Star Home happened to pick up our distress signal on the way back to Hapes Prime—my mother was so mad at both of us."

Rey giggled, imagining Isolder as a child, trudging into the opulent interiors of the Star Home and dripping saltwater everywhere while a younger Ta'a Chume glared at him, arms crossed. But the moment of levity was fleeting as she recalled the fate that had befallen her grandfather. His taste for adventure had been his undoing—pirates had attacked his ship as it journeyed through the Transitory Mists unescorted and incognito.

In her vengeance, Ta'a Chume had launched a ruthless, protracted military campaign that had driven the pirate fleets out of the Hapes Cluster for good. And, despite her slew of lovers, she had never married again.

"I miss him," Isolder sighed, observing Nelanas in the portrait with the blue eyes that the man had passed on to him. "And I am sorry that the two of you never had the chance to meet. He would have adored you, Rey."

She was in a solemn mood by the time she wandered out onto the balcony alone, Isolder having gone to his quarters to rest. From here, Rey had an unobstructed, panoramic view of the western gardens, teeming with rows of yellow jacinder, pink sasalea, and blue Ithorian roses that grew in the
sun-dappled shade of Lettrani fruit trees, their branches shrouded in silvery sprays of Rylothian sweetmoss.

A flash of black drew her attention to Boethiah, who was scouting the perimeter for threats as hapless gardeners scurried out of her path.

Rey checked her comlink for what felt like the thousandth time since Kylo left. There were no messages from him.

It hurt. It really did. She'd spent most of last night tossing and turning in a bed that was too big, comlink clutched in her hands in the futile hope that he would make contact.

_You never learn your lesson_, Rey chided herself. _Hapan Chume’dā, future Lady of the Shadowgreen, and here you are, still waiting._

With stricken yet steely resolve, she powered off the small silver device. Mostly so that she wouldn't give in to the temptation to comm Kylo first, only to face rejection on the other end— because, in all honesty, if he wanted to talk to her, he would have by now.

When he returned to the Citadel, the droids had finished unpacking his bags. Despite his fatigue, Kylo was quick to notice the book on the nightstand, because it hadn't been there before.

He staggered over to inspect it, his injured, aching body settling heavily on the edge of the bed. With a jolt, he recognized the volume of poetry that he'd started reading back at the Reef Fortress, the same one that Rey had been engrossed in when he found her in the library and kissed his way down to her lovely breasts. A lifetime ago, or so it seemed.

She must have slipped it into his luggage. That was the only possible explanation. His pulse sped up as he opened the book and there, all over the title page, was Rey's clumsy High Galactic scrawl.

Kylo experienced a very deep, profound moment of horror at the fact that his wife had defaced a centuries-old manuscript. It faded quickly, however, as he read what she'd written.
Ben,

I don't know very much about sonnets, but I like the one on page 9 the most.

Sincerely,

Rey

Kylo turned to the aforementioned page. It was a simple yet lyrical piece that demanded to be read out loud, especially the last few lines. "Everything carries me to you," he whispered in the cold solitude of his chambers, his voice trembling at the edges, still weakened like the rest of him by what he'd endured on Snoke's ship, "as if everything that exists—aromas, light, metals—were little boats that sail towards those isles of yours that wait for me."

Kylo let the words hang in the air for a while, savoring the melancholy sort of peace that they wrought, and then he put the book down and took out his comlink. He'd ached to hear Rey's voice practically since the moment he left her on the docks of Alqualonde, and that in itself made him irrationally angry because he'd sworn more than a decade ago that he would never miss anyone again. Instead of contacting her directly, he was keeping tabs on her well-being through Boethiah—also partly because he feared coming her only to engage in a hurried, lukewarm conversation that would leave him more bereft and alone than ever before.

"Ben, sweetheart, I'd love to chat but the Senate is convening in ten minutes—give my regards to Luke—"

"Hey, kid, good of you to comm but it's not a great time, things're a bit hairy right now—say hi to Luke for me—"

With a hitched, stuttering gasp for much-needed air, Kylo fought off the shackles of the past. They fell away and lay curled somewhere, waiting for the next time that they could wrap around him again. For now, though, he focused all of his attention on the comlink. Things would be different with Rey. Surely this book—with her note pointing out that particular sonnet—was a sign of that.

Tremulously, he pulled up the holographic keyboard and tapped in the sequence that would patch him through to her.

There was no response.
He glanced at the chrono. It was midday on Lovola.

He tried again.

Still nothing.

Chapter End Notes

The Sarlacc and Loaded Cantina on Molavar.

Thuris Stout.

Maldovean Burtalle from the Maldovea system in the Brema sector.

Moagwood.

Ryloth Place.

The FSI-200 by Sabrashi Bio-Chemical Deterrents, Inc.

The Model 6 modular backpack by Adventure Hiker and Hunter.

Xeno by Affodies Crafthouse of Pure Neimoidia.

Lovola.

Dreena.

Jacinder.

Sasalea.

Ithorian rose.

Leitrani fruit tree.

Rylothian sweetmoss.

The Hapan sonnet is actually an excerpt from "If You Forget Me" by Pablo Neruda. I pondered for almost a month (lmao @ myself) before finally deciding that Neruda is the one who most captures what I imagine the Hapan style of verse to read like.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

Apologies for not being able to respond to all the wonderful comments on the last chapter as I’ve been busy writing this one in the midst of preparing for my trip! Please take note that there is a content warning for brief references to homophobic/cissexist succession laws, as well as a discussion of pregnancy and its alternatives between some Hapan nobles.

Many thanks to reylottrashpiler, kimaracretak, and Vivien for giving this a sensitivity read for me, and thank you to all of you for the continued encouragement and support. I would love having your thoughts on this chapter to keep me company during my travels :) And, with that, I'm off! The next time I see you guys, I will be one year older and hopefully wiser. Bis dann!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rey spent the night on Lovola, in a room that, like most of the Shadowgreen, seemed overgrown with flowers at first glance. Only careful inspection revealed the extensive network of jewel-encrusted pots and gilded trellises that governed roots and stems, branches and blossoms, into a cultivated state of charming disarray. There were fragrant arrack vines and orange candlewicks spilling in from the balcony, turquoise palomellas and yellow Mysess blossoms and cheerful sundews strewn all over the alabaster floors, and gingerbells and sprays of Queen's Heart draped over the canopy bed like sweet-smelling curtains. All silvered by the starlight.

Had the circumstances been any different, Rey would have taken an awed sort of joy in her surroundings, instead of simply curling up on the too-big mattress and staring at the comlink on the nightstand. She dreaded the sleepless hours that lay ahead of her, the upcoming battle between her willpower and her foolish desire to just turn the blasted thing on and comm her husband. A battle that she was not entirely sure the latter wouldn't win.

Esli and Sayl were conversing on the balcony of the adjoining room, unaware that Rey could hear them due to the mansion's clever acoustics that made low tones echo through the air—a safeguard against conspiracy, devised by one of Rey's more paranoid ancestors. In true Hapan fashion, the Shadowgreen hid a mass of thorns within its delicate beauty.

"She's been so quiet ever since he left," Esli was telling Sayl. "Do you think Her Grace is... pining?"

"It's only been two days," the other girl pointed out, but there was a hint of doubt in her voice.
"She didn't even go for thirds at dinner earlier—"

Rey flicked a wrist in the direction of the balcony doors and they swung shut, ushering in a ringing silence. "I'm not pining," she huffed out loud. She was just— well, she had no idea what had gotten into her, exactly, but she was definitely *not* pining.

She rolled over onto her back, her gaze focusing on the riot of petals hung overhead, each leafy stem forming a part of some intricate tapestry that she decided she vastly preferred to the elegant dreamsilk webs of Alqualonde and the Per’Agthra. It wasn't long before her thoughts drifted to Kylo once more. Sleep was so hard to come by without his arms around her, without his nose buried in the slope of her neck or his lips pressed to her hair...

*What is he doing now?* Rey wondered. *It's afternoon on Coruscant. Is he at a meeting, did he remember to eat lunch, is he thinking of me?* She could have screamed from how restless she was feeling at this very moment, tired out by the long day and yet strangely fitful due to the absence of the ridiculously large, brawny, overheated body that she'd grown accustomed to having in her bed. Although her eyes were on the flowers, soon what she *saw* was the supply closet, Kylo's lashes fanning out over the tops of his high cheekbones, his gloved hands ruthlessly shoving her bodice out of the way so that he could kiss her breasts. The tryst had been rushed and frantic and, stars, she'd come *so* hard. Even now, just the *memory* caused a surge of heat to ripple through her veins.

Rey shifted in bed, wincing at the dampness that had collected between her legs. The satiny fabric of her nightgown scraped across her nipples, a maddeningly gentle friction that had her gritting her teeth. Before she was even fully aware of what she was doing, her right hand closed over her breast, tentatively stroking the nipple until it hardened beneath her fingertips.

It wasn't enough. She missed Kylo's hands and his mouth and the way he lavished her with such single-minded attention. She missed the feeling of his solid weight on top of her and how his dark eyes savored her from head to toe.

She missed—

*No, don't think it,* some frightened inner voice warned, but it was too late. The thought formed in her mind, crashing through her with all the heartbreaking intensity of a solar flare.

She missed *him.*
She missed her husband.

Rey turned over onto her side again, burrowing under the blankets. Her body curled in on itself at what was nearly the very edge of the bed, knees to chest, mimicking the way she'd slept back when she'd been all alone.

She was alone. He'd promised her that she wasn't and then he'd left. She tried to force herself to be logical about this—the man was *Emperor*, for crying out loud. He'd already spent three weeks with her, leaving his realm to power-hungry underlings like Hux. It would have been a potentially disastrous state of affairs had it gone on for much longer. She knew that. He'd asked her to come with him and she'd been the one who refused. She knew *that*, too.

And yet these facts provided no measure of comfort, not in the slow and ceaseless hours of night that had always been the loneliest time for her. In the end, it had been a choice between her and his empire, and Kylo had chosen the latter.

*Shouldn't have come as a surprise, really, her snider, darker streak opined. Since when has anyone ever chosen you? All that you have now, it's because you were born as She Who Will Come After. All that you had before, with the Resistance, it's because you were born strong in the Force—and you couldn't even win the war for them, could you? Your husband didn't even marry you of his own free will. You are his means to an end. You are everyone's means to an end. And nothing more.*

Rey closed her eyes. When she eventually fell asleep, it was with tears rolling down her cheeks and dripping onto the pillowcase.

*#

Looking back on it in the time to come, Rey would surmise that it was her half-hearted, foiled attempt at pleasure that led to the dream, her frustrated body finishing what it had started.

At first, she thought she was awake—thought that she'd woken up in the middle of the night with an ache in her chest and a wetness coating her thighs. She thought she was awake when she slipped a hand down her underwear in a dazed, unthinking bid for release. But then the world went quiet, in a way that amplified the sound of her thundering heartbeat, and suddenly her husband was with her, and that was how she realized that this wasn't real.

Kylo knelt between her legs, staring intently down at her. He was naked, and Rey chastised her
dream-self for being such a pervert even as she continued to rub circles on her clit, meeting his gaze with an air of despondent, accusing challenge. He was a wraith, so pale in the starlight, his muscular frame outlined by a tangle of flowers and leaves.

"Show me," he said. "I want to see..."

He reached forward to gently yet insistently tug at her panties. She let him, gasping at how a million sparks raced through her at every brush of his fingers along her hips, her thighs, her calves. Everything was heightened in the dream-state. Everything felt better than it ever had before, because she'd been so afraid that he would never touch her again. And once she was bared to him, there was a certain meditativeness to the way his fingers closed around his hardening length, stroking up and down ever so slowly as his free hand moved to—

— to her knee. His palm rested atop it and— stayed there.

Rey narrowed her eyes at him. She wasn't in the least bit subtle as she shifted her leg, trying to nudge his fingers towards where she needed them, but Kylo held fast. A firm grip that completely belied the softness at the corner of his lush mouth.

"Will you touch yourself for me, cyar'ika?" he asked hoarsely. "I think about you doing it a lot, you know. More than I should."

"You're in my room," Rey's pride demanded that she pointedly tell him, no matter how delightful the tiny rush of happiness his confession elicited in her was, "and that means we do what I want."

The softness turned into a smirk that was just this side of aggravating. "And what do you want?" Kylo pressed.

*Everything, Rey thought. Your mouth, your fingers, your cock. The way it feels when you come inside me. Give me everything.* But, before she could say any of that, it struck her anew what a generous lover he was, that he always made sure she was sated before chasing his own release, that her pleasure was his as well.

She spread her legs further, hiking the translucent skirts of her nightgown further up her thighs in order to give him a better view. "I want," she hurried to say before her courage failed her, "to make you happy."
And there it was. His adorable little close-lipped smile. Crooked and boyish and reflected in his eyes. It was enough to break Rey's heart all over again. She wished she'd told him in person. She wished that this were real.

Her hand— which had stilled sometime between Kylo pulling down her underwear and him fisting his erection— moved again, fingers abandoning her clit in favor of the slower, more drawn-out sensations of gliding softly along her entrance. In the absence of all other external sounds, it was easy for her to track the alteration in Kylo's breathing, from steady to ragged. They watched each other, his hand effortlessly matching the pace of hers. They devoured each other across the distance between them, a space scented with the spice-laden gingerbells and the dewier Queen's Heart that grew all around and over the bed, wild and unfettered, blooming in the silver-etched night.

It took a while for Rey to move past the initial awkwardness of indulging in so intimate and personal an act when there was another pair of eyes to see. But Kylo helped her along, murmuring encouragement and direction, slower, yes, fuck, spread your legs, that's it, his desire for her so stark on his expressive face that she gradually began to revel in it, in the thrill of putting on a show for him, in feeling like she held all the secrets to his universe in the palm of her hand.

She didn't think it was possible for the look in his eyes to get any hungrier but, oh, it did— when she couldn't stand it anymore and slipped her fingers inside herself, moaning at the stretch, he leaned forward, his gaze predatory and alert in a way that made her think, vaguely, of wolves.

"So good, my beauty, my dragoness," he was crooning to her in her dream, his low, husky voice rippling like smoke through the flowers, through the starry air, through the earthier and more depraved slapping of skin, through the rhythm of hands that played bodies like instruments and yet never met. "Force, I miss you." She nearly orgasmed from that ardent declaration alone but she staved it off, unwilling to let this moment end before it absolutely had to. This place in her mind was so much better than the waking world. In this dream her husband missed her, in this dream there were flower petals trailing down to his hair as he knelt on silk sheets and looked up her gossamer skirts like she was taking him to paradise.

Kylo was quick to surmise that this was by far the most pleasant dream he'd ever had. Sleep had proven elusive last night, which most likely explained why he'd dozed off in the middle of the day. One minute he was poring over fiscal reports from the New Territories and the next he was in a garden that was somehow also a bedroom.

He was naked, which— leave it to his dream-self to dispense with the formalities. Rey was not, but she was wearing one of those nightgowns, a state of affairs that gave him no cause to complain. And now he was jerking himself between her legs, plying her with all those filthy words that she seemed to love so much and, oh, stars, what a sight, her pretty fingers playing with her sex, so deliciously
pink and slick.

He couldn't help but raise an eyebrow when she crammed a fourth finger inside herself. Technically, he was making her do it, product of his subconscious as this version of her was, but there was no explaining that to his erection, which twitched violently in his hand. "Feeling ambitious tonight, are we?"

"I," Rey panted as her inner walls stretched to accommodate the new intrusion, "am the blood of Hapes." There was a trace of haughtiness in her demeanor despite the fact that her spine was arching and her hips were spasming against her own palm. "We invented ambition."

Kylo didn't think he'd ever been so aroused in his life. His mouth was as dry as dust and he was so hard it hurt. "Ambition can be a good thing," he hummed, lightly stroking her knee.

And in his dream the air smelled like the gingerbells of Alderaan and the Queen's Heart that grew in teeming profusion on Naboo. In his dream his wife unraveled before him, her long, lean body rising and falling and curving over the sheets like a sail in a gentle breeze. In his dream her golden skin bloomed opalescent with his spend and he told her he missed her over and over again, because he could afford to forsake his pride on a starlit, imagined night like this, and she shivered and sighed and said, yes, yes, I miss you, too, and that was how he knew for certain that he was dreaming.

Kylo jolted awake, his spine snapping upright as his head lifted from the desk. The holograph of the fiscal reports had dimmed after being inactive for— he checked the chrono— a little over an hour. He swiped at the screen to bring up the next sheet and the numbers blazed into solidity once more, so bright they made him wince.

He rubbed at his bleary face and was briefly startled by the feel of the rough leather. His hands had been bare in the dream— quite a vivid one, now that he thought about it, everything as crisp and clear as if he'd really lived those moments with Rey. But already it was all fading, the memories of sound and scent and texture slipping from his grasp no matter how he tried to hold on to them, gradually replaced by the stark wood and metal of his private office in the Citadel, by the sunlight pouring in through the clari-crystalline windows.

And by the uncomfortable dampness between his legs.
Much to Kylo's chagrin, he'd ejaculated in his trousers. Like some virginal schoolboy. He'd have to hurry back to his suite, on the way passing officers and droids and stormtroopers who would have no idea that the inner seat of their Emperor's pants was awash in come. But Kylo would know, and that was humiliating enough. Leave it to Rey to inconvenience him, even in his own subconscious. She couldn't be bothered to take his comms and here he was, still lusting after her. He imagined her snickering at his predicament, and his fists clenched.

"Minx," he said out loud, torn between wishing he could tell her that in person and hating her a little because he couldn't.

In the early hours of Zhellday, one of the Queen Mother's many informants scattered throughout the Hapes Cluster sent a coded message to the Per'Agthra. Upon decryption, it contained only one sentence: *Seasons have changed for the Bliz.*

It was a reference to an avian species that resided mostly in Hapes Prime's northern hemisphere. However, for a few short months every year, the Bliz would migrate south to escape the harsh winter conditions of their normal habitat. The informant was saying that General Organa had finished moving the last of her troops out of the Veil.

Reading the message in her private chambers, Ta'a Chume breathed a sigh that could have been either relief or resignation. Perhaps it was both. Perhaps a complicated step in some acrobatic tactical waltz had just been concluded with minor injury, and it was now time to focus one's energy and wits on the rest of the equally complicated routine.

"Good riddance, Princess," Ta'a Chume muttered, setting down her datapad. "And, for what it's worth, godspeed."

From Lovola, Rey made the journey to the nearby Olanji system. Three days ago, Dechen Rhade, the Countess of the Breakwater, had invited her for "a small lunch, my dear Chume'da, just us and some friends." Which meant, of course, that Dechen had something important that she wished to discuss.

It was a short enough trip that Rey left her ladies-in-waiting at the Shadowgreen with Isolder. She traveled in a consular shuttle with her Chume'doro and Boethiah Ren, flanked by Miy'til starfighters and a wedge-shaped Maxima-A class heavy cruiser bearing the stormtroopers that Kylo had assigned
to be her guard; frankly, Rey thought this was overkill, but she was Picking Her Battles.

As small talk wasn't part of the *Chume'doro*' s job description and Boethiah could hardly be considered a winning conversationalist, the brief jump was conducted in silence. Rey was grateful for that— she needed space to ruminate on last night's dream. It had faded somewhat, as dreams were wont to do, but certain parts of it were lodged firmly enough in her memory that she had to struggle not to blush as she sat in the cabin across from Boethiah.

In the privacy of her own head, Rey repeated what her subconscious' version of Kylo had called her. "My dragoness"? She wrinkled her nose. *I've been reading too much poetry.* And that, in turn, caused her to wonder if he'd seen the book she'd packed for him yet. If he'd read the message she'd scribbled on the title page and the sonnet she'd directed him to. It had been a last-minute impulse to write that dedication and then slip the volume into his luggage while he was in the 'fresher, but now she was besieged anew by doubt. Had she been too forward? Had she made him uncomfortable?

Was that why he hadn't contacted her since he left?

Rey looked at Boethiah. The knight was tapping away at her comlink, exuding her trademark aura of perpetual boredom. Rey waited until Boethiah had set aside the device and then she asked, "Is His Majesty often very busy in his daily routine?"

Boethiah stilled, her angry bewilderment at being addressed radiating strong and clear through the Force. "He's the Emperor," she replied, her voice modulator crackling with disdain. "I would presume that he's often busy."

At the other end of the cabin, Moreem cleared her throat— an unmistakable warning that made Boethiah sulkily add, "Your Grace."

Rey inwardly cursed her abysmal decision-making skills. Some harebrained part of her had just wanted verbal assurance that his schedule, and not her sappy parting gift, was the reason for all this radio silence, but she had failed to take into account the awkwardness of seeking the aforementioned assurance from one of the Knights of Ren. What was it about this infuriating man that made her common sense fly right out the window?

Boethiah warily tilted her masked head as she studied Rey. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Rey lied. "I was just curious what he does with his day, that's all."
"He'll definitely have to work through a hideous ton of backlog this week," Boethiah snidely pointed out, "considering that he put his affairs on hold to attend your little party, where, I might add, he almost got killed."

Moreem cleared her throat again, but Rey caught the major's eye and shook her head slightly. She should have been offended by Boethiah's tone but, after almost a year of people bowing and scraping, to be spoken to so rudely was refreshing in its own twisted way. Besides, this was the woman she'd once wrestled with at the edge of a cliff, the two of them disarmed and doing their utmost best to strangle each other while the sky rained fire and debris from shattered First Order and Resistance ships. They were long past the point of formalities.

"Of course, he'd probably get a whole lot more done," the knight continued in a tone of deep resentment, "if he stopped bugging me about your well-being every five seconds."

Rey's heart skipped a beat. "What?"

But Boethiah folded her arms across her chest and refused to say anything more. Rey could only stare at the other woman, her mind in a whirl as Olanji's silvery blue haze lit up the viewports and the convoy made planetfall.

* * *

The Breakwater was a harbor city of sorts, constructed over and around a dam that spilled the massive river Adurant into a reservoir from which this region of the planet drew its hydroelectric energy. Like nearby Charubah, Olanji was a tech-oriented world, and it showed in the dozens of factories scattered along the cerulean waterline. Looming over everything was the ancestral castle of House Rhade, perched at the center of the dam and serving as its highest point, fashioned from white allacrete and emerald glass and eschewing standard Hapan architecture for sleek, minimalist lines.

It was the countess herself who met Rey on the landing pad. "So lovely to see you, Your Grace," Dechen gushed, taking Rey by the arm after the required curtsy and escorting her to the dining room, chattering a mile a minute as Boethiah, the Chume'doro, and the stormtroopers trailed behind. Rey zoned out— it wasn't as if Dechen would notice— and pondered her next course of action regarding Kylo. Should she press Boethiah for what exactly he was saying? Should she comm to tell him to ask about her well-being himself? Dear stars, why was she somehow even more annoyed than when she thought he didn't care?
I don't know what's going on with me. Rey wanted to scream. Why am I reacting like this, why do I feel this way, on top of everything else— And then, in a burst of frustration that she was well-aware was both selfish and irrational— Why can't he just be here?

But, as always, it wasn't long before she had to set her conflicted emotions aside and focus on the duties of being Chume' da. As Dechen had promised, the lunch gathering consisted of only a handful of ladies from the younger set— of course, this being an event hosted by a Hapan noble, each of these ladies carried more wealth and power in her little finger than some of the Empire's sector governors. A quick scan of the faces at the table was all Rey needed to deduce that she'd walked into a room containing practically half of the Rifle Worlds' economic and political backbone.

The most notable personage in attendance was Lania Jien, the Ducha of the Olanji system. She sat next to Dechen and was quiet for the greater portion of the meal, in stark contrast to the other noblewomen who plied Rey with the usual flatteries and delicate maneuvering for certain concessions that could only be granted or at the very least accelerated by royal decree. Rey had to keep her wits at their sharpest to respond courteously while promising nothing, although she made mental notes to discuss some of the more sensible proposals with the Queen Mother. But part of her kept wondering why Lania was holding her peace— Dechen, too, come to think of it. Whatever these two wanted from her, they wished to bring it up in private.

Rey's suspicions turned out to be correct. Once the meal had ended and the rest of the guests took their leave, Dechen invited Rey to adjourn with her and Lania to the parlor, where Hapan gold was served in ice-cold glasses. Rey still disliked the bitterness of this particular wine, but she managed to sip it with a straight face as she watched the two other women sitting opposite her on the couch and waited for them to speak.

Lania broke the silence, slipping her hand into Dechen's. "Your Grace," she addressed Rey, her silver-hued eyes steely with tension against her olive skin, "the Countess Rhade and I grew up together, when she was sent to be my lady-in-waiting at Greymoor. We are childhood sweethearts, and we believe it is time that we unite our houses."

Rey relaxed, thinking that she'd finally realized the purpose of this meeting. All marriage ceremonies between the aristocracy had to be conducted on Hapes Prime by law, and the couple probably wanted her help in speeding up the bureaucratic process. "I understand your eagerness, my ladies, and I would be most happy to assist in any way that I can." Ta'a Chume would jump at this chance, she cynically added to herself. It would be another favor owed to her by the Rifle Worlds.

Lania smiled tightly. "Thank you, Chume' da, but—as it is— we are not in any particular rush. There is the matter of succession that we wish to deal with first."

Dechen spoke up. "As I'm certain Her Grace knows, noblewomen of mine and Lady Jien's
persuasion who choose to wed their partners have traditionally elected to bequeath lands and titles to relatives or, in some cases, legitimize any offspring that they beget with a male lover. Unfortunately, we find neither of those options palatable."

"I would rather claw my own eyes out in the afterlife than have my shade see my younger sister installed as the Duchan of Olanji and the Lady of Greymoor," Lania said bluntly. "And I have no wish to lay with a man."

"I have no use for men as well," Dechen chimed in with a smirk. "What we would vastly prefer, Your Grace, is to someday adopt a child and name her heir to both our holdings. We realize that there are other alternatives—an anonymous sperm donor, or surrogacy—but, as it is, neither of us have any interest in being with child and, setting aside the potential political complications of a surrogate, at the end of the day we would like to give an orphan a home."

None of the three women in this room had any illusions about the challenge that lay ahead. To allow a child not of the blood to inherit would mean adding provisions to the Hapan constitution or amending it altogether. It would be a vicious, uphill battle that promised to tear the already fractured Royal Court even further apart.

"We realize that Ta'a Chume is a traditionalist," Lania continued, "but perhaps if Your Grace were to speak with her, to arrange a meeting with us and like-minded nobles? Or perhaps this can be a consideration for... the future," she carefully added.

And by future, there was no doubt that she meant the reign of Kira Ka Djo.

Don't make promises you can't keep, was one of the first lessons that Rey's grandmother had drilled into her head. But, looking at Lania and Dechen as they held hands and faced her with a terse trepidation that not even the famed Hapan composure could disguise, Rey thought of what made a family, of how she'd carved one out with the Resistance. She thought of children who, unlike Aeshi back on Lovola, had no parents to speak of, and how it was still so tangible to her how that felt because, when all was said and done, the scars of Jakku still lived on in her soul.

And she thought of freedom. How she hadn't had the freedom to choose whom she married, how even the upper echelons of Consortium society were constrained by the issues of legacy, how it was legacy that had contributed to Ben Solo's downfall.

What was the point of power if one couldn't use it to make things better? To change the old ways?
"I will see it done," Rey told Lania and Dechen before she could doubt herself, before she could look back. "In Ta'a Chume's time or in mine."

After finishing off the last of her wine, Rey professed a need to use the facilities. "I can manage," she said when Dechen offered to escort her, figuring that she ought to give the couple opportunity to talk in private.

Following the countess' directions, Rey exited the parlor via a side door and found herself in a pristine white hallway, stained emerald and gold by the sunlight streaming in through the tinted windows. She located the 'fresher without incident but, afterwards, as she was washing her hands, she heard faint musical sounds emerge from behind a second door that led east of where she'd entered. Curious, she walked over to that door and it slid open at her approach.

What she saw took her breath away.

Another white corridor connected the 'fresher to the opposite wing of the castle. There was a roof but no window-glass, affording an unobstructed view of the rose gardens below. But the exquisite flowers didn't capture Rey's attention as they normally would have— because the corridor was lined, from one end to the other, with chime-paintings.

Crafted exclusively on the planet of Farnica in the Interior Region of the Hapes Cluster, each chime-painting was a mixed media artwork that incorporated sculpture with percussion instruments— made from either wood or precious metals— that were hung aloft to catch the wind. A soft breeze had just picked up and now dozens of chimes were swaying gently in their neat rows, producing a variety of melodies that filled the air.

Rey wandered amidst the sculptures in a trance. There was a startlingly lifelike, crystalline vulptex captured in mid-stride, its spine fading into a profusion of golden vines from which dangled tiny, rainbow-hued whisper birds. Behind it stood a majestic Krugga deer carved from the palest ivory, its antlers stylized to resemble tree branches sprouting everlilies fashioned from bronze. Across from the deer, a scarlet phoenix was reborn from the elaborately painted waves of a nova adorned with star-shaped chimes; it faced a flowy, serpentine jade dragon wreathed in sea-foam so exquisitely rendered that Rey almost expected it to be wet to the touch.

On and on the exhibit went, each piece more stunning than the last, and always the music that emanated from them, ebbing and surging with the breeze that also whistled through the roses in the garden below. Depending on the material from which each set of chimes had been constructed, there
were bold, brassy notes and the delicate cascade of glass bells and the sonorous patter of mahogany, all mingling together into what Rey could very nearly imagine was the song of the universe.

But, when she reached the end of the corridor, everything went—

— quiet—

Rey froze.

It wasn't dead silence. Not exactly. She could hear the muffled thud of her pulse and, somehow, she could also hear nothingness, the primal, gultural vacuum that swallowed all external sounds the same way it had last night, when it fell over her like a heavy velvet curtain.

Wind chimes swayed out of the corner of her eye, disconcertingly mute.

Behind her, there was a sudden harsh intake of air, as if someone's breath had hitched.

Rey turned around.

And there he was, standing in front of her, tall and pale and dressed in black and not just another dream, staring at her with the same slack-jawed expression that she was sure occupied her own face.

She wondered nothing, asked no questions, held no grudges. There was only joy, brilliant and blinding, and the triumphant reverberations of the Force. "Ben," she breathed out, with all that she felt in her heart, and then she was rushing forward and flinging herself into her husband's arms. Across time and space. Across the stars.

Chapter End Notes

Arrack vine.

Candlewick flower.

Palomella.
Mysess blossom.
Sun-dew flower.
Gingerbell.
Queen's Heart.
The New Territories.
Bliz.
Maxima-A class heavy cruiser.
Allacrete.
Chime-painting.
Farnica.
Vulpex.
Whisper bird.
Krugga deer.
Phoenix.

Dechen Rhade of the Breakwater first appears in Chapter 25 as one of the ladies who visited Rey at Alqualonde.
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

I LIVE. Thank you, everyone, for waiting so patiently and for all the kind comments on the last chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Kylo Ren, it was whispered about, had been in an even nastier mood than usual these past three days. His generals blamed the Hapans and their shoddy assassination attempt, while the lower-ranking officers who transcribed his meetings opined that he was under a grievous load of stress from the work that had accumulated during his absence.

The stormtroopers joked amongst themselves, in the privacy of their own barracks, that the Emperor missed his wife. But this was soldiers’ talk, ribald and not to be taken seriously, and these same stormtroopers all but tripped all over one another to scramble out of the way and stand at attention as Kylo stalked down the corridors of the Citadel.

He paid no heed to them or to the various droids that were also skittering aside as if they'd picked up on the atmosphere of doom and were unwilling to draw his notice. The day had only gone downhill after that disastrous nap and his resultant... trousers situation, and he wanted nothing more than to once again retreat into the solace of his private chambers, from which he had no plans to emerge until the next morning.

Perhaps he'd even be able to get some sleep, although he rather doubted it. He hadn't been lying when he told Rey that he could only sleep when she was in his bed, and that in itself was enough to worsen his temper.

Bound for the turbolift that would take him to the residential wing of the complex, Kylo rounded the corner. And stopped short.

Standing in front of him in the otherwise deserted hallway, as if she'd materialized out of thin air, was a figure clad in a gown with a form-fitting, gold-encrusted, pale ivory bodice, the short sleeves and trailing skirts made up of flared panels of translucent, rosy beige chiffon. Her chestnut hair had been plaited and curled into a chignon beneath a golden chaplet of stylized laurel leaves and her back was turned to him, but he knew who she was. He would have known her anywhere in the galaxy.

The world had gone quiet. But also— not. It was as if all other sounds had been sucked into a
vacuum and there was no space for anything except breath and blood and heartbeat, threaded through with the guttural hum that was recognizable only to the Force-touched. His startled, strangled half-gasp at the sight of her was so loud in all of this unearthly silence. And she heard, and turned to him.

Several questions sprang to the tip of Kylo's tongue—How are you doing this? Can you see my surroundings, I can't see yours, do you ever think of me?—but they were answered before he could give any of them voice. For one thing, the shock and disbelief on Rey's face mirrored his own churning emotions and, for another, the look in her eyes stated in no uncertain terms that—in the same way she eclipsed everything else in his universe—all she saw was him.

"Ben."

Before Kylo could move a muscle—before he could so much as speak—Rey collided into him, throwing her arms around his neck. He'd been afraid that this was a mere projection in the Force, that they'd slip through each other like phantoms, but his own arms closed around her slight waist and the scent of wild roses filled his nose. This was real. She was real, and she was sniffling into his tunic, her mind bared to him in a brief, unguarded second of purest joy. Through the strange telepathic link that had opened between them, he saw how doubt had assailed her practically from the moment they separated, how she had started to fret when he didn't comm, how she'd switched off her comlink in a burst of frustration, reckless and determined all at once.

Kylo could only stand there and hold his wife, staring blankly over the top of her head as the realization hit. She'd wanted him to comm. She'd fallen asleep with her device clutched in the palm of her hand while he'd been steadfastly ignoring the urge to talk to her and hear her voice, busying himself with matters of ruling that he'd put off for far too long. And then she'd—

—switched off her comlink—

It took him a while to identify the tightness in his chest as fury. Fury with their situation, with the things that had happened in Rey's past that contributed to her insecurity at being left behind. Fury with what had spilled over from his own childhood, rendering him ill-equipped to be there for her when she needed him.

His hands flew up to grip her by the arms and Rey lifted her head from his chest, peering up at him with wide, tear-stained eyes. He crushed his lips to hers in an artless, punishing kiss, beads of wetness sliding down his cheeks as he squeezed his own eyes shut and lost himself in the taste of her mouth. She squeaked in protest at first, taken aback by his intensity, but he didn't let up, scraping his teeth against her bottom lip for good measure as he guided her backwards until her spine hit the wall and they could go no further.
"That," he informed her, brusque and ragged, when they broke apart for air, "was for not answering my comms. For turning your comlink off."

Surprise and relief broke out over her expression, as tremulous and radiant as first light. She surged up on her toes to kiss him again, maneuvering him around until he was the one crowded up against the wall and being ravished by her own merciless mouth.

"And this," she muttered against his lips, "is for keeping tabs on me through your lackey instead of just contacting me yourself."

Oh, she was an infuriating woman. Always turning the tables on him, always giving back as good as she got. Kylo growled low in his throat and seized control of the kiss— a control that Rey relinquished only for a handful of seconds before she wrestled it back from him again.

The next few moments were a blur as they vented out all the anger and anxiety of the past three days through the movements of their bodies. Frantic kisses, shattered moans, dark heat. Fingernails raking against clothes, teeth digging into skin. There was still some part of Kylo's brain— one that he couldn't entirely shut off— wondering how the hell this could even be possible. But Rey didn't seem to care about such technicalities, so why should he? He shoved all vestiges of academic curiosity to the very back of his mind as he pinned her to the wall once more, as he slipped a hand under her gauzy skirts and pushed his palm flush against the gusset of her panties. He didn't bother with gentleness when he stroked her through the damp silk, pressing a knuckle to the outline of her swollen bundle of nerves and clapping his free hand over her lips to stifle her sharp cry at the raw rush of pleasure-pain.

"This," he hissed in her ear with the savage vindictiveness that could only be borne from such a pitiful, all-consuming attachment, "is for making me dream of you touching yourself for me on Lovola— for making your Emperor come in his pants like a kriffing teenager—"

She wrenched away from him, quick as lightning. At first, he was paralyzed by the fear that he'd gone too far, but her hand drifted up to cradle his face, instinctively running a thumb along the scar with which she'd marked him as hers. "What are you talking about?" she asked, her tone as breathless and as unsteady as he felt. "That was my dream. Was— was the Force connecting us, even then?"

And, like the most cruel of jokes, that was when the link snapped in half, the Force shying away once attention had been called to it. One minute Kylo was looking into Rey's eyes and, the next, he was gazing at nothing but the blank obsidian wall in the hallway of the Citadel.
"Shit," he swore out loud.

Rey didn't think she'd ever moved so fast in her life. After racing back to the parlor and bidding a hasty farewell to Dechen and Lania, she all but sprinted back to the shuttle, her bemused guards on her heels, and locked herself in the sleeping quarters. She sat on the bed and fumbled for her comlink, her fingers trembling as they keyed in a hurried sequence, and then— and then—

"Rey."

She collapsed onto the mattress, the back of her head hitting the pillows, the relief that flooded her so sweet and aching that she couldn't have stayed upright a second longer. "Ben," she whimpered, unable to say anything more than that, unable to come to terms with the fact that she'd been holding him in her arms and kissing him mere minutes ago and now they had to settle for this, for existing to each other as a voice on the opposite end of the line.

"Come here." Kylo sounded like he was begging. He sounded out of breath like he, too, had rushed to the privacy of his room so that he could talk to her over comlink. "Damn the funeral. *Come here.*"

Fresh tears welled up in Rey's eyes, elicited by the sharp point of burning need in his tone. "You know I can't."

He swore— so crudely and savagely that she jumped. And then for a while there was nothing but silence as the two of them tried to get their racing hearts under control. She *knew* his heart was racing — in the echoes of the link that had just snapped, she could hear it, skipping a beat faster than hers, as if she could feel everything he was feeling, as if his pulse lived and bloomed in the spaces between her own.

"Ben," she said once she trusted her voice not to waver, "what's happening to us?"

He sighed. "It's— hard to say for certain. There is historical precedent for two Force-sensitive individuals establishing a mental connection that allows them to communicate over vast distances but, as I have been given to understand, that is the sort of phenomenon that usually occurs between master and apprentice or long-term allies. Not..."
He trailed off and she gripped the comlink tighter in her hand, the rounded edges of the device biting into her palm. "Not what?" she pressed, needing him to say it, to say that they were—

"Husband and wife." His tone was so gentle, so very tentative. She closed her eyes. Hearing it in such plain terms from him was a relief. Was like a drug. The fate that had seemed so detestable back then unfolded around her, solid and comforting.

Kylo cleared his throat, a bit self-consciously. "However, I haven't encountered anything in my studies to indicate that a Force bond is capable of what happened just now."

"You were in the Breakwater," Rey marveled. "We touched. We kissed."

"And I saw you in the Citadel." He paused. "I was, perhaps, a little brutish— or a lot— I apologize—"

"No, no," she hastened to reassure him, her stomach doing a pleasant flip at the memory, "it's all right. I... I liked it," she finished in a much smaller voice, feeling oddly shy.

"You did?" Something about the way he sounded made her wonder if that trademark befuddled crease had worked its way between his brows. She wished she could see for herself, in person.

"I really, really did," she confirmed before her courage could fail her, a tiny grin playing at the corner of her lips, giddy and unbidden.

"I see." His voice broke a little; she wouldn't have registered it if she hadn't been hanging on to his every word, attempting to decipher emotion from an audio feed. "That's... something to keep in mind, then."

"It is," Rey agreed. "But we're straying from the original topic."

"Right. The Force bond." He cleared his throat once more. "From what I recall, it is something that develops over time and can be controlled. There is no mention in the old texts of this random skipping about that occurs between us. And neither was there any talk of dreamspace overlapping."
The beginnings of a flushed warmth suffused Rey's veins at the mention of the dream they'd somehow shared. Kylo took another unsteady breath, one that she almost felt bursting in her own chest. "You were something else," he said thickly. Wistfully. "Lying in your bed of flowers, covered in moonlight. I never wanted to wake up."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, startled and flustered by this new sweetness, and then cringing because she was startled and flustered. "Well— I mean—" She turned on her side to press her heated cheek against the pillow, embarrassed and exasperated. All in good ways. "What am I supposed to say to that?"

"You don't have to say anything." And, this time, the way he sounded made her fantasize that he was smiling. That boyish, lopsided half-smile that filled her heart. "It's enough for me that you know."

They talked until Rey's shuttle made planetfall on Lovola and it was time for her to disembark. Bumbling fool that Kylo might be, he did remember to thank her for the book. She insisted that it was nothing, sounding as disconcerted as she'd been when he told her about his reaction to seeing her in the dream. They signed off with promises to comm again soon, and he sat at the edge of his mattress and stared at the wall as he went over the conversation in his head.

*I need to compliment my wife more often,* he decided. And he would start when she arrived on Coruscant for her visit. If she left Hapes immediately once the funeral was over, she would be in his arms the morning after next.

For the first time in years, Kylo was actually looking forward to something. It was a strange sensation but, all things considered, it wasn't entirely unpleasant.

* *

His comlink buzzed at one in the morning. He'd been tossing about in bed as usual and he answered hurriedly, grateful for the reprieve from another sleepless night.

"Hi," Rey said, endearingly awkward.

Kylo rolled over onto his back and gazed up at the dark ceiling of his room as he tried to curb a smile
from forming. "All done with your royal duties for the day?"

"Yes, I've just gotten in from dinner—" She broke off with a start. "Kriff, I forgot about the time
difference—"

"It's fine. You didn't wake me."

"Well—" She paused, still tentative. "If you're sure..."

He would have risen from the dead just to answer her comm, but he masterfully succeeded in
preventing such a dramatic declaration from ever leaving his lips. "I'm sure," he confirmed instead.
"How are you?"

"Um," Rey said, that single nonsensical interjection edged with something weighty and nervous,
something that made Kylo's body instinctively tense in anticipation for reasons he couldn't determine
as of yet. "I'm in bed. I've been thinking about last night and— and earlier today. What we did—"
She lowered her voice and her next words emerged like they'd been forced through a lump in her
throat— "when you touched me—"

Kylo's hand fisted into the sheets. He pictured Rey as she must look right this very moment, lying
back amidst flowers and silk, clad in— "What are you wearing?" he blurted out, his heart hammering
faster within his ribcage as he prayed that she wouldn't hang up on him.

He heard a ragged intake of breath on the other end of the line. Relief, he thought— or perhaps he
hoped. She sounded relieved. Like she'd wanted him to ask her that. "The pink Loveti moth," she
bashfully replied and, stars, he knew that nightgown well. It was in the top five nightgowns that he
yearned to rip off of her the most.

Kylo was reaching down into his sleep pants almost before he knew it. "Speaking of last night,
cyar'ika," he murmured, "shall we go for round two?"

* *

The next day, the denizens of the Citadel furtively consulted with one another and arrived at the
verdict that the Emperor's mood was much improved. None of them, however, could figure out the
reason behind such an auspicious change in circumstance.
"What do you mean—" Boethiah's growl was a low and icy rumble through her voice modulator—"I'm not allowed to wear black?"

"I mean exactly what I said!" Janassa stomped her foot. "It's a funeral. Why would you wear black?"

Boethiah glanced at Rey, who blithely pretended not to notice as she sat at her dressing table in the Shadowgreen while the other ladies-in-waiting put the finishing touches on her makeup. Had she been so inclined, she would have explained to Boethiah that black—already a much-maligned color throughout the Hapes Cluster—was even more of a taboo at interment ceremonies. But, as it was, she rather enjoyed watching the knight suffer. It made waking up at the crack of dawn worth it.

"You can wear purple," Janassa continued, "as it symbolizes respect—or white, the color of remembrance—or red, since Lord Feara died in battle—but you absolutely cannot wear black."

Rey herself was clad in purple. It was the heaviest gown she owned, all wide wrist-length sleeves and multi-layered velvet skirts embellished with generous panels of silver brocade. She'd dressed appropriately for winter on Wodan but, here in the more temperate climes of Lovola, she could already feel beads of perspiration gathering along her spine.

"I am unfortunately fresh out of other palette options," Boethiah sneered. "My stylist took the day off to wash her hair, you see."

"That's all right." Janassa was unfazed. "You can borrow one of my gowns, we're about the same size—"

Boethiah tensed. "I am not prancing around in a dress. Of all the impractical—" She broke off, turning to Rey. "With all due respect, Chume'da," she said through gritted teeth, "Lord Ren assigned me to guard you with my life and, as such, my apparel is designed for that purpose."

Even though Rey was taking a twisted sort of delight in Boethiah's impossible situation, she also realized that she could not in good conscience allow it to continue unchecked. She remembered how alien dresses had felt at first, how uncomfortable she sometimes felt in them still. Boethiah might have been her enemy in the past, but now the scales of power had been tipped in her favor and it seemed the height of pettiness to use that power to render someone—no matter who—helpless in their own skin. It seemed one step closer to becoming like Ta'a Chume, who'd ordered most of Rey's
tunics and leggings excluded from the move to the Reef Fortress.

"The problem," Rey explained to Boethiah in what she hoped was a conciliatory tone of voice, "is that black really is anathema at Hapan funerals, and I can't afford to antagonize either House Feara or Varless. The Consortium heir has more leeway to flout tradition than most, but then I'd be making it all about me rather than the passing of a great lord."

"Your Grace, if I may?" Sayl chimed in. "I have a couple of pantsuits in my wardrobe, perhaps that would be acceptable..."


Having overshot their departure time by a good fifteen minutes, the Chume'da's entourage hurriedly piled into the shuttle that would take them to Wodan, with Boethiah looking just as fearsome in a white pantsuit as she did in mask and armor due to the menacing expression on her face. Rey had to admit that the knight was, in fact, very pretty— copper-skinned and slight of build, with the most arresting golden-hued eyes and a dusting of freckles on her nose and cheeks.

"Why do so many outworlders have freckles?" Vanya had complained after her attempts to dab concealer on the marks were brutally rebuffed. "Staying out of the sun is very important, you know."

"They're birthmarks, so switch off, Ruffles," Boethiah had grunted— a pointed reference to the frilled lace adorning the wrists and bodice of Vanya's gown.

Niobe, for her part, seemed more fascinated with Boethiah's hair. Indeed, as the shuttle coasted into the black of space, she studied the knight's severe ponytail once more. "What an intense shade of black. Do you dye it, by any chance?"

Boethiah rose to her feet. "I'm going to sit up front with the crew."

Rey couldn't blame her. The girls were a bit much at times.

It wasn't long before her datapad lit up with a missive from Kylo: Are you in transit?
Yes, Rey typed. She glanced at the timestamp and mentally fitted it to the schedule that he'd enlightened her on yesterday. How's your meeting going?

_Bleakly. I never liked Ter Abbes even at the best of times, and having to sit through laborious peace talks between the former administration and the B'Leph loyalists is doing nothing in the way of endearing this planet to me._

_Since the entire Locris sector is under First Order control, I don't understand why there need to be peace talks in the first place?_

_Ter Abbes was already embroiled in a civil war of their own making before we brought them into the Empire's fold. Each side surrendered separately, to two different generals who promised them different things. And now I have to clean up the mess._

Rey frowned, Kylo's blasé tone grating on her nerves. _You could've saved yourself the headache by not invading them_, she replied before she could think better of it.

_Indeed, they would have been much happier destroying their homeworld in a decade-long power struggle. Did you know that it was a centrist Republic senator who was rumored to have funded the populist Tholote B'Leph's assassination?_

Rey narrowed her eyes at the screen. _Killing people who don't share the same view is something the First Order is all too familiar with, I'm sure._

Her datapad went inactive for a long while after that, and she fumed silently in her seat as her oblivious ladies chatted among themselves. It was painfully clear that she and her husband should just refrain from discussing politics altogether, but how could they avoid what defined their marriage so thoroughly? She remembered last night with a pang, how he had described in graphic detail—in that rich, deep voice of his—all the things that he dreamed of doing to her, and how she had fallen asleep sated with the echoes of the soft grunt he made at his own release still ringing in her ears, tinged by the static of a long-distance comm, followed by sweet words and an even sweeter, raspy, "Good night, Rey." While there was no doubt in her mind that she wanted to see him again, it hit her that it would mean having to play a symbolic role in the very same authoritarian regime that had caused the galaxy so much grief. Being Empress in absentia was tolerable; _actually_ holding court in the Citadel, making nice with former enemy officers as they continued to enact their oppressive policies, would be a different matter entirely.
From space, the planet Wodan appeared to be engulfed in flame due to constant volcanic activity bleeding ionized particles into the atmosphere that then interacted with debris pulled in from the nearby Great Rim Route. However, Rey's studies had taught her that beneath the fiery veil were cities and a thriving biosphere, mostly on continents where the volcanoes had gone dormant.

The datapad on her lap blinked again, forcing her gaze away from the burning globe that loomed beyond the transparisteel viewport. Kylo had sent another curt missive: *Message me when you've arrived safely.* As if they hadn't argued just an hour ago.

The man was a dolt. But Rey's fingers were already flying over the keyboard to type an equally curt reply: *I have.*

Kylo didn't respond. Dolt, dolt, dolt.

* And after that came the plunge through atmosphere and into clouds of ash, the shuttle's sensors screeching as it traced a flight path away from the eruptions that wracked more than half of Wodan's surface. All thoughts of marital troubles were temporarily set aside as Rey drank in the sights that unfolded all around her— wave-tossed oceans, icy tundra, sprawling urban and forest landscapes covered in a light dusting of powdery snow. And always the volcanoes in the distance, rings upon rings of them, their obsidian crags streaming with red-gold magma as they coughed up great lungfuls of smoke into the air.

Lasbelin, or the Autumnwatch— seat of the deceased Jobal Feara's estate and where his funeral would be held— was nestled in the caldera of what had once been the largest volcano on the planet. It took its name from the hundreds of acres of saqila that occupied the vast property; endemic to Wodan, these trees sported red bark and red leaves all throughout the year and even now, in the heart of winter, they blazed like a river of fire against the pristine snow.

There were several landing grids scattered throughout the caldera and Rey's convoy docked at the one marked with the banner of the Royal House, joining Ta'a Chume's and Isolder's ships that, judging from the snowflakes clumped on their hulls, had been there for some time. While her father had departed Lovola before her due to the fact that he wanted to spend more time with his peers in the generation to which he and Feara belonged, Rey could already envision the disgruntlement on Ta'a Chume's face at her tardiness.
Sleek silver cloud cars ferried Rey and her entourage from the landing grid to the castle's main entrance, where she was bemused to find Lairelosse, Aleson, Dechen, Wyllah Novar, Myn Eriston, and Osira Varless waiting for her on the front steps, all of them looking none too pleased to be out in the cold despite being bundled up in luxurious furs that, if sold collectively, would in all likelihood suffice to buy out the entire Hutt Cartel. Rey's ladies draped her own heavy fur stole over her shoulders before she disembarked, an added layer of warmth that she was extremely grateful for once she left the cloud car's inbuilt heating system for the biting chill of Lasbelin's grounds.

"That's all the royal family accounted for, then," Aleson remarked once formal greetings were over and done with. "With the exception of His Imperial Majesty, of course."

Rey shot him a withering look. "Does my husband's absence wound you so deeply, Lord Gray?"

Aleson smirked. "I'll survive, Chume'da."

"I have just realized—" Myn said with a breeziness that indicated this had kept her up many a night in the past— "once Her Grace ascends, she will be an Imperial Majesty twice over. Here in Hapes in addition to already being one out in the Empire."

"Don't let that crowd in there hear you say that," Dechen warned, nodding towards the castle. "Or we'll have a riot on our hands."

"What do you mean by that, Countess Rhade?" Rey asked. She had a vague idea, however— she was in the Rifle Worlds, after all.

It was Lairelosse who confirmed her suspicions, stepping forward and linking her arm with Rey's. "The six of us came out to greet you so that we may all walk into the castle together as a show of solidarity," she declared. "You see, Chume'da, twenty-five percent of the people in attendance today are already your allies or can be wooed over, but fifty percent would love nothing more than to see the Royal House fall, while the remaining twenty-five percent blame you for Lord Feara's death."

"Wonderful," Rey muttered as they made their way to the great doors of Autumn. "And here I was afraid it would get boring."
Ter Abbes.

Tholote B’Leph.

Locris sector.

Loveti moth fiber.

Cloud car.

All the noblewomen in the last scene were present at the afternoon tea in Chapter 25.
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

Many, many thanks to clara-gemm for their beautiful rendition of the wind-chime scene from Chapter 42!

This update contains a funeral scene as well as several reflections on losing a loved one woven all throughout. Please be guided accordingly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cynthia Varless was an enigma right from the start. Rey had expected a grieving daughter but the woman curtsying to her in the gilded reception hall of the Autumnwatch appeared remarkably composed and self-assured. Two years younger than Rey, Cynthia had auburn hair cut in a stylish, chin-length bob, and her eyes were so light blue in color that they were almost white, almost like ice. She wore the requisite gray robes of mourning and red paint had been artfully smeared across her face in three diagonal, jagged lines, the lowermost one bleeding onto her pale lips. This signified that her father had died in battle, and who was to say otherwise, even though Lord Feara had been found with the blaster bolt's point of entry lodged in his back? Hapans knew all about pride and charade, and it was doubtful that anyone in the assembly would publicly begrudge Cynthia this.

It wouldn't be Rey, at any rate. She'd meant it when she told Ta'a Chume that Feara had been a good man.

"Lady Varless," Rey said once Cynthia had gracefully straightened up from her curtsy, "allow me to extend my heartfelt condolences on your father's passing. He was very kind to me and he will be missed."

"For his moderation as much as his kindness, I'm sure, Chume'da," Cynthia replied, and the way she said it— well, it was impossible to determine whether she was referring to Feara's temperance or his political moderation— as in, his ability to placate the ranks of the opposition, which was what the Queen Mother had valued him for.

Rey tried again. "I am truly sorry for your loss, my lady."

Cynthia inclined her head with rather more imperiousness than was appropriate in the presence of the Hapan Royal House. "Thank you, Your Grace. I suppose we orphans must stick together. For you were in my current situation for most of your life, were you not? Parentless, having to fend for yourself..."
"I had no castles," Rey pointed out before she could help it, stung by how this glamorous, wealthy noble who looked like she'd never done an honest day's work in her life could even think to compare their experiences. "I ruled over nothing." Except a dusty AT-AT lying on its side in the Goazon Badlands, where she'd dined on meager portions of veg-meat and polystarch, where her only company had been her pilot doll and her potted spinebarrel and, for a few hours, that nameless junk droid that had tried so hard to be useful before finally falling still...

A hint of mockery lurked in the depths of Cynthisa's glacial eyes. "You are saying I should be counting my blessings, then, Chume'da?"

"Her Grace is saying nothing of the sort," Lairelosse snapped. "It's a pity you're not as good at accepting condolences as you are at putting words in other people's mouths, Cyn."

"Shall you have your little snake challenge me to an honor duel, Laire?" Cynthisa purred, her gaze flicking to Aleson, who stood stiffly beside Lairelosse, bearing the silver insignia of the Serpent's Trace on his white cloak. "That's what he does best, I hear."

"Seems to me you should be spending more time mourning your father than speculating on the size of Aleson's snake," Osira retorted, which caused Myn to choke on the wine she was sipping and Dechen to cough ever so delicately behind a gloved palm.

"Ah, my dear cousin." Cynthisa's voice went as cold as the winter that assailed the castle walls. "Unbearably crass as always. It's fortunate that the Consortium is willing to make allowances for your illegitimate birth."

"I'd say they more than made allowances when they recognized me as Ducha of K'Farri," Osira sweetly replied. "What's fortunate is that our government so very firmly believes in justice."

Rey was well-versed enough in the history of K'Farri's leadership to know that Osira was making a thinly-veiled reference to her mother's death— purportedly at the hands of Cynthisa's mother. The Lady of the Autumnwatch bristled but recovered quickly, turning to Rey once more. "And would Her Grace agree?" Cynthisa queried. "That our government holds justice in high esteem?"

There was... something in the other woman's tone. Some insinuation, the shape of which Rey couldn't quite grasp. She frowned as she chose her next words with great care. "I have seen no cause for complaint in my studies of the Hapan legal system."
"Of course you haven't," said Cynthisa. "History is written by the victors."

Wyllah moved with a canny alertness that gave every impression of one springing into action. "Oh, look," she said, all of a sudden absolutely fascinated by something on the far side of the reception hall, "there's the Marchioness of Candlehearth. Ducha Yliri, didn't you mention that you wished to introduce the Chume'da to her?"

"Indeed I did!" Lairelosse exclaimed. "You will excuse us, Lady Varless— come along, Your Grace —"

Rey was fairly certain that she'd already made the marchioness' acquaintance at her and Kylo's wedding, but she allowed herself to be dragged away from Cynthisa, her allies clustering protectively around her as they crossed the hall. It was a relief to have some distance put between her and the bereaved who obviously had an axe to grind, but Rey couldn't help wondering...

"What was Lady Varless on about?" she asked Lairelosse once they were out of earshot. "With all that talk of justice?"

"Oh, don't mind her," Lairelosse said airily. "Cynthisa inherited her father's hair but none of his virtues. She's an unpleasant person all around."

"It's just rumors, Chume'da," Myn attempted to reassure. "Old gossip, which no one in their right mind would believe..." She trailed off when Lairelosse shot her a warning look and then she would say no more, clamping her lips shut.

"Old gossip?" Rey echoed, not one to be deterred. "Regarding what, exactly?"

Before anyone could dare answer, the crowd shifted and Ta'a Chume was standing in Rey's path, bedecked in golden furs and icy blue satin, a transparent birdcage veil woven from finest gemweb drawn over her features. Rey didn't miss the uneasy glances that her companions exchanged with one another— although, since they were Hapans, the uneasiness manifested in nothing more than a raised eyebrow here and a slight downwards turn of the mouth there— and soon Lairelosse, Myn, Wyllah, Dechen, and Osira had sunk into their respective curtsies while Aleson bowed.

"Ereneda," Rey said coolly. This was the first time she and her grandmother had come face to face since their argument at the Reef Fortress, and she wasn't inclined to let bygones be bygones just yet.
"Your Grace." Ta'a Chume's greeting was similarly cool. Her jade eyes surveyed the rest of the young nobles, narrowing slightly as they lingered on Aleson, before focusing on Rey once more. "Where are the seven of you going, might I ask? Surely Lady Cynthisa is in need of comfort from her peers on this most sorrowful of days."

"Fresher," said Dechen.

"The drinks table," said Aleson.

"To talk to the Marchioness of Candlehearth," said Laireslosse.

The three of them spoke at the same time, followed by a collective, bewildered silence, during which Rey stumbled to the verbal rescue. "In that order," she added in what she hoped was a firm, confident tone.

"I see. Well," Ta'a Chume addressed the group at large, "you'll have to do all of that without the Chume'da, I'm afraid, as I need her to accompany me on my walkabout. We have much to discuss."

I don't want to discuss anything with you, Rey was tempted to growl, but she could hardly make a scene at a funeral deep in politically unstable territory. She bid goodbye to the other nobles, her skin crawling as Ta'a Chume latched on to her elbow, the stiletto cones adorning the old woman's fingernails registering as faint pinpricks through Rey's thick velvet sleeve.

Walkabout was Ta'a Chume's term for making the rounds in a gathering of aristocrats, moving from one circle to another and either making small talk or engaging in some light back-channel negotiation and just generally getting the feel of the atmosphere in the room. However, Rey didn't need to talk to anyone to discern the mood of this particular assembly; she sensed it in the air, weighing in the Force like snowfall— sorrow at Feara's passing, as well as a vague undercurrent of hostility. She glimpsed it at the periphery of her vision— whispers behind wineglasses and stares like fleeting daggers, the perpetrators either shying away or offering nods and polite, brittle, blameless smiles when she made eye contact.

Ever since stepping into the role of Chume'da, Rey had on several various occasions felt scrutinized, patronized, judged and found wanting— sometimes all at the same time— but she'd never felt unwelcome before. "The aristocracy of the Rifle Worlds has less to gain from cozying up to the Royal House as compared to those in, say, the Interior Region," Aleson had explained earlier. "Aside from the ones who harbored actual sympathy for Kalen's rebellion, there are those who know
that the Queen Mother will never really forgive their region for taking part in the rebellion in the first place—and, so, what's the use?"

"We have a saying here in Hapes: 'The enemy of the person who treats me like an enemy is my friend,'" Lairelosse had quoted. "It's widely regarded as solid advice for those who are vacillating between alliances."

"I'm the one being treated like an enemy right now," Rey had grumbled, and Lairelosse and Aleson had flashed wry smiles but hadn't argued, either, which had been quite depressing.

Ta'a Chume didn't seem in any rush to talk to the other funeral guests. Instead, she steered Rey through the crowd with a measured slowness in her steps. "You arrived late, Kira."

Rey was not about to explain that she'd overslept due to the fact that her husband had sweetly talked her into an orgasm the night before. It was a relief when Ta'a Chume continued speaking and saved her the trouble of having to come up with an excuse fit for polite company. "I assume your bodyguard's makeover had something to do with that."

Rey glanced over at Boethiah, who, in defiance of the formal setting, was leaning against a nearby pillar with insouciantly slumped shoulders and hands shoved into the pockets of her borrowed white pantsuit, glaring at anyone who happened to look her way.

"There were some adjustments that needed to be made," Rey conceded.

"You should have foreseen that and accordingly made allowances in your schedule so that you could still have departed on time," Ta'a Chume admonished. "I no longer knew when to expect you and was thus unable to meet you myself and bring you straight to Lady Cynthisa. That way, you could have avoided going up to her in the company of the bastard cousin she hates for stealing what she thinks is rightfully hers."

*It's always layers with you.* Rey thought with a burst of resentment as Ta'a Chume at last revealed the true reason Rey's lack of punctuality had made her cross. "Osira is worth ten of Cynthisa, Your Majesty."

"I," sniffed Ta'a Chume, "hold Ducha Varless in high regard. The Lady of the Autumnwatch doesn't, and it is her friendship that I specifically ordered you to court."
"Then I'll try again," Rey snapped, feeling much like she had— and saying the same thing she'd said— back when Luke had chided her for not being able to sense the Force. In all honesty, though, she'd take the most esoteric training exercise over all this politicking any day of the week.

"See that you do," said Ta'a Chume. "This is a crucial period. You can't afford to make any more mistakes or to upset the order of things any more than your marriage and your double-dealing already have. I suppose there might be time in the future to facilitate any changes you wish to enact within your power as the Consortium heir, but that time is not now. Do you understand, Kira?"

Rey gaped at the Queen Mother. "How did you know—"

"What other reason could Dechen Rhade have had for inviting you to a luncheon at the Breakwater where Lania Jien was also present, if not to plot constitutional amendment behind my back? I've gotten where I am by constantly appraising myself of people's motives and learning how to put two and two together—"

"You mean having spies everywhere!" Rey hissed.

"I knew you left the Shadowgreen for Olanji, and I know Countess Rhade and Ducha Jien frequent an orphanage there," Ta'a Chume interrupted. "Seeing as it's about time those two get married, I suspected they might want to talk to you about modifying inheritance laws. But did I know for certain? No. You were the one who confirmed it just now."

"You— you—" Rey sputtered, too overcome with sudden fury to form a coherent sentence. She instinctively tried to wrestle her arm from Ta'a Chume's grasp, but the latter tightened her hold in warning— a few nobles were starting to take notice of the altercation.

"Remember this, Kira Ka Djo," drawled the Queen Mother. "In a nest of vipers, one must be a viper, too. Keep this in mind and you just might survive us all."

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After the guests had fortified themselves with enough mulled wine to brave the arctic temperatures once more, they retrieved their coats and shuffled outside for the internment. The Imperial Crypt on Hapes Prime was located in the mountains, watched over by the sages, but here on Wodan, all lords and ladies of the Autumnwatch were buried on the estate itself, beneath the saqila trees. Due to the heightened security measures that had characterized most events since the attack on the Reef
Fortress, only the Consortium nobles would be present to bury Feara; his serfs had already paid their respects during the five-day wake.

The graveyard was a five-minute walk from the castle, a scenic journey through snow-driven orchards where the saqila's crimson foliage still blazed as bright as day in the heart of winter. But the beauty was lost on Rey in her current situation, because it was—as the cruder Resistance soldiers might declare—cold as balls. Despite the many layers of fur and velvet that she was shrouded in, her teeth chattered and full-body shivers wracked her frame like minor earthquakes. She had not experienced this sort of freezing since Starkiller Base, when the sun died—and, even then, that had been tolerable, as she'd been warmed by the adrenaline of her and Kylo's frantic lightsaber duel and she'd been no stranger to the cold, having just been plucked out of Jakku where an icy chill would descend on the sandy dunes in the evenings.

*Now,* however—with this stately pace and after almost a year of the finest duvets credits could buy and hot showers and fireplaces and climate-controlled rooms—Rey was suffering.

Trying not to be too obvious about it, she huddled closer to her father as they walked. Isolder seemed surprised at first, and then a wave of affection, solid and gentle, poured forth from his energy signature. He draped an arm over Rey's shoulders and drew her close in a complete disregard for the aristocratic posturing that one was expected to uphold on public occasions such as this.

"How are you, Atta?" Rey murmured, her lips quirking in a soft smile—one that Isolder was slow to return and, when he did, it was with a trace of sadness.

"I could be better," he admitted. "It's not easy saying goodbye to one's friends, even at my age when that sort of thing is par for the course. And Lord Feara's demise was..." He trailed off with a sigh before leading Rey away from their nearest neighbors in the procession. When he spoke again, it was in a lower tone of voice. "I am of the opinion that Jobal did not have the family he deserved in this life, but he loved them all the same." His words made Rey think with a shudder of Cynthisa's casual cruelty, as well as the rumors of the conniving, power-hungry murderess her mother had been. "A man like that," Isolder concluded, "should have been granted a peaceful death."

"We will find those who orchestrated the masquerade attack," Rey vowed fiercely, wanting nothing more than to avenge the sorrow on the Hapan prince's face, "and they will pay for this. I promise you."

Isolder blinked at her, momentarily taken aback, and then squeezed her shoulder. "You remind me more and more of Teneniel every day," he said, and this time his smile was wider and more genuine.
Feara's body lay in state underneath the spray of broad red leaves crowning the saqila tree that had been picked out for him, surrounded by dozens of other trees sprouting marble headstones amidst their roots. Rey thought at first that an eerily realistic statue had been carved atop the lid of the handsome ivory coffin but she soon realized that it was, in fact, Feara himself—or, at least, the earthly shell that had once housed his soul. He'd been frozen in carbonite, dressed in grand ceremonial robes with his hands folded on his stomach, wrapped around the hilt of the longsword that he clutched close to him in death. In spite of the violent manner in which he had been killed, he looked serene now, the gray metal alloy smoothing away the lines of age and any semblance of pain.

They didn't bury him right away; one after the other, friends and relatives stepped forward to issue their eulogies. None were overly long but there was enough of them that, by the time Ta'a Chume concluded her speech, Rey felt like a living icicle. She determinedly tried to ignore the cold and focus instead on going through the motions of last rites with the appropriate amount of solemn respect, but it was a difficult task. Her breath emerged from her trembling lips as visible plumes of translucent white fog.

The assembly's consternation was palpable when the scarlet-robed sage officiating the funeral looked expectantly at Cynthisa, only for the latter to shake her head. The meaning behind the gesture was clear—she would not speak at her father's internment ceremony. The composure with which she had greeted Rey a few hours ago seemed greatly shattered; she'd wrapped her arms around herself, stolidly refusing to make eye contact with anyone.

Rey's heart clenched. It was true that they had started off on the wrong foot, but she was not so callous that she couldn't muster sympathy for someone who had now lost both parents—as she had, in her darkest moments back on Jakku, also believed of herself. She resolved to seize the next available opportunity to talk to Cynthisa and offer what comfort she could—in private, after the funeral. Perhaps the other woman would be less combative if it was just the two of them.

There was something apologetic in the way Isolder walked over to the bereaved, no doubt brought on by guilt over what he'd told Rey earlier about Feara not deserving the kind of family he'd gotten. Cynthisa still wouldn't meet his gaze but he stood in front of her and spoke gently. "If the lady permits, I would be honored to conduct the final send-off."

It took a while, but Cynthisa finally gave an almost imperceptible nod. Isolder then turned to address the crowd. "Lord Jobal Feara and I knew each other all our lives. We saw each other through the little joys and fears of childhood—through the births of beautiful daughters—" He glanced from Cynthisa to Rey with fondness—"and through the war, and all that followed. He taught me loyalty, honor, and decency—except at our monthly card table, where he taught me how to cheat." Subdued laughter rippled through the assembly and Isolder flashed a rueful grin before the expression on his face turned sorrowful. But it was the kind of sorrow that brandished itself like a flag over a last stand.
It was the kind of sorrow that looked like defiance in the right light. "And I will miss him, but— in my travels throughout the galaxy I have encountered many perspectives on death. There are those who say that death is rest, there are those who say that death is coming home, there are those who say that death is but the next chapter of the natural cycle that all souls must traverse. This is what I say: here in the Hapes Cluster, death shall have no dominion." He looked at the bier and his next words were unmistakably for Feara, and Feara alone. "We will see each other again, old friend."

Having said his piece, Isolder retreated back into the crowd, exchanging quiet words with some of the older nobles. Rey watched him from where she stood at the other side of the graveyard plot, awestruck by her father's heart and grateful that it was him she had run into at the end of her waiting.

It had started to snow again by the time the sage, whose name was Maraidal, lit the incense and swung the ruby-encrusted censer— suspended on a golden chain— back and forth over the bier in meditative, hypnotic patterns, filling the air with perfumed, opalescent smoke.

"Deep peace of the running wave to you." Maraidal's silvery tone was a fine match for the elegant benediction that she was now uttering over Feara's body. "Deep peace of the flowing air to you. Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. Deep peace of the shining stars to you..."

The sound of the sage's voice faded even as her lips continued moving. And, all around Rey, all other sounds went still. Gone were the crackle of twigs underfoot and the various small noises of the crowd and the snap of snow on branches and even the frequent rumble of volcanic eruptions carried on the crests of the wind from far, far away. There was only silence and a mute snowfall. There was only—

*Ben.*

Rey very nearly said his name out loud but stopped herself at the last possible second. She was the only one who could see him, judging from how none of the Hapans present had screamed bloody murder at the sight of the Emperor of the First Order materializing in front of Feara's coffin.

In light of their recent spat, she was annoyed at the way her heart skipped a beat, at the way her mind went temporarily blank. Kylo was shirtless, strands of dark hair clinging to his pale cheeks and his broad, sculpted torso glistening with sweat. He'd stilled in the act of wrapping strips of gauze around his left hand to stare at her, the initial surprise on his face fading into wary resignation. There was a small cut on his mouth, a crimson smudge marring the lush pink swell of his bottom lip. His bare knuckles were bruised and bloodied, too— he'd obviously just gotten in from some sort of training session.
I thought you were in a meeting, Rey told him via the mental link that had opened up between them.

"I called to adjourn for a few hours," Kylo said shortly. "People were getting restless, anyway."

And you?

He looked away, all of a sudden completely engrossed in the task of winding the bandages around his palm. "I needed to blow off steam," he mumbled. "You know why."

Rey could imagine it— or perhaps the Force fed it to her. How their argument had left him frustrated, how he’d stormed out of the boardroom to spar with his knights. It shouldn't have been possible for a political marriage between sworn foes to get even more complicated, but it had, and she was so lost and aching and confused.

And still freezing.

Rey clutched her fur stole tighter around her shoulders, burrowing her gloved hands into its luxurious folds. It was Hapan funeral custom to hold vigil over the body until the last of the incense burned out, but if she didn’t find a way to warm up soon there were going to be two bodies to put in the ground today. Her teeth were rattling again, more loudly than ever before, and the frost-tinged air stung her exposed face.

Kylo lowered his now-bandaged hand and started to work on the other, which was equally scraped up. Whatever mode of combat he'd engaged in today, it had been unarmed and, glancing at his profile, Rey noted the beginnings of what promised to be a wicked black eye if it wasn’t healed soon. She winced in sympathy; there was only one Knight of Ren who excelled at bare-knuckle fighting and Hircine did not pull any punches, in the most literal sense.

Before Kylo could finish unwinding the new roll of gauze that he'd picked up, his eyes darted to Rey in what seemed to be a compulsive, unthinking action on his part. He paused and cocked his head, studying her as she lifted her chin and did her best to project an aura of not about to die from hypothermia, thank you very much.

"You're cold," he muttered after a while, sounding displeased.

I have been warmer, yes, Rey conceded.
"Where exactly on Wodan are you?"

The orchards of Lasbelin. We're burying Feara on his ancestral lands.

A muscle ticked along Kylo's jaw. "They made you attend an outdoor funeral. In the middle of winter."

Rey wondered how he knew what season it was on this planet. Had he seen it in her mind? Had he guessed it from how miserable she looked? She supposed it was likely that he could have researched the weather conditions of where she was going, but that also begged the question why. She had no idea how to respond to him and so she shrugged before she could catch herself. A few feet away, Lairelosse noticed the gesture and raised a quizzical brow, probably wondering which part of the sage's blessing the Chume'da was taking issue with.

Chagrined, Rey passed off the shrug as a shiver— and, as if that was all the prompting that he'd needed, Kylo stormed over to her, his heavy footsteps eerily leaving no prints on the white snow. It was strange watching him act so unaffected by the frozen surroundings in his current state of undress; she had to remind herself that he wasn't here. Not really.

As he drew near, she began to tremble, the anticipation in the pit of her stomach and the ice in her veins mixing to form a nauseating sort of numbness that hollowed her stomach and filled her throat at the same time. The winter light shone in Kylo's eyes as he strode towards her against a backdrop of fiery crimson trees. Rey stared straight ahead, her gaze fixed on the casket over which swayed the censer that was blooming plumes of jewel-toned smoke. She couldn't risk moving, couldn't risk looking at him, couldn't risk giving herself away in front of all these people who hadn't the slightest clue what was going on right under their noses.

But, oh, how aware she was of him. It was charged with static, the distance between them that narrowed with each step that he took — until, finally, he was so close that she could smell him, all sweat and leather and blood and a lingering hint of aftershave, and—

— and he walked past her—

Rey didn't dare to follow Kylo with her eyes even as her mind struggled to scream out into the Force and ask him where the hell did he think he was going. But she didn't have to wait too long to find out — at the next shuddering breath she exhaled after he drifted out of her field of vision, his strong arms encased her from behind, wrapping firmly around her waist as he curled himself around her, his head
drooping forward as he rested his chin in the crook of her neck.

This was madness. This was pure and utter insanity. She was standing in a graveyard, surrounded by a host of allies and enemies alike, and her disheveled, half-naked husband was draped over her like a gigantic throw rug while she participated in the last rites for her father's friend. The Force had a twisted sense of humor. Or perhaps this was all just Rey— perhaps she was just a walking disaster, and would always be one.

*If there is an afterlife, she thought, Lord Feara, please forgive me. You died at my party and now I've made a mockery of your funeral—*

Kylo laughed. It was a hoarse scrape of sound, muffled into her fur stole. The kind of laugh that could only belong to someone who didn't laugh very often. She felt the corner of his smile against the scant inch of her neck that wasn't covered up. "Do you know something?" he mused. "You're... funny. The little things that you do and say, the look on your face sometimes. You're funny even when you don't mean to be."

Rey stiffened. *I'm so glad I could amuse you, Your Worship."

"You do many things to me, Chume'da. The amusement is merely a bonus."

Rey didn't know why she pinched Kylo's arm. It simply seemed like the most natural thing to do, her hand moving discreetly beneath the furs, out of sight of anyone else. *Kindly stop flirting with me at a state burial.*

A fresh wave of mirth emanated from him but he desisted, which, for Rey, was a sure sign that he was treading cautiously after their quarrel. They fell into a tentative silence, his heart at her spine and his massive frame enveloping her in blessed heat as the currents of the Force hummed and shifted all around them. She resisted the urge to melt against him and he held on tighter, and they stayed that way until the connection ground to another abrupt, random end. He vanished with her next breath, with the sigh of the wind through the saqila leaves, without either of them getting the chance to say goodbye. The last tendrils of incense smoke floated up to the blue-gray heavens and the body in its carbonite shroud was lowered into the coffin and then into the earth, and Rey was left to watch, with only a fleeting memory of warmth.

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In the quarters that had been prepared for him at Ter Abbes, Kylo jolted out of the Force bond with a
start, his arms collapsing through the empty air where Rey had been standing seconds ago. Beads of ice-cold wetness dripped down his temple and, bringing his bandaged hand to his face, he brushed them away and stared in bewilderment at the liquid that had gathered on his palm. It was melted snow.

"I can feel my fingers again," Myn crowed in relief, wiggling said appendages as she plopped down on the chaise lounge that Rey's group had staked out upon their return to the castle. In accordance with the Hapan tradition of keeping the bereaved company, most of the guests would not start leaving until sunset while closer friends and relatives would stay overnight, although Ta'a Chume had begged off early, citing a meeting back on Hapes Prime. As she saw her grandmother off, it had occurred to Rey that the woman wasn't walking as steadily as she usually did, even with the help of her cane, and she'd had difficulty climbing into the cloud car that would take her to her shuttle. The cold had probably gotten to her, too.

From where she sat between Myn and Osira, Rey observed the sitting room. The servants were passing around trays of mulled wine and cider and a variety of freshly-baked breads, still piping hot from Lasbelin's ovens. The nobles partook of these offerings gratefully as they conversed in muted tones. Cynthisa was holding court by the roaring fireplace, surrounded by lords and ladies that hailed mostly from the Rifle Worlds and the Lorelli Reach. The Lady of the Autumnwatch had removed her face paint after the funeral, and her bare features were pale and drawn.

A slight frown marred Laielosse's expression as she glanced over at Cynthisa and her posse from the chair beside the chaise lounge that she'd claimed for herself. "What's Kantale doing there?" She nudged Aleson, who, instead of finding an appropriate place to sit, had elected to perch on the armrest of her chair. "Did the two of you have a falling out?"

"You could say that," Aleson's tone was diplomatic. "He's from the Reach, after all. Some friendships just aren't made to withstand geopolitical differences, I suppose."

"Hmm." Laielose pursed her lips but made no further comment on the subject.

Rey kept a watchful eye on Cynthisa as the afternoon wore on. The latter appeared to be losing more and more of her composure with each hour that ticked by. Sometimes there would be tears glistening on her face, which she would dab at with a kerchief while other people either tactfully abstained from commenting or offered a reassuring touch on the arm. She had no siblings and her mother had died years ago. It wasn't going to be easy for her to be all alone in this great big castle, and Rey felt a stab of guilt over the things she'd said earlier—it had been a visceral reaction on her part but, now that she had time to reflect, loss and loneliness came in many forms. Who was she to say that Cynthisa's pain was less than hers had been?
As she circulated amidst the throng and went through the social niceties expected of the Chume'da, Rey stayed on the lookout for an opportunity to talk to Cynthisa without anyone to overhear or gawk. She was hampered in this objective by Boethiah's constant presence, the knight trailing after her from room to room and staring intently at anyone who came forward to speak with her charge. One of the more loose-tongued ladies-in-waiting must have let Boethiah's identity slip and it must have spread throughout the party in that wildfire way gossip always did, because more and more nobles were starting to appear visibly unnerved by the woman in the white pantsuit.

When some minor Gateworlds lord fled from Rey upon catching sight of Boethiah over her shoulder, Rey finally had enough. She stalked over to where the knight had positioned herself a few feet away and attempted a placating smile. "Look, why don't you go get something to eat? You must be hungry."

"My orders are to watch over you," Boethiah replied, stone-faced.

"But I distinctly remember telling my husband that you are not to follow me around everywhere. I'll be fine, really, I have my lightsaber if anything happens—" Rey paused, narrowing her eyes. "Why are you smirking?"

"You call him that so easily now," Boethiah remarked, like she was enjoying a private joke at Rey's expense. "'Your husband,' I mean. It's very... sweet."

Without further ado, Rey pointed to the eastern doors of the salon they were in. "The buffet table is over there. I'll comm you if I need you. Get lost."

"As my Emperor's wife wishes," Boethiah drawled with a mocking bow before walking away.

"That's Empress to you," Rey grumbled under her breath.

She found Cynthisa in the next room but was waylaid by the aristocrats who had been present at the Olanji Breakwater, all exclaiming about how honored they would be for her to grace another luncheon with her presence. It took considerably more effort to extricate herself from a group of nobles that she couldn't afford to insult— Rey managed this just in time to see Cynthisa's gray skirts disappear out a small side door.

Eager to avoid any more interruptions, Rey used the Force to dim other people's awareness of her
being in the salon. It was the same trick that Kylo had employed at the masquerade so that they could make it to the antechamber unnoticed. She crept out through the same side door that Cynthisa had used and found herself in a narrow, unfurnished hallway. There were corridors like this at the Reef Fortress, too—discreet passages woven amidst the walls that one could use should they wish to retreat to another room of the estate without having to talk to another living soul. It was exactly the kind of place that Rey would have sought out if she wanted to be alone, and she almost turned back to give Cynthisa privacy. But the muffled crying from up ahead stopped her.

*I had no one,* Rey remembered. *Back on Jakku, there was no one to hold me when I cried, when I missed my family, when I felt like I had nothing left in the universe.*

She headed towards the sound, rounding the corner to find Cynthisa leaning against the wall and weeping, her face buried in her hands. Gone was her bravado, replaced by sobs that rang with desperate grief. Rey's chest ached with compassion at the sorry sight. She knew how the Consortium nobles prided themselves on their emotional fortitude, and she couldn't help but be in awe at how Cynthisa had waited for hours until she could sneak away before completely breaking down.

"Lady Varless," Rey said softly, touching the other woman on the shoulder.

Cynthisa appeared to crumple at such gentleness. She turned to face Rey, spreading her gray-sleeved arms like a child begging to be carried. Rey hugged her, thinking about how Finn had shown her that hugs could be a source of comfort, and that was when she felt something sharp being jabbed into her neck.

A wave of overwhelming dizziness set in. Her knees gave way, snapping like twigs in the onset of an abrupt, frightening paralysis that consumed her from head to toe. She dropped to the floor with a thud, her throat closing up as a dark fog crawled along the edges of her vision.

Cynthisa loomed over her, pale features contorted in hatred, a syringe clutched in her fist, the tip dripping with blood. *My blood,* Rey realized, and she tried to call for help but couldn't. She couldn't speak, she couldn't move, every single muscle in her body refusing to obey as poison seeped into her veins and her consciousness started to ebb.

"You don't belong here in the Cluster, Chume'da." Cynthisa's voice, sounding like it was coming from much too far away, was the last thing Rey heard—and those frosty blue eyes glittering with contempt were the last thing she saw—before everything went black. "A Hapan would never have fallen for that."

Chapter End Notes
The sage's words are taken from this Gaelic blessing.
Dear readers, it is my great pleasure to announce that this story has been featured on Tor.com as one of 19 Nerdy Things That Brought Us Joy In 2018! To say that I am honored is an understatement, particularly when the list includes Emily Wilson's *Odyssey* translation and Lando Calrissian's wardrobe <3

We also have another beautiful art piece from the talented clara-gemm, and I'd like to give a special shout-out to justlola82 for requesting it. Many thanks as well to everyone who commented on the last chapter; I haven't had time to reply because I've been using all my spare time to write, but please know that y'all light up my life. Seriously.

**Please note that this update comes with a trigger warning for MENTIONS OF SUICIDE. It's in the last sentence of the paragraph that begins, in bold, "The night she told me all of this..."** It's just one line that describes the method without going into graphic detail, but I'd be happy to provide a summary upon request, either in the comments section or Tumblr/Twitter private message.

I'm super nervous about this installment and it's a bit of a monster, clocking in at 7,368 words. I'M SORRY. Feedback would be much appreciated!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A slim arm shot out from behind an abruptly thrown open door and hauled Aleson Gray into the cloakroom that he was passing en route to top up his glass of mulled wine.

"I *beg* your pardon, my—" he started to say, affronted, only for the sentence to immediately grind to a halt, unfinished, at the sight of Lairelosse Yliri.

"Your what?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"My lady, of course." Aleson raised his glass to her in salute before gulping down what was left of his drink. "Always my lady."

Lairelosse shook her head in exasperation at his antics, but she quickly moved on to the pertinent matter at hand. "I cannot find Her Grace. It's been almost thirty-five minutes since I last saw her."

"Who else is missing?"
"That bi—" Lairelosse coughed delicately. "The bereaved."

Aleson grinned. "You weren't far off the mark the first time." He handed her his empty glass. "Right, then. Give me a couple of hours before raising the alarm— if Cynthisa's made her move, we might finally be able to get to the bottom of this conspiracy once and for all."

"Be careful," Lairelosse warned.

"When have I ever not been careful?" he shot back.

She froze, then rested her hand on his arm as he was about to push open the cloakroom door. "On second thought, make that an hour and a half," she ordered.

"Fine," he sighed.

Upon exiting the cloakroom, Aleson headed back in the direction he'd come from, weaving through the crush of his fellow nobles who were all chatting gaily with one another while in all likelihood inwardly contemplating when would be the best time to either forge alliances or reaffirm old ones, now that control of Lasbelin had turned over to House Varless. He brushed past Procyon Kantale, muttering in a low voice meant for the other man's ears alone, "Time to blow your cover, old chap."

Kantale, for his part, waited a suitable amount of time before following Aleson to another cloakroom. "Verisya Galney and Beed Thane just left," he said, pulling his winter coat from the racks. "They were across the room from each other but I noticed that they checked their comlinks at the same time, and then I saw them slip out a side door."

"What a happy coincidence," Aleson drawled as he shrugged on his own coat. "Cynthisa and the Chume'da are missing, too."

Kantale shook his head, straightening his cuff-links. "I think I know where they are, but, I have to tell you, I didn't expect her to pull any stunts today. Not when all eyes are on the Autumnwatch."

"It's Cyn. She's always been unpredictable," Aleson pointed out. He adjusted his brocaded collar with a flourish. "Besides, her father's dead. She probably feels like she's got nothing left to lose."
Rey was fading in and out, her consciousness lapping at the shores of some faint, hazy reality before receding again, the way the obsidian tide of the Evernight ebbed and flowed against the rocks of what she had come to call home. There were snatches of things—the whine of repulsorlifts, a throb of pain in her skull, the glow of embers, a rough jostling at her wrists, the edge of a damask curtain—occasionally rising up from the gloom but quick to slip out of reach even as she tried her best to hold on.

She dreamt. Or—it felt like a dream. She was soaring over vast, thick jungles, the leaves soaked in what she at first thought was blood but turned out to be daylight, the sun a crimson orb above the mountains. The scene changed and now she was gazing at that red light from inside the mouth of a cave, warmed by cooking fires and bodies moving to and fro. The figures did not appear to realize that she was there and their faces were blurred, as if she was seeing them—was separated from them—by walls of dark, translucent glass.

*Child,* an invisible presence hummed in Rey's ear, and it sounded like the rush of mighty wings, *why do you tarry? Events are moving fast. You are almost out of time.*

Rey didn't know what the voice was talking about but she knew her answer, knew it the way she knew her own heartbeat. "He needs me," she whispered.

There was—something like a snort, almost, indicating disapproval and resignation all at once. One of the figures passed directly in front of Rey and then stopped. Looked straight at her. The glass seemed to thin in that moment and Rey could make out a stooped frame, long white hair, and startlingly alert hazel eyes that burned with the unbridled power of the Force. Her pulse sped up with a strange familiarity, like she was hearing a once beloved song that she had forgotten the words to.

"Teneniel?" the figure rasped in a voice dry and weathered with age.

The dream—or the vision, or whatever it was—shattered before Rey could respond. The cave and the fires and the people and the red sun fell away, and she was somewhere that was opalescent and shifting and *in between,* a place that was also starting to erode, also starting to crack at the seams.

*If he needs you,* said the same winged presence, *then wake up.*
There was a dull, heavy thumping sound, and Rey opened her eyes with a gasp.

She was in a log cabin—a spacious one-room affair with a roaring fireplace and a skylight covered in snow, the Ayalayli thornwood floor polished to a brilliant sheen. It was difficult to breathe and her arms ached and she couldn't move them; glancing down at herself, she saw that she'd been tied to a bedpost, her legs folded underneath her with her ankles similarly restrained, and, glancing out the curtained window beyond which fat snowflakes rained down on bare branches in a whirl of white, she saw that she was no longer in the caldera of Lasbelin. Her blade had been removed from her thigh holster and placed on a shelf by the front door, hopelessly far from reach.

She soon discovered the source of the thump that had jolted her awake. An opaque cylindrical container had been plunked on the floor a couple of feet away, the creature hidden within projecting a net that robbed her of the Force, and the person who had set it down was walking over to the couch by the fire.

Through narrowed eyes, Rey watched Cynthisa Varless take a seat and pour a cup of tea, but it wasn't long before a fresh wave of dizziness sent a multitude of black spots dancing across her vision. It was impossible to keep the nausea at bay no matter how hard she tried, her stomach churning and bile working its way up her throat—And, besides, she groggily asked herself, why are you trying to fight it, anyway? You've been bitten by pole-snakes while out in the desert, you know the old adage back on Jakku—better out than in.

Rey leaned over to the side as far as the ropes would allow her to and took an absurd amount of vindictive pleasure in spewing vomit all over the shiny, opulent floor.

The Lady of the Autumnwatch paused in the act of bringing the porcelain teacup to her lips. "Disgusting."

"For the one who's going to clean that up, sure. But it won't be me." Rey's words came out weak and strangled, her vocal cords still straining from the temporary paralysis that her entire body had been subjected to, but she compensated with what she hoped was a suitably nonchalant expression. "This is thornwood, isn't it? Pity."

Anger flashed across Cynthisa's hauntingly beautiful face. She took a sip of tea, as if buying time to calm down; her hand shook with pent-up emotion but, when she returned the cup to its place on the table in front of her, it was with a cold little smile. "That's quite all right. I don't expect scavengers to be very respectful of other people's property or, indeed, to have any concept of manners whatsoever."
"Cynthisa," Rey deadpanned, fed up— completely and utterly fed up— with the verbal gymnastics that the Consortium so delighted in, "you literally stabbed me with a needle, kidnapped me, and tied me to a bedpost."

"For the record, the original plan involved just that first bit. The venom of the Kodashi viper is capable of killing an adult humanoid within minutes of being introduced into the bloodstream. But you—" And here Cynthisa pursed her lips in annoyance, as if Rey had done nothing more consequential than accidentally tread on the hem of her skirt— "survived the dosage. I can only assume it was due to that— that sorcery of yours."

"It's called the Force," Rey couldn't resist correcting even as she wondered how exactly the Force could have saved her while she was unconscious and unable to wield it. For some reason, her mind kept darting back to some vague, dim dream of wings. "It's not sorcery."

"No?" Cynthisa quirked a perfectly sculpted brow. "Then why did they call Teneniel Djo a witch? Among other things."

"You keep my mother's name out of your mouth!" Rey snapped. Something in her throat twinged in protest from the effort of raising her voice and she coughed, narrowly managing at the last possible second to crane her neck so that the resultant bile and blood streaked the floor instead of her gown.

"I hardly think you are in any position to dictate, Chume'da." Cynthisa's mocking drawl was overlain with a note of triumph. "Your soldiers and your allies are far away, no one knows where you are, and I have more of that venom stored in this cabin. You are at my mercy."

"And you're just getting a big old kick out of that, aren't you, Lady Varless?" Rey glared at her. "Power is all that matters to you, isn't it? I wouldn't be surprised if you paid the assassins extra to make sure Lord Feara died in the attack so that you could rule the Autumnwatch!"

Cynthisa stood up with stately grace. She crossed the room and poured all her strength into the palm that caught Rey's cheek in a vicious slap which sent the latter's head reeling to the side, the sound of the impact echoing through the air like thunder.

Well, that's going to leave a bruise, Rey thought sourly. The skin on her face burned and her left ear rang from the force of the blow, but she was strangely unperturbed. Unkar Plutt's fists had been meatier, had been capable of eliciting more pain. She’d survived him and she would survive this conniving, treacherous ice queen, too.
"I loved my father." There was a raw edge to Cynthisa's declaration and she was close enough that the sorrow on her face was starkly apparent. But it was not like Isolder's sorrow— the expression on the prince's face during his eulogy had been defiant, determined to remember only the good, whereas Cynthisa's at this moment was furious and vengeful. And maybe it wasn't sorrow, after all, Rey realized with a start. Maybe it was the kind of rage that could only be borne from grief. "I would never have agreed to the plan had I known that he'd get caught in the crossfire. But I can promise you that his death will not be in vain."

"I rather feel like he'd beg to differ, don't you think?" Even as Rey spoke, she was attempting to move her wrists. They were bound together behind her back while more ropes lashed her upper body to the bedpost. Her arms were free, though, as were her legs save for her ankles. There was a way to escape from this— she just had to be smart, and she just had to keep her captor distracted until she was able to figure it out. "I rather feel like he'd have minded dying in his daughter's bid to— to what, Cynthisa? Sit on the Dragon Throne?"

The other woman blinked those ethereal frosted eyes, her pink mouth parted in a silent o of surprised bewilderment. And then she—

— she laughed—

Mirth exploded from Cynthisa as if Rey had told the greatest, most hilarious joke in the galaxy. It was in all honesty one of the most disturbing sights Rey had ever witnessed, this young auburn-haired aristocrat towering over her and all but cackling as red-gold flames flickered in the background and snow powdered the skylight over their heads. She felt like she was in a scene from a bad holodrama. She felt like she was on kriffing Ryloth Place.

And she also felt, as she listened to the knife's edge of laughter that grated against her ears, that Cynthisa Varless was not of particularly sound mind. She'd seen it before, among her fellow scavengers in the Badlands— how a certain madness could overtake those who already had so little and yet tried to carve a family out of blood, sweat, and tears, only to lose their children or their spouses or their friends to illness, collapsing rubble, malfunctioning gear, wild animals, heatstroke, weather storms, and the other ravages of the desert. She knew that, even in the most extreme conditions, there was a thread inside everyone that tethered them to humanity, and she knew that sometimes all it took was one more tragedy for the load to become too much to bear and for that thread to snap.

Cynthisa had grown up in an environment that was as different from Jakku as day was from night, but perhaps it also came down to how one was raised, and what one was taught to value. Perhaps in the glittering, cutthroat society of Hapes, mothers left indelible marks on the souls of their daughters.

This could have been me if I'd never been spirited away from the Cluster, if I'd spent my childhood in
Ta'a Chume's shadow, Rey found herself thinking even as she stared at Cynthisa, even as she tried to work the ropes that held her. *I want to change things.*

"That's what I never cease to find rather amusing about my people," Cynthisa remarked once she'd gained a modicum of control. "They're so obsessed with the bigger picture that they neglect the finer details, which they don't realize can be infinitely more satisfying for everyone involved. Every highborn female wants to be She Who Has No Equal, and every highborn male wants to be her consort. They would do anything for this, they would give anything for this, because they think it's worth it to have a target the size of an entire realm on their backs for the rest of their lives. They'd be far happier if they'd had a mother like Iluna Varless, who taught me that true power belongs to those who lurk in the shadows."

"I know someone your mother would have gotten along with famously," Rey muttered, thinking of Snoke.

"As for myself," Cynthisa continued, ignoring her, "I shall be content with the rulership of the K'Farri system and all its planets. It is my birthright, stolen from me by that usurper Osira, and the future Queen Mother has promised it to me in exchange for my assistance."

Rey stilled. "The future Queen Mother?"

Cynthisa smiled down at her, a smile that was chilling despite—or maybe because of—how serene it was. How beatific. "Ta'a Chume is not long for this world, my dear. When she dies without an heir, the throne will be up for grabs. Your house fell the day she married you off to the Emperor of the First Order and lost her people's trust—you just didn't know it yet."

"If I die, that shatters the alliance," Rey growled. "With nothing to hold them off, the First Order will conquer Hapes. *Including* your precious K'Farri."

Cynthisa shrugged, uncaring. "New alliances can always be forged. Perhaps even—" And here her smile widened, turned sly and shark-like—"new marriages."

Something in Rey's brain shut down, as if in an effort to numb her from a heartache the sheer depth of which she couldn't even begin to comprehend. "The Emperor will never agree to that," she said flatly.

"Am I hearing this right—are you telling me that you would wager your survival on a man's heart?"
Cynthisa issued a patented sigh as she turned around to stalk back to the couch and finish her tea. "With every new word that comes out of your mouth, Kira Ka Djo, you prove more and more how unfit you are to rule Hapes. Just like," she concluded with great relish, "Her late Highness."

"Teneniel never wanted to rule!" Rey said hotly.

"Of course she didn't. She was a filthy savage from some primitive backwater in the Outer Rim Territories, little more than an animal."

*Stars, Rey thought, her own fury spiking, coaxed to a blaze that rivaled the fire in the hearth, I'm really going to kill her. When I get my hands free, I'm going to wring her neck —

"Teneniel Djo never wanted to rule," Cynthisa repeated, "and that was her undoing. That, I do believe, was why she had to die."

The snow had begun to fall in earnest over the Druadach, a steep mountain range that was located thirty standard minutes away by shuttle from the Autumnwatch caldera. Here the forests were not saqila but, rather, a mixture of larch and blueblossom, their branches bare save for heaps of white slush. Visibility was poor; even the most eagle-eyed sentinel would have been hard-pressed to spot the two tall, lean figures that were traipsing up the ridge, shivering as they cautiously made their way towards the log cabin in the distance, the light shining through its windows serving as the faintest of beacons through the icy deluge.

Still, Aleson was not taking any chances. He'd insisted that he and Kantale stash their commandeered cloud car in one of the lower caves, that they approach the deceased Lord Feara's old hunting lodge from behind, and that they do so slowly, ducking behind tree trunks and embankments and withered bramble whenever the opportunity presented itself. While he felt justified in this admittedly rare show of prudence, the long, drawn-out trek was giving him time to think, which was never good. Dozens upon dozens of worst-case scenarios filtered through his mind.

"Are you absolutely certain," Aleson finally said, "that this is where Cyn took the Chume'da?"

"Positive," Kantale replied, glancing over his shoulder as he led the way. "At the last Heritage Council meeting, Lord Ettagar was boasting about being inducted into the upper echelons, so I stuck a tracker on him— a fancy little bug, fresh from the Royal Armaments Guild of Charubah's new line
of surveillance equipment. Disintegrates at the push of a remote button. I traced him here to the Druadach and, now that we know Cynthisa's involved, where else would the Council be holding their meetings aside from the old hunting lodge?"

"Shame, really," Aleson commented. "That place was the setting of quite a slew of excellent school holidays, remember, back when..."

"Back when our good friend the Lady Varless was not a few starships short of a fleet?" Kantale snorted. "Yes, I remember."

"Do you think the secret passage is still there?"

"Kriff, I hope so. Otherwise—" Kantale broke off with a yelp as two long legs dropped down from an overhanging branch and wrapped around his neck in a stranglehold, swiveling him to face Aleson, who automatically reached for his blaster but was sent sprawling to the ground when the legs lashed out, a booted foot smashing into his nose. It wasn't long before Kantale went flying into the snow beside him, the two men flat on their backs and groaning as an incandescent beam of scarlet lit up the hoary winter gloom and the mysterious attacker charged at them, and—

"Oh," said Boethiah Ren, stopping in place with the tip of her lightsaber mere centimeters away from spearing through Aleson's heart. She looked— and sounded— remarkably unimpressed. "It's two princes playing rescue mission out in the woods."

"I think you broke our Lord Gray's nose," Kantale wheezed, switching from Hapan to accented Basic before spitting out the blood that had pooled into his mouth from the lip Boethiah had cut when she overpowered him.

Aleson was decidedly less amused. "What the hell?" he roared, cradling his bleeding nose in one gloved palm. "If this is how the First Order treats their allies—"

"My allegiance is to the Knights of Ren." Boethiah stepped back, extinguishing her blade and watching with bored golden eyes as the nobles picked themselves up from off the ground. "In any case, I don't know if either of you have noticed, but it's hard to see anything in this snowstorm. I thought you were that Varless woman's guards."

"And how did you end up on this godforsaken mountain, pray?" Kantale inquired.
"The Chume'da was getting tired of me following her around, so I followed her around some more—albeit discreetly," said Boethiah. "I couldn't find her in any of the salons, so I tracked her Force signature to the private hangar and hitched a ride on the shuttle Varless loaded her into. The Consortium really needs to work on its security—why don't your bilges have heat sensors?"

Kantale gaped at her. "Because we didn't think we'd ever need them! Who'd be mad enough to cling to the underbelly of a starship while it's flying thousands of meters in the air at eight-hundred-fifty kilometers per hour?"

"Well, me." Boethiah smirked. "However, I noticed on the approach that the lodge was under heavy guard, so I was forced to hop off."

"Heavy guard?" Aleson echoed, and then swore under his breath. "There's a secret underground passage leading up through the floor of the cabin, but if Heritage Council troops are crawling all over the grounds, we're going to need reinforcements."

"And I know just where to get them. I was holding off because I didn't want that annoying woman to panic and kill the other annoying woman before I could get to her, but now that you're telling me there's a way in..." Boethiah fished out her comlink. She appeared to be calculating, counting off something in her head as her lips formed words beneath the wind, words that Aleson thought sounded vaguely like *Ter Abbes* and *sub-hyperspace*. There was a beep and a flicker of light to indicate that whoever she was contacting had picked up, and then she lifted the comlink to her mouth and mumbled something into it before shoving the device back into her pocket. "Lord Ren should be here within the hour," she informed the stunned nobles.

"You commed the Emperor?" Kantale hissed. "Have you taken leave of your senses? He has no jurisdiction here! If he comes storming into Hapan space with his warships and his soldiers, the Ducha of Wodan will view it as an act of aggression—"

"Listen here, Cuff-links—" Boethiah jabbed a finger none too gently into Kantale's chest—"I've been biting my tongue ever since the first day of those stupid marriage negotiations because I was ordered to play nice, but I am sick—sick—"She poked him again for good measure—"of all this fancy political bantha shit. The Hapes Consortium prides itself on how cunning you all are and how prettily you talk, but none of you would last a minute in a real fight. If you want to be the one to explain to *Kylo Ren* that he was unable to save his wife because you wished to discuss it in committee first, then be my guest, but I will make sure I'm already halfway to the edge of the galaxy when you do because—"She took a deep breath, and her next words were painted in the deadly calm before a summer storm, a threat and a promise all at once—"if the Empress of the First Order dies today, I swear to the Force, the entire Hapes Cluster will burn. And there will be no survivors."
The moment, the world, and everything that Rey had ever known had not yet shattered. But all of it was about to, all of it was poised to, all of it was hanging off the edge of a cliff, waiting— Rey was certain— to be pushed over by what would transpire in the next few minutes.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked Cynthisa. "What do you mean, 'she had to die'?" She remembered the other woman's words earlier at the reception hall in the castle, the strange emphasis on the Consortium's brand of justice, and how history was written by the victors. She remembered what Myn had told her about old gossip, and how she should pay it no mind...

Before Cynthisa could reply to Rey's question, the front door burst open, the temperature dipping slightly as a puff of icy wind blew through the room, scattering crystalline white snowflakes over the threshold. Hope began to soar in Rey's chest— hope that help had arrived— but it was quick to fade when she noticed that Cynthisa looked irritated but otherwise unruffled by the interruption.

"My dear Lady Varless, this is most irregular," Verisya Galney huffed as she and Beed Thane entered the lodge, their cheeks pink from the cold. "What could be so urgent that you summoned the Archon Thane and myself from your own father's—" Her blue eyes swept the lodge and then nearly popped out of her head at the sight of the Chume'da tied to a bedpost, a bruise darkening her cheek and regurgitated poison staining the wooden floor.

Thane turned to appraise himself as to what had rendered the Ducha of Terephon so suddenly incapable of speech. The last vestiges of color drained from his already sallow features as he made eye contact with Rey. He opened his mouth to speak but Verisya beat him to it, recovering from her shock enough to slam the door shut and whirl around to fix Cynthisa with a murderous gaze.

"What have you done?" Verisya all but screeched, the sound about as pleasant as fingernails scraping against slate. "You foolish girl, you have jeopardized everything!"

"I have not," Cynthisa calmly replied, taking another sip of tea. "I have merely provided the Heritage Council with the impetus it needs to get things moving again. With Kira Ka Djo out of the way, it will be easy to seize the throne from the Queen Mother—"

The heels of Verisya's winter boots clattered across the floor as she strode over to the couch and swept out an arm, batting the teacup out of Cynthisa's hands. The crash of breaking porcelain was followed by an awful, suffocating stillness, during which Cynthisa got to her feet, chin lifted in sullen defiance as she met the older woman's glare head-on.
"This is what you call 'out of the way'?” Verisya gestured towards Rey in agitation. "You've abducted her from a gathering where all her allies are present, with her guards and her stormtroopers nearby, and you've trussed her up like a chicken in a mountain lodge everyone knows your family owns instead of just simply killing her and being done with it—"

While Verisya was telling Cynthisa off, Rey was arriving at the conclusion that she'd grown rather tired of the other people in the room talking about her as if she were a particularly bothersome lampshade or an aphid-infested potted plant— and she would be lying if she said that she wasn't at least a little bit stung by this revelation of the identities of two more members of the Heritage Council. Ducha Galney and Archon Thane had always been perfectly cordial in the past. Vipers, indeed, Rey thought with no small amount of fury. However, she was extremely aware that she had to set her feelings aside and concentrate on redoubling her efforts to escape from the restraints, because the mere fact that the Hapan nobles were being so transparent about their motives while she was within earshot meant only one thing— they had no intention of letting Rey leave this cabin alive.

Her arms had gone numb after being locked behind her back and around the bedpost for what felt like hours, but she determinedly worked through it. This was nothing. She'd spent her childhood setting her own broken bones and popping her own joints back into place all on her own. She'd fallen more times than she cared to count while clambering around in the bellies of the massive warships dotting the sands of Jakku and, if she could slam her dislocated shoulder back into position against the bulkhead of one of those silent graveyard giants and simply scream through the pain instead of shying away from it— and then continue scavenging, cracked bones and sore muscles and all— then she could damn well get herself out of these ropes even though her arms had fallen asleep.

After a bit more wriggling, the rope around her wrists loosened just the slightest bit, helped along by Rey sliding it up and down the bedpost as best as she could. The extra slack allowed her to shift the angle of her hands and jam her fingers through the gap, widening it, and that was when she felt the tiniest resistance at her ring finger, below the second knuckle.

The rope had snagged on the shard of the ice moon that was embedded in her wedding ring.

Rey was careful to school her features into total blankness even as exhilaration coursed through her veins. She stared straight ahead at the arguing nobles, digging the ring into the rope, worrying at it with the gemstone.

"I did mean to kill her straight away!" Cynthisa finally managed to get a word in edgewise amidst Verisya's tirade. "I admit I wasn't thinking very clearly when I did it, I only wanted her gone—"

"Oh, don't be so hard on yourself, my lady!" Verisya shouted, her nostrils flaring. "This is the cleverest, most foolproof plan in the history of the Hapes Consortium! What ever would we do without you?"
"But," Cynthisa pressed on, even though she couldn't help rolling her eyes at the older woman's sarcasm, "when I checked for signs of life, the dosage had only knocked her out, and that gave me time to realize that this is it. This is our chance. Don't you see, Ducha Galney? After we kill Kira Ka Djo, Ta'a Chume will have no heir. Even her staunchest allies will think twice before supporting a doddering old leader who's already fallen ill. This gives us the perfect window of opportunity to install the new Queen Mother on the Dragon Throne." Cynthisa's voice grew firmer, more persuasive. "After we kill this upstart Chume'da, rally the rest of the Heritage Council. Call your banners. We can lay siege to the capital tonight."

Beed Thane, who had thus far been content to listen and assess the situation in much the same way he had conducted himself during Rey's marriage negotiations, cleared his throat. "The girl has a point, Verisya," he told Ducha Galney. "This is the opportune moment. There's only one way out of this corner that she has so recklessly backed us into, but perhaps that's for the best."

Verisya scowled, obviously reluctant to concede but knowing that her two cohorts were in the right. "Fine," she gritted out at last, "but let me be the one to administer the poison this time. It's beyond me, really, how one can muck up something so simple—"

"I shall observe your technique with the closest scrutiny, that I might learn from my mistakes," sniped the Lady of the Autumnwatch. "But first there is something I wish for the witch's daughter to take to her grave."

Thane and Verisya watched warily as Cynthisa approached her captive once more, the smile on her face widening with each step that she took. Rey kept her own expression impassive; behind her back, unseen, the jewel on her wedding ring continued slicing away at the rope.

"Did you ever wonder," Cynthisa cooed, "why you were left behind on that miserable little dirtball in the back end of nowhere? Did you ever wonder why no one came back for you?"

Every day, Rey thought. I asked myself that every single day.

"You were supposed to go somewhere else, were you not? I'm sure Isolder has already told you—you were supposed to find shelter with his friends in the New Republic. Unfortunately, my darling Chume'da, your nursemaid had other plans." Cynthisa retrieved something from the folds of her robes and held it out to Rey. It was a data cube, black in color and small enough to fit in the palm of one's hand. As Rey looked on, the device's inner mechanisms shuddered and thrilled and it rose into the air, disassembling into several jagged pieces, bright turquoise light seeping out of the cracks like yolk from an eggshell.
Soon the light coagulated into a clumsy rendition of the normally elegant, flowing Hapan script, as if the words had been penned by someone who had the barest grasp on their letters. It took a handful of moments for Rey to realize that she was reading a digitized version of a written confession, traced in the space between her and Cynthisa by whorls of icy holographic light. While the document was dated only five years ago, the events it described had taken place long before that.

My name is Elayne Sato. I was a scullery maid in the employ of Iluna Varless, the Lady of Lasbelin. At the time of this writing, I have been incarcerated on the prison moon of Eremandu for nearly a decade. I was caught stealing from my lady's jewelry vaults in order to pay off my family's debts, and I pen this account now in exchange for my freedom.

Rey darted a glance at Cynthisa through the translucent wall of text that separated them. Iluna had fallen from a balcony in the Autumnwatch when her daughter was nine years old, which meant that the deal had been struck with Cynthisa herself, during a period when she would have been approximately fifteen or sixteen.

Shortly after the Hapan civil war, the unfortunate scullery maid had written, I was assigned a new cellmate, Cheriss Koor. Later I would find out that this was her birth name, and so it was what the database pulled up when they scanned her upon her capture. What the prison officials and guards didn't know, what no one else knew save for her and myself, was that in more recent years she had been going by the alias of Aletra Creel. Reading the familiar name of the woman who had cared for her as a child stole the breath from Rey's lungs, piercing her as sharply as if a dagger had been slipped between her ribs. In the course of our weeks-long acquaintance, we got to talking, becoming friends of sorts, and one night she told me everything. One night I learned that her crimes were by far greater than mine.

Elayne went on to divulge how Aletra Creel had— while purportedly working for Isolder and Teneniel— been an agent of Kalen's rebellion all along. However, she hadn't revealed her true allegiance until the fall of Ta'a Chume'Dan, when Isolder tasked her and a couple of Royal Guards to escape from the burning city and bring his young daughter to the headquarters of the New Republic on Orinda. Aletra had known that, whether her side won or lost, she needed to ensure that the rightful heir to the Hapan throne could never be found again.

She sabotaged the ship and they crashed somewhere. She wouldn't say where, only that it was very, very far away, where no one would even think to look. One of the Chume'doro was killed upon impact, while the other one was gravely injured. Aletra bludgeoned her with a piece of debris before fishing the screaming, crying Kira Ka Djo out of the wreckage. She told me that she wished the child had died in the crash, too, it would have made her job a whole lot easier, but by some freak occurrence the little Chume'da remained unscathed.
I can't remember any of this, Rey thought numbly. Even though the truth was now being revealed at long last, her mind still couldn't peel away the insulating layers that flashburn had provided, the sweet solace of denial. I can only remember the end.

"I'll come back for you, sweetheart. I promise."

Rey forced herself to continue reading Elayne Sato's testimonial. Aletra had left the royal heir on that undisclosed planet. She'd sold the child in exchange for an old starship and then she'd flown off, content in the knowledge that she'd done her part for the rebellion. She'd been planning to wait until it was safe to return to the Hapes Cluster, only to learn of Kalen's death one month afterwards.

Aletra went into hiding, Elayne wrote. If she wasn't careful, Ta'a Chume's agents would find her and stop at nothing to extract Kira Ka Djo's location. She disappeared into the slums of Riosa, in the Inner Rim, and scraped by for about a year on running errands for the local crime syndicates and picking pockets. Until one day, she picked the wrong pocket.

Rey's gaze drifted to the next line. Her mouth went dry.

Luke Skywalker had once told Rey, back on Ahch-To, that the Force bound all living things together, not just in terms of energy but also in the way every single organism moved through time and space. Events set other events into motion, forming a myriad chain reactions that echoed through the years. "I sometimes think," Luke had admitted, "that we're being pulled along on strings, that we are all caught up in some vast net. On days when I am feeling uncharitable towards the Force, I consider it akin to being trapped in a spider's web. But, on good days, I do feel that we are constellations."

Rey had no idea— she couldn't even begin to parse— which school of thought suited her mood now. Because the man that Aletra Creel had attempted to rob had been none other than Ransolm Casterfo, the Republic senator who betrayed Leia Organa by revealing the truth of her parentage at a hearing into her nomination as the Populist candidate.

Casterfo had ordered Aletra deported back to the Veil along with the various crews of several Hapan ships arrested for piracy in the Outer Rim. That alone was what had saved her from any further scrutiny upon her return, but she'd been well aware that it was only a matter of time, and so she'd decided to take matters into her own hands.

The night she told me all of this, she seemed very strangely at peace. Elayne's penmanship grew
even more erratic, as if she had suddenly been overcome by distress. **She was sure that Ta'a Chume would track her down soon and have her tortured for information. I asked her why didn't she just come clean, women can't be executed within the Hapes Cluster, anyway, and she said that it wouldn't matter, she'd still be dead. Because, aside from the location of the heir to the throne, there was one more thing that Aletra knew. One more thing that Kalen himself had told her the last time she saw him. A secret that she passed on to me before she hung herself later that night, while I slept.**

Rey flinched. She averted her gaze from the document, her heart pounding too fast and too loud. A weighty, nameless dread gnawed at her stomach.

"Whatever is the matter?" Cynthisa inquired in a tone of mock concern. "Don't you want to know what your lovely nanny's secret was?"

Rey didn't say anything. A thread of rope at her wrist finally gave way and she twisted her finger around to dig her wedding ring deeper into her restraints. The ice moon was harder than any diamond, the edges of its facets as sharp as any sword, and if she just kept at it she'd be able to fray the rope, weakening it enough for her to snap it in half by tugging her wrists apart.

"Very well, I shall just tell you myself," Cynthisa said, all venomous sweetness, when the seconds ticked by with no response from Rey. She waved an imperious hand through the wall of holographic text and it dissolved into a pool of turquoise light once more; at the same time, the pieces of the data cube reforged themselves and swallowed up the light with a faint whooshing sound. "But I think you already have an inkling. I can see it in your eyes."

She crouched down so that her face was level with Rey's. Given the new proximity, her madness was even more apparent; it crawled like worms beneath the surface of her elegant, fine-boned features, it lay curled into the twist of her pale mouth, it was there in the wild, dark glint amidst irises the color of frost.

"Teneniel Djo was murdered— poisoned, not long after you were born. The one who ordered her death," Cynthisa announced with relish, "was Ta'a Chume herself."

Those words were the tipping point, the final push that sent everything Rey had ever believed careening off cliff's edge. Her world shattered like glass. But still her hands worked, because they were scavenger's hands, always busy, always searching, no matter what. Unbeknown to anyone else in the cabin, the rope frayed with one last scrape of the ice moon, and she pulled her wrists free.
On Ter Abbes, there were quite a few raised eyebrows among generals and politicians alike when the Emperor of the First Order committed an unforgivable breach of protocol by answering his comlink in the middle of crucial peace talks that would determine the Locris sector's fate. The ongoing discussion ground to an affronted halt as Kylo Ren, after checking to see who was trying to establish contact, lifted the device to his ear.

He listened for a while, his expression still and flat but somehow growing stiller and flatter with each passing second, and then he stood up so violently and abruptly that everyone else at the table gave a start as he slammed his chair into the wall and left the boardroom.

"Your Majesty!" A particularly foolhardy official of the Ter Abbes government hurried after him. "Your Majesty, what is the meaning of this?" He laid a hand on the Emperor's shoulder, determined to make him turn around and issue an acceptable explanation. "It took us four months to coordinate these talks, you can't just—"

That was as far as the official got before something sharp and invisible constricted around his throat in a viselike grip. His hands flew to his neck in a futile, unthinking attempt to ease the pressure, but there was no relief to be found. He realized, dimly and belatedly, that the Emperor had turned around, and was now staring at him with the most wrathful, most menacing eyes he had ever seen on a living person— and perhaps it was just the lack of oxygen rushing to his head but he could have sworn that some strange amber light glinted in their depths.

"Tell every single mincing bureaucrat in that boardroom," Kylo Ren growled over the official's panicked whimpers, "that if anyone tries to stop me from leaving again, this planet will meet the same fate as Wodan."

The Emperor released whatever strange hold he had on the official's windpipe and stormed off, abandoning the latter in the hallway as he crumpled to the floor.

"Wodan?" the official repeated to himself in between gratefully sucking in gasps of much-needed air. "Where the hell is that?"

Chapter End Notes

Ayalayli thornwood.

Pole-snake.
Kodashi viper venom.

Blueblossom tree.

Royal Armaments Guild of Charubah.

"A few starships short of a fleet" is Expanded Universe slang for someone who's insane.

Data cube.

It's been a while so, as a reminder, it was established in Chapter 3 that Rey can't remember her childhood prior to Jakku because of a phenomenon known as flashburn.

Riosa.
Look, I tried my best to proofread but please be kind if you see any errors or random keyboard smashes. My new kitten won't leave me alone. His name is Darth Pancakes, Pancakes for short.

Thank you to fleur-lilas-art and billysmind for the gorgeous pieces inspired by this story! Broomchickabroom also made this hilarious and cute af doodle that I've been laughing at all week.

I'm not sure how to tw this chapter but there is a brief scene, around two sentences, of what could be considered sexual harrassment/violence. Description for those who want to be prepared: a man objectifies a woman who is unconscious and unable to defend herself as he frisks her for concealed weapons.

Also, since people have been wondering, lol we are definitely not going to end at 50 chapters. I will update the projected total again once I have a better idea of how many more there will be. I've already started writing the next installment so hopefully I can post it soon despite the nefarious schemes of my evil overlord! Reviews always motivate me to work faster ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Well?" Cynthisa demanded after several seconds had ticked past with no discernible reaction from her bound captive. "What do you have to say for yourself?" Her lips pressed together in a thin, impatient line when Rey opted to maintain her silence. "Speak!" The command rang through the lodge on a shrill note that was met only with the crackling of the fire in the hearth.

The gall, Rey thought. No matter what, I'm your Chume'da. You can't order me around. In her head she was, of course, calling Cynthisa every foul name in the holobook, every epithet she'd ever picked up from traders in Niima Outpost, from scavengers in the Badlands, from drunken louts in cantinas, from soldiers in Resistance bases. In her head she cursed Cynthisa in Basic and in Huttese and in Teedospake and in Meese Caulf and in the Delphidian common tongue and in Evocii. It would be immensely satisfying to blister the lady's pretty little ears with all those choice sobriquets, but Rey could not allow herself to indulge. For one thing, it was obvious that— in the manner of most typical Hapan standoffs— she was being goaded into losing her composure, and the best way to get on Cynthisa's nerves right now was to do the exact opposite.

And, for another, she was preoccupied with the recently liberated hands behind her back working to loosen the knots on the ropes that tied her upper body and her ankles to the bedpost. Most of her higher brain functions were focused on straddling the razor-thin boundary between undoing the knots enough so that she could slip free at a moment's notice and letting the sudden slack of the restraints become noticeable, the latter being something that absolutely could not happen if she was
to have any hope of taking Cynthisa and her cohorts by surprise.

"I tire of this posturing, Lady Varless," announced Ducha Galney. "Shall we get on?"

It took every ounce of Rey's willpower to hold back a snort. Big words from the woman who had crossed the room in high-heeled boots just to slap a teacup out of someone else's hands. The Hapes Consortium was ridiculous, and there had been times when Rey found them amusing—even endearing—but now she just wished for all of it to burn.

"I want her to address it!" Cynthisa hissed, speaking to Ducha Galney even though her icy gaze was fixed solely on Rey. "I want her to realize what kind of family she has, what kind of woman she calls her grandmother and her sovereign!" The Lady of the Autumnwatch's voice grew higher and more unsteady with each word. "I want her to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that, like me, she has been left with nothing!"

"To what end? So you can cry about it together?" Verisya sighed. "My lady, let us just get all this nasty business over and done with. Where is the poison?"

It was a random Heritage Council soldier who ended up saving Rey's life, although the aforementioned soldier would certainly have been displeased to know it. Rey had tugged the last knot loose and was preparing to break free and make all three of the pampered aristocrats inside the cabin wish they'd never been born, when a flicker of movement outside the window caught her eye. The figure who had shifted into view looked stocky and male and his armor was done up in shades of red and silver, the colors of the Autumnwatch. Although his back was turned to the window, Rey could see that he carried a blaster rifle and was currently touching his ear as if speaking to someone via comlink. His presence brought her to the damning realization that she didn't know how many guards were stationed around the lodge. She didn't know how many would come rushing in if they heard the sounds of a scuffle or if Cynthisa, Ducha Galney, and Thane called for help.

She had to keep the nobles distracted until she could formulate a new plan.

"What happened to Elayne Sato?" Rey asked Cynthisa, whose pale brow wrinkled in confusion. "Did you keep your end of the bargain? Did you let her go free?"

"Well, of course not," Cynthisa appeared mystified. "She attempted to steal from House Varless. I can't let that go unpunished."
Rey hadn't thought it was possible to dislike the other woman more than she already did, but she was quickly proven wrong. "That means she's been languishing in the Iron Hells for fifteen years, give or take, all because she wanted to help her family by taking some useless trinkets your family wouldn't even have missed!"

"I confess myself bewildered," sneered Cynthisa, "that you would care so much about a servant's fate at a time like this."

"The mere fact that you can't understand the reason for that," said Rey quietly, "is why I will never be like you."

Her fists clenching at her sides, Cynthisa opened her mouth to reply but was interrupted by Thane. "Lady Varless," he implored, "the Chume'da is obviously stalling. By now her allies will surely have noticed that she's disappeared. We have to kill her before they find her. There's not another moment to waste."

"Archon Thane is right." Verisya's tone was clipped, the last lingering shreds of patience gone from her demeanor. "Hand over the poison now, if you please, Cynthisa."

Being addressed by her given name instead of her title must have finally clued Cynthisa in to the urgency that her fellow conspirators were feeling. Without saying another word, she walked over to the mantelpiece and retrieved an opalescent chalcedony snuffbox engraved with an ornate pattern of — Rey squinted, and recognized nightshade thorn and coma-bloom from the herbiary she'd spent many an afternoon poring over in the library of Alqualonde, tracing the beautiful, painted illustrations with her fingertips.

As Cynthisa cradled the snuffbox in both palms, Verisya opened its lid and inspected what was nestled inside with the air of a connoisseur. She raised an eyebrow, her sapphire blue gaze darting from the snuffbox's contents to Rey and then back again. "But this is Kodashi venom!" the Ducha exclaimed. "Even a couple of drops should have been enough—"

"The Force works in mysterious ways," Thane muttered, causing all eyes in the room to swivel in his direction. He shrugged. "It's something I heard back when I was a child."

"Be that as it may," said Verisya, "not even the Force can save her if I inject all of it at once. It will be an ugly death—" And here she looked almost regretful—"but it can't be helped."
"I'm quite certain the Chume'da is no stranger to ugly deaths," Cynthisa airily remarked. "People perish like rats every day on that junkyard planet of hers."

Rey watched Verisya remove a small pewter vial from the snuffbox and then uncap it, placing the cap back in the box. When her hand rose into the air again, this time it held a wickedly sharp syringe, the needle of which she plunged into the open vial, drawing forth a dark, emerald green liquid. Her movements were as deft and as seamless as if she had done this a million times before— which was probably not far from the truth.

Tension built up along Rey's spine. She found it difficult to breathe, and the heavy folds of her gown did nothing in the way of alleviating the matter. There was no help for it; she would have to fight her way out of this cabin as quickly as she could manage, giving the nobles no opportunity to call for their guards. After dispatching Cynthisa, Ducha Galney, and Thane, she would hurl herself through the window and out into the snow; perhaps the Heritage Council soldiers would be surprised by the sudden eruption of breaking glass and that would be enough to buy her some time to vanish into the barren forest.

Cynthisa placed the chalcedony snuffbox on the coffee table and she and Thane observed with matching blank expressions as Verisya approached Rey with syringe in hand. "I am dreadfully sorry about this, Your Grace." The Ducha of Terephon spoke directly to Rey for the first time since setting foot inside the lodge. "I have, on occasion, felt some fondness for you and your little peccadilloes— given the choice, I would have preferred a much less distressing method to end this but, as it is, there is simply no other way." She gracefully stooped down and pulled back the collar of Rey's purple gown with the fingers not holding the syringe. "If you are truly Hapan, then you will understand."

"I'm not Hapan," Rey spat out.

Verisya smiled, caressing Rey's neck in a parody of affection as she felt around for the jugular vein. "No, you're not, are you?"

Half a second before the tip of the needle could sink into her flesh, Rey slipped free of the ropes, grabbing Verisya's wrist and twisting it so that the syringe plunged into the side of the other woman's exposed neck. Verisya's jaw dropped open in a bloodcurdling scream as the venom burned its way through her system and she crumpled to the floor. Rey wasted no time in leaping to her feet and charging at Cynthisa, who had momentarily gone rigid with shock, but, before she could reach her, Beed Thane broke out of his own stupor, his hand diving into his robes and reemerging wrapped around the grip of a compact-sized slugthrower that he then aimed at Rey.

Shit. Should've gone for him first. The realization flashed through her mind like lightning. When Thane pulled the trigger, she barely had time to dodge— and, in fact, she couldn't. She was still somewhat woozy, still ungainly from the toll that fighting the poison's effects had taken on her
system. The projectile nicked her side as she dove to the ground, narrowly missing her vital organs, and then—

— And then several things happened, almost all at once—

There was a rattle of blaster fire from outside, the snowy landscape beyond the windows lighting up in splinters of green as several voices shouted commands and obscenities in the Hapan tongue—

There was a growl of frustration from Cynthisa before she shrieked at Thane, "Kill her! Kill her now—"

There was a searing pain as Rey attempted to move but collapsed, palm pressed to the dark stain that had blossomed on her stomach, blood from the projectile wound seeping through layers of velvet—

There was the slightest of tremors running down Thane's outstretched arm as he locked eyes with Rey and prepared to fire again—

And there was the creak of wood as a trapdoor swung open, and Boethiah, Aleson, and Kantale burst up from out of the cabin floor.

*

Inkari thought at first that they were ghosts. The monotony of standing guard had been pierced by a scream coming from inside the lodge, followed shortly by the sound of a blaster being discharged. He and five other men had been about to rush to the front door but then they appeared, dropping down from the trees in swift and deadly silence, all of them wearing black masks and clad in black armor.

There were only five of the figures but they fought like an army, their motley assortment of weapons cutting through the ranks of Inkari's comrades in a relentless obsidian wave. Blaster bolts couldn't seem to have any effect; the figures either sidestepped or ducked out of the lasers' path or froze them in mid-air before redirecting them back onto the Hapan soldiers. They moved impossibly fast and struck without mercy.

It wasn't long before Inkari lost all his courage. While he'd always been loyal to House Varless and House Feara, he hadn't signed up to die like this—on a desolate mountain at the hands of wraiths
with magical powers. After watching yet another one of his comrades fall—strangled by the slicewire that one of the smaller black-clad figures wielded like a whip—Inkari turned tail and ran for the woods.

Some Heritage Council troops had been assigned to patrol the surrounding forest and Inkari tried to make contact on the shortwave as he fled. No such luck—there was nothing but a crackle of static on the other end of every line that he tapped into. Eventually he tripped over something but was able to right himself before he hit the ground, and he’d scrambled forward perhaps a couple more steps before his brain finally caught up to the fact that what he’d stumbled on hadn’t been a log or a pile of snow but a **corpse**, dressed in Autumnwatch armor and mouth open in an eternal scream of agony...

Another figure emerged from the trees in front of him. Inkari fell back with a cry, skidding on a patch of icy slush just as a jagged scarlet crossguard shrieked into existence, the sound it made so high-toned and discordant that it set his teeth on edge. The tip of the blade was pointed towards the ground, blazing beside a pair of booted feet and the hem of a cape, rippling slowly in the arctic wind.

"Leaving so soon?" sneered a deep, forbidding voice gone soft with quiet menace, and, flat on his back, Inkari lifted his terrified gaze higher. All hope shriveled within him at the sight of the pale, scarred face and the narrowed eyes that burned like embers in the late afternoon light.

It was the Emperor.

* The boy known as Ben Solo had been a poor excuse for a Jedi. To his uncle's chagrin, he had felt everything too keenly, he had been repugnantly quick to succumb to his temper and to his pride and to his sorrow in equal measure.

The man who called himself Kylo Ren was not much different. The only thing that had changed was that, this time, there was no one to stop him.

The soldier cowering on the snow-covered ground shouted in pain as Kylo scoured his mind. His name was Xiarr Inkari. He had been one of the first soldiers to respond when Cynthisa Varless called for a platoon to be sent to her father's old hunting lodge here on the Druadach mountain range. He had been the one to search Rey for weapons while she lay there passed out and defenseless; he had lifted her skirts and run his hands up her thighs until he found the lighstaber.
He had thought, fleetingly, that the Chume'da had nice legs.

A roar of pure animalistic fury burst forth from Kylo's chest and tore through the winter air. "I'm going to kill you," he hissed through the suffocating hatred that coalesced into a lump in his throat. He could barely see the man through the haze of red that shrouded his vision. The dark side roiled within him, clamoring for vengeance, clamoring to make this soldier's fate hurt.

Kylo swept out his free arm and Inkari was picked up by invisible currents and slammed into a nearby tree trunk. Giving him no time to recover from the collision, Kylo stalked over and punched the man square across the jaw with a heavy, gloved fist. Oh, how he would have relished beating the lecherous soldier to a bloody pulp, but he needed to get to Rey. He brought his blade down over Inkari's head, relishing in the dying scream that pierced the woods as the scarlet beam cut effortlessly through flesh and muscle and bone.

You can't faint, Rey told herself sternly. There'll be time for fainting later. Her body rebelled but her mind won out, sheer determination powering her through the next flurry of minutes that passed. Aleson and Kantale rushed at Thane, pinning him to the wall and wrenching the blaster from his grasp, while Boethiah tackled Cynthisa to the floor, both women sliding across the room until, with a vigorous swipe of her leg, Boethiah managed to rattle the small shelf containing Rey's lightsaber. The blade was dislodged—along with several very expensive-looking figurines—and, amidst the cacophony of shattering crystal, as the front door flew open to admit a stream of red-and-silver uniforms, Rey's outstretched fingers closed around the hilt as it rolled to a stop within arm's reach.

"My lord, my ladies, we need to get you out of here," one of the guards was calling over his shoulder as he backed into the lodge, his gaze fixed on whatever was happening outside. "The tunnel—" He stopped short as his stupefied companions blocked his path, and then he turned around, eyes widening as he took in the chaotic scene that lay before him.

When she looked back on this moment in the time to come, Rey would try to put herself in the poor guards' shoes and feel a twinge of sympathy for them. It must have been a difficult sight to swallow. Verisya Galney, the Ducha of Terephon, was sprawled on the floor, her skin tinged with the gray pallor of death and streaked through with prominent, blackened veins. A few feet away from her, Kira Ka Djo, the Chume'da of the Hapes Consortium, was bleeding out from the stomach and Cynthisa Varless, the Lady of the Autumnwatch, was trapped in a choke-hold by a strange woman dressed in white. Meanwhile, Beed Thane, the Archon of Vergill, was on his feet but restrained by Aleson Gray and Procyon Kantale, Lords of the Serpent's Trace and Stormhold, respectively. This was way above any foot soldier's pay grade.

Nevertheless, the guards were aware of their duty to the Heritage Council, and so some rushed to
help Thane while others went to rescue Cynthisa—and others still opened fire on Rey.

Getting to her feet, Rey had never ignited a lightsaber so fast in her life. Without the Force, it was harder to balance the energy of the focusing crystal but the blade shone strong and true as she spun around and sliced the ysalamiri cage in half. There was no time to regret her actions, no time to mourn the hapless creature within. The Force came rushing back just as the end of her spin brought her to face the soldiers once more and, with an instinct that had been chiseled into her sinews by two years of war, she held out her free hand and—

— And every single blaster bolt headed her way hung suspended in the air, quivering with barely contained energy even as their trajectory was abruptly halted, mere centimeters away from her form —

With another wave of telekinetic energy, she reversed the path of the laser beams, mowing down the soldiers clustered at the entrance of the lodge. The next scream came from Cynthisa, a grating scream of utter despair that was unceremoniously cut off when Boethiah knocked her out with a Force blow.

With one of his allies dead and the other one unconscious—and with their troops apparently on the losing end of what sounded like a fierce battle being pitched outside—Beed Thane's desperation granted him a burst of surprising strength. He twisted out of Aleson and Kantale's hold, socking the latter in the ribs, and then charged at Rey with a wild glint in his eyes as he produced a curved dagger from the sleeve of his tunic.

It wasn't a fair fight at all, and it was over so fast. Even though Rey was hanging on by a thread—her already weakened state aggravated by the amount of energy that had been required to manipulate the barrage of blaster fire—the reach of her weapon far surpassed that of Thane's. Clenching her teeth through the pain as the movement stretched the wound in her side, she pulled the interlocked hilts of her saberstaff apart and thrust the lethal end of one blade through her attacker's chest. Thane's body was lifted off its feet, impaled on the silvery white durindfire beam, his dagger jabbing ineffectually at empty air until it clattered to the floor, falling from fingers gone limp, falling from a hand that dropped to the side with ponderous finality.

And that was when Rey saw her husband.

Several feet from the entrance of the cabin, Kylo had just finished slicing open the last in a group of Heritage Council guards that had tried in vain to overwhelm him with sheer numbers. He kicked the corpse away from him, his teeth bared in a vicious snarl that slowly faded as he caught sight of Rey through the doorway, standing in the middle of the room with the deceased Archon of Vergill speared on her lightsaber. The imperial couple's gazes met, and held, and they extinguished their blades at the same time.
Rey was stumbling out of the cabin almost before she knew it. Kylo stared at her, broad chest heaving with exertion, the waves of dark hair falling over his forehead damp with sweat in spite of the winter chill that hung all around them. The Knights of Ren gathered behind him, sheathing their bloodstained weapons as their cloaks rustled in the icy gale— Rey idly identified Clavicus, Hircine, Jyggalag, Meridia, and Mephala, but she couldn't bring herself to be mad at Kylo for reneging on their agreement regarding the twins. While he may have broken his promise, it had been for a clear reason, one that she could immediately take at face value— he'd brought them because he'd needed backup in order to rescue her. Pure and simple. For all his flaws, the man she had married was blunt and straightforward, and nothing else seemed more appealing to her right now after what she had just endured.

You're light-headed. Rey chastised herself for her dazed musings that were not entirely apropos of the situation. You're losing too much blood. Her vision started to dim at the edges as she took another step forward. Kylo must have been jolted into action by her faltering pace or, perhaps, by the unnatural paleness of her complexion— she certainly felt as white as a sheet— because he closed the distance between them in swift strides, making his way to her over the snow, amidst the dead bodies scattered everywhere. She lifted her chin to meet his gaze— Stars, my husband is so tall, she thought, somewhat dreamily, even as she noticed his attention drift first to the bruise on her cheek from where Cynthisa had slapped her, and then to the blood seeping through her gown, his features tensing in barely suppressed alarm.

He moved to support her weight but she stopped him, her fingers curling loosely at the sides of his arms. "Heal me," she mumbled.

Fury smoldered in Kylo's eyes. Rey could see the deadly internal battle raging within him, how he struggled to gain control of his emotions. She could feel the darkness emanating from him, reaching for her with sharp claws. But his voice when he spoke was achingly gentle, strained with the effort of not upsetting her any further. "Yes," he said, "of course. We'll return to the Heresiarch and I'll heal you on the way back to Coruscant—"

"No— listen—" Rey dug her fingers into Kylo's sleeves with the last of her strength. "Heal me, and then take me to Hapes Prime. I need to speak with Ta'a Chume." He opened his mouth to argue but she cut him off with an imploring look. "Ben, please." A sob hitched in her throat. "Cyare, please."

Kylo's jaw clenched but he nodded slowly, the dark wrath radiating from his Force signature diminishing as if curbed, somewhat, by Rey's impulsive, heartfelt use of the endearment. Satisfied, she allowed herself to surrender at last to her fatigue, to the restfulness of oblivion, to the unconsciousness that was waiting to enfold her in its serene, blessed embrace.
He caught his wife as she fell. Her limp body draped across his arms, the crook of his right elbow cradling her head while his left hand supported the backs of her knees. He'd carried her like this before, in another forest, although the weight of her was heavier now due to the voluminous amethyst layers of her velvet skirts.

Boethiah emerged from the cabin, followed by Procyon Kantale and Aleson Gray. Kylo's immense displeasure at the latter's presence faded slightly when he saw that the young lord's nose was purpling and just the tiniest bit crooked, but said displeasure returned in full force when Aleson tipped him a mocking two-finger salute.

Clavicus snickered at Boethiah. "Nice outfit. Very fancy."

"I killed four men in the tunnel a little while ago," Boethiah mildly replied. "I don't mind upping today's count." She turned to Kylo and bowed. "Lord Ren, I failed in my duty—"

"That can wait," Kylo snapped. "Tell the crew to bring the shuttle around."

Meridia gave every indication of pouting behind her mask. "Are we returning to the Citadel so soon, my lord?"

"Not immediately. We're dropping by Hapes Prime first."

Jyggalag cocked his head, puzzled. "Why?"

Kylo glanced down at the unconscious woman in his arms. Another lump formed in his throat at the sight of her wan, bruised face. "The Empress commands it."

Chapter End Notes

Mees Caulf.

Delphidian common tongue.

Evocii.
Nightshade thorn.

Coma-bloom.

Slugthrower.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

All my love to everyone for the continued support and encouragement and especially to galupalik, ladybayba-reylogoddess, damnsdrivers, and anniesscribbles for the gorgeous art and edits!

I have increased the chapter count to 55 but, as always, this is subject to change depending on how much ground I can cover per installment. No new ideas are being added to the plot; I am really just that Extra (TM) when it comes to writing Reylo interaction and political drama. Thanks for sticking with me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Since Aleson's Evenstar was widely considered the fastest vessel in the Hapes Cluster, their lordships Gray and Kantale returned to the Lasbelin caldera to retrieve it from Kavan's designated landing grid and speed on ahead to Ta'a Chume'Dan, where they would break the news to the Queen Mother and reveal the identities of every noble whom Kantale had seen at Heritage Council meetings or heard mentioned as a fellow sympathizer. Meanwhile, Kylo's Upsilon-class shuttle, which had made planetfall above Wodan's most remote and most active volcanic region so as to bypass the atmospheric sensors, flew back to the Heresiarch, which was cloaked above the planet.

Aleson had promised to alert Rey's guards and ladies-in-waiting so that they could rendezvous with their Chume'da on Hapes Prime, but there was still one last matter to take care of, and Kylo had just finished carefully placing Rey on the narrow bed in his private quarters when Hircine buzzed at his door.

"The Varless woman's been secured in the holding cell, my lord, although she's still down for the count. When would you like to interrogate her?"

Kylo hesitated. He couldn't be in the same room with Rey's would-be murderer— he'd tear Cynthisa limb from limb, and they needed her alive. "Let Boethiah do it. Tell her to extract the names of all the high-ranking members of the Heritage Council and the locations of their safehouses, as well as what other plans they might have up their sleeve."

Hircine nodded. "And once we have that information?"

"My wife will decide Lady Varless' fate," said Kylo. Not only was Cynthisa under Hapan jurisdiction, but he felt it was only right that Rey be the one to mete out justice.
When Hircine had made his leave, Kylo shut the door and turned back to the figure laid out on his bed, worryingly still. He'd had enough presence of mind to undo the clasps of Rey's gown before placing her on the mattress, and he now slid the garment off of her with careful hands. Another spike of fury throbbed deep in his chest at the sight of her chemise, for the bloodstains were even more apparent on white silk, but he forced himself to calm down. He had to be in the proper state of mind if he was to heal her without causing any unnecessary pain.

Kylo pulled up a chair and sat beside the bed, removing his gloves. He touched his fingertips to Rey's cool cheek, channeling the Assist into her ruptured blood vessels, smoothing the bruise away. Next, his hands lowered down her torso, gingerly feeling around for any broken bones. There were none, thank the Force, and he turned his attention to the slugthrower wound in her side.

*I should have gotten Hircine to do this,* Kylo thought dourly. His healing abilities weren't the best—he could sew up most injuries, but he left scars on occasion. And while those were part and parcel of being a warrior—something that he knew Rey understood all too well—he didn't want her to have a mark from this horrible day permanently etched onto her skin. But she'd asked him to do it, and he doubted that she would acquiesce to being vulnerable to the ministrations of any of his knights.

Lifting up her chemise, he didn't allow himself so much as a glance at anything else but the area of concern. It would be a violation otherwise, and Inkari had already subjected her to that without her knowledge. Kylo gritted his teeth against the helpless anger that built up once more, the dark side whispering to him that Wodan hadn't paid enough, that the planet needed to be razed to the ground, that he should wage all-out war against the Heritage Council right this instant.

That wasn't what Rey needed him to do, though. Not now.

Upon closer inspection, the slugthrower projectile had merely grazed her and it wasn't as serious as he'd feared. But, when he touched his palm to the wound, he realized with a start that she'd been poisoned—it was unmistakable, the acrid taste that welled up on the back of his tongue, the noxious smoke that poured from her open veins, visible only to someone who was submerged in the meditation required of the healing trance. Rey's strength in the Force had kept the more adverse effects at bay and, in a twisted sense, bleeding out some of it had helped, but there was still enough lingering in her system that her body was beginning to shut down.

If she were to die—

It was some blossoming panic—some instinct for self-preservation—that caused Kylo's brain to attempt to veer away from that line of thought. But the terror held fast, latching on to his soul in a slow, sharp freeze. If Rey were to die, he would not survive it. He knew that as keenly as he knew
the sound of his own heartbeat.

Kylo set to his task with a renewed sense of purpose. He closed his eyes and began the arduous process of using the healing trance to leach the poison from Rey's veins. The minutes that passed felt like hours, beads of perspiration dotting his forehead. He extricated each molecule of poison, drawing it out through the open wound, dissolving it into nothingness. When he cast a visual check to reassure himself that Rey was still breathing, her limp form was floating several inches in the air, along with the chronometer that had been on the nightstand, the lightsaber and the datapad that had been on his desk, his discarded gloves, her gown, her shoes— every single object in the room that wasn't nailed down was being levitated on the currents of the Force, a byproduct of the amount of energy that he was exerting.

But it wasn't enough. The poison had spread to Rey's entire body, difficult to track, difficult to grasp — for every drop that Kylo banished, rivulets slipped away. He wasn't strong enough, he would never be strong enough, he was running out of time, he was going to lose her. Fear constricted around him again and, with it, the dark. She would die and he would make them all pay. Not just the Autumnwatch, not just Wodan, not just the Heritage Council, but all of it. He would grind the Hapes Cluster into dust.

*That is the trap.*

The voice came back to him, a mournful warning. Perhaps due to the fact that he was immersed in meditation, he could hear it more clearly now. So clearly that he could almost tell who it belonged to.

You start out thinking you're doing it for the ones you carry in your heart but, in the end, all that is left is you and your vengeance. It will consume you utterly, until you lose even the echoes of her. In the end, all you will ever have is yourself.

Kylo shuddered. *I can't do this.*

You can. You must.

If she dies—

There was a pause in the air, accompanied by the curious sensation of someone— of someone else—walking the pathways of memory. When the voice spoke again, it was infinitely gentle. And, yet, also infinitely grieved.
There is no death, there is the Force.

Rey was in that shivering in-between place again, standing in front of the throne that she’d seen only once before, on a humid rainforest world, the shape of it illuminated by the flickering pulse of light and dark coalescing into something new. This time, she could make out the outlines of three silhouettes. Two stood on either side of the throne—a man and a woman, she thought, both wearing crowns, while the third figure sat on the throne itself and was smaller in stature.

A child?

Rey squinted through the shadowy veil as best as she could, but from this distance it was impossible to make out distinguishing facial features on any of the silhouettes. Before she could take one step closer, she felt more light pouring in through the east, like sunrise, and she went there instead. Peace, the light seemed to promise. Purpose. She felt a bittersweet ache in her chest, and that was how she knew she was dying.

There was a part of her that welcomed it. No more secrets. No more pain. No more mysteries. No more battles.

She could be with her mother again.

Rey took another step towards the light in the east. She’d never been one to give in to self-pity but, when all was said and done, she’d had such a hard life. Surely she could rest now. Surely no one would begrudge her for it.

"Rey."

I know that voice, she thought. Someone was behind her. Right behind her. She didn’t dare turn around but she could see that the scene had changed. The light was still there in front of her, only now it was at the end of the Breakwater’s hallway of wind-chime paintings, the crystals swaying silently in the breeze, the only other sounds being breath and heartbeat and the hum of the Force.
"Sweetheart."

Strong arms wrapped around her from behind, and suddenly she was in the orchards of Lasbelin once more, amidst white snow and red trees beneath a silver sky. The light shone invitingly even in the depths of winter, filling her soul with grace.

"It's time to come back," the deep, husky voice murmured in her ear. "Come back to me now."

Rey turned around—

—and opened her eyes.

"Ben?"

Kylo snapped out of the healing trance. The levitating objects in the room succumbed to gravity as soon as the Force relinquished its grip but, before Rey could hit the mattress, Kylo was on his feet, scooping her up in his arms and raining frantic kisses on her face without a second thought. She said his name again through a startled, breathless laugh, and he realized with piercing clarity what people meant when they said someone's laugh could be like music, could sound like the greatest song ever made. He deposited her onto his bed again, wasting no time in climbing on top of her and pressing his lips to the pulse point below her earlobe as she ran her fingers through his hair, a kind of touch he had missed so dearly, a kind of touch he had come so close to never feeling again. Hot, foolish, embarrassing tears leaked from the corners of his eyes as he squeezed them shut. He held her tighter, hiding his face in the slope of her neck, and Rey stroked the shell of his ear as she kissed the top of his head.

Kylo was the first to break the weighty silence that had settled over them both. "I couldn't protect you." His failure rang like a dull, hollow note through the recycled air of the ship's quarters.

He felt Rey smile against his scalp. "You did. You don't know it, but..." She held up the wedding ring on her finger for his perusal. The stone was chipped in some places, as if it had been subjected to an enormous amount of friction and pressure. "They had me tied up, but a thread in the rope snagged on this, and I was able to fray the binds around my wrists."
Kylo couldn't help but shake his head in awe at his wife's ingenuity. He took her hand and brought it to his lips, ghosting a kiss over her delicate knuckles. "I've always wondered—" How are you so strong, how could you have endured so much in your short life and yet your presence still fills any given room like sunlight, how could I have been so fortunate—" why is it referred to as the ice moon? We do not, for example, say that a crown has the diamond on it, or that earrings are made from the sapphire..." What am I doing? What the hell was he doing? He couldn't care less what the Hapans called their baubles— but it was too late, his courage had failed him at the last second and his mouth had run off again, and now Rey was answering his inane question.

"Because there is only one ice moon," she said. "Legend has it that, in the beginning, the Hapes Cluster had eight moons instead of seven. The eighth moon was the most beautiful of all, made entirely of precious stone. But it was destroyed in a mysterious cataclysm, and its pieces rained down on the Gateworlds. So, because it is a finite resource, each shard that is unearthed is priceless, which is why it can only be used in the most significant of settings. The Dragon Throne, the Imperial Crown..." She reached for the hand of his that bore his own shard of the ice moon and laced their fingers together. "The wedding rings of the Royal House." Her hazel eyes darkened. "It's a bit ridiculous, isn't it? It's only a rock that's shinier than other rocks, and yet we've assigned it so much value. It would be worth nothing at Niima Outpost— the spacers passing through there need parts for their ships, not trinkets."

Kylo had no idea how to respond to that and, in any case, Rey seemed like she was gearing up to say more. He kissed the back of her hand again, this time in a wordless encouragement to continue, but she shook her head and wrapped her slender legs around his waist, nuzzling at his temple, inhaling his scent with a wistful sigh. He decided he was more than fine with this, and he rested his head on her chest, soothing himself with the rhythmic rise and fall of her breathing underneath his cheek.

After a while, he reluctantly tore himself away and divested her of her ruined chemise, then he reached for the hot washcloths he'd had the droids prepare the moment he boarded. He meticulously wiped the dried blood from her skin and, clad only in her underwear, Rey all but purred in contentment as she submitted to his soothing ministrations, eyes half-lidded and Force signature aglow. He remembered that she'd done this for him as well, back on Coruscant— he'd been delirious with pain but every gentle touch of hers, after the punishment he'd borne, had cooled his fever like drops of rain in the midst of a drought. Had felt like tiny stolen moments of peace in a lifetime of war.

When he was finished, a glance at the chrono told him that they had about half an hour to go before the jump to Hapes' Interior Region— the Heresiarch's sub-hyperspace drives had burnt out in Kylo's haste to get to Wodan, and the energy mirrors needed time to replenish. He quickly crawled back into bed with her, pulling the blanket over their bodies so that she wouldn't feel cold.

It wasn't long, though, before she rolled on top of him, her lithe torso sprawled over his chest as she pinned him to the mattress. He lifted his hand to tug her hair free of its formerly elegant style that had already been rendered askew by the events of the last few hours, and glossy chestnut brown waves draped over their faces like a veil.
"You called me sweetheart," Rey said, all shy, bemused wonder. "There in the in-between." The look on her face echoed the way he'd felt—and had automatically tried so hard not to show—when she called him cyare.

"I did," Kylo confirmed, fingers tracing circles on the small of her back. "Is that not true? Are you not my sweetheart?"

A slow flush of pleasure shaded Rey's cheeks to faint, burnished rose. "I guess I am." She kissed him, soft and sweet and languorous, and before Kylo knew it he was smiling against her lips, because whenever she made the first move it was always a gift. Every single time.

She pulled away to blink down at him for several long moments. Just as he started to feel self-conscious—his mouth was too wide when he smiled, his nose all the more prominent—Rey dropped a quick peck on his chin, and then she sealed her lips over his once more. This kiss was more heated and he welcomed it greedily, his body reacting the only way it knew how after he had been separated from her for days and had almost lost her to yet another assassination attempt.

All too soon, the intercom crackled to life with a message from the bridge. The Heresiarch had reached Hapes Prime and the shuttles were waiting, prepared to make planetfall. But Rey didn't immediately clamber off of him as he'd expected her to. Instead, she claimed his mouth in one last searing kiss. She opened her mind to him and he saw everything that Cynthisa had told her, all of it, clear as day. And even though his first instinct was to spirit her away from this treacherous sector as quickly as possible, he understood at once that Rey needed to confront her grandmother, and that she needed to do it alone. He would stand guard and make sure no one intruded—and he would carve out an escape path with his blade if he had to.

*Give me courage,* Rey seemed to say with her lips and her teeth and her desperate, grasping hands. *With every moan she made in the back of her throat. I need your strength.*

*You have it,* Kylo replied in kind through their strange connection, kissing her until they were both senseless. *You have me.*

There were dozens of courtiers attending to the Queen Mother at the Fountain Palace, and a hush fell over all of them when Rey stormed into the throne room in her bloodstained purple gown. Ta'a Chume was leaning back in her seat of honor, gold cone-tipped nails tapping on the armrest as she
listened to whatever one of her sycophants was whispering in her ear, but she raised an eyebrow at her granddaughter's entrance and held up a palm to bid her courtier to desist. The man gulped at the sight of Rey bearing down upon them and disappeared back into the crowd with a hurried bow.

"Out!" Rey snarled to the hall at large as she approached the dais on which the throne rested.

Perhaps word had already spread of what happened on Wodan, or perhaps it was the look on Rey's face or the menacing wrath in her tone. Whatever it was, the courtiers all but fled, and—after glancing at the Queen Mother, who nodded in confirmation—the Royal Guard followed suit.

"Kira," Ta'a Chume drawled once the doors had closed and she and Rey were all alone in the vast hall. "Lords Gray and Kantale have appraised me of the situation and the arrests are being conducted as we speak. I understand that you have Cynthisa Varless in your custody, so—"

Rey's arm shot out in front of her, almost of its own accord. Her fingers clawed at the air and Ta'a Chume was jerked upright and hauled down from the dais, her body coming to a violent stop inches away from Rey. It was a new morning on Hapes Prime and the Queen Mother had dressed in the sumptuous silver robes of office, her diamond-fringed lashes unnervingly still beneath her icy crown. Rey's eyes narrowed at the painted features, the power-white skin, the midnight-hued lips. Was this the face of her mother's murderer?

She was going to find out.

Gritting her teeth, Rey crashed into Ta'a Chume's mind with all the ruthlessness of a siege weapon. The first crack in the surface layer revealed Aleson and Kantale breaking the news in the Queen Mother's private salon; there was a flash of genuine concern for Rey's welfare that, under any other circumstances, would have been enough to give her pause. That wasn't what she was looking for today, though, and she dove deeper without the slightest hesitation. Ta'a Chume had a mind like a steel trap, it was true, but Rey was stronger. She had the Force, and she stripped back the years, fueled by the same stubborn desperation with which she'd dismantled the sand-crusted, rusted-over machinery of her early life. She rifled savagely through the Queen Mother's memories and— as she always had— took what she could get.

*"

"Your son is on his way back to the Hapes Cluster, Ereneda."
She glances up from the paperwork on the desk in her private office, fixing a cold stare on the spy who had brought the news. "It's about time. His brother is stirring up my court with all this nonsense of constitutional reform. Send him a communique, tell him that he needs to talk to Kalen—yes, what is it?" she asks sharply when the spy fidgets where he stands.

"Prince Isolder isn't returning alone. His wife is accompanying him," the man cautiously replies. "Her name is Teneniel Djo. She is from Dathomir."

Ta'a Chume's hand curls into a fist atop the desk. "Months away from home, shirking his responsibilities, and he brings back a witch?" She shakes her head, quietly appalled by her own momentary lapse in composure. "But who am I to speak ill of the Chume'da?" The laws of succession are very clear, after all, and her eldest son has already proclaimed his intention to never wed. A girl from the primitive jungle will be all too grateful for the luxuries of the Consortium, will be naive, will be easy to control. Ta'a Chume supposes that it could have been much worse. "We'll give her a royal welcome, as befits the heir to the throne."

* *

Teneniel Djo is a problem from the moment she arrives at the Per'Agthra. Her manners are too rough, her spirit too free. Ta'a Chume endures, tries to be as patient as possible, because in the end it's like taming a wild animal, isn't it?

But the witch from Dathomir will not be tamed. She spends most of her time away from court, scrambling around instead through the rainforests of Stalsinek IV and returning to the capital with mud on her clothes and twigs in her hair and a wild light in her eyes. She is not the sort to command any kind of loyalty among the Hapan nobles, and already whispers are starting to bloom of how unsuitable—how feral—the next Queen Mother is.

It is not yet the final straw when Ta'a Chume broaches the subject of a formal coronation and Teneniel informs her that she has no interest in ruling. The encounter leaves a sour taste in Ta'a Chume's mouth, yes, but she is able to hold her peace—for Teneniel's maids gossip about the thickening of their mistress' waistline and how she runs to the 'fresher first thing in the morning. Ta'a Chume breathes a sigh of relief when an ultrasound confirms, months later, that the baby is female. She can live with Teneniel's rejection—much better that the heir be of Hapan blood, anyway, diluted though it might be by an offworlder's unpredictable genetics.

* *

It is a difficult birth, compounded by the fact that Teneniel insists on the natural method, as is the
way of her people. She is submerged in bacta for a week, and one of the first things she does after recovering enough to breathe and stand on her own is confront the Queen Mother.

"You proclaimed my daughter Chume’da."

Ta’a Chume impassively regards the woman who had burst into the salon, still wearing white patient’s robes, reddish-brown hair unkempt. "I did. Is there a problem?"

Teneniel bristles. "You didn’t ask me or Isolder—"

"I was not aware that I needed permission from either of you, and in light of your refusal I had no other options," Ta’a Chume says archly. "In any case, it doesn't matter whether Kira Ka Djo is my Chume’da or yours— she will rule the Hapes Cluster one day. She is my only female descendant. It is her fate."

"Kira will choose her own fate!" Teneniel snaps. "She can be your official heir for now, but I’ll raise her to know that she will always have a choice. And, when the time comes, I expect you to respect her wishes, whatever they might be."

With that, Teneniel spins on her heel and leaves the salon. She doesn’t notice— or perhaps she senses but willfully ignores— the way Ta’a Chume’s eyes narrow at her retreating back.

That is the last straw. Ta’a Chume begins to make plans. If the animal can’t be tamed, then necessity dictates that it must be put down.

"It was a poison of your own making." Rey’s voice shook with each snippet of information that she extracted from Ta’a Chume’s mind, puzzle pieces clicking into place, gradually forming a horrifying picture. "You worked on it for months. It had to do the job while still remaining undetectable to most medical tests, and it also had to be slow-acting so no one would suspect foul play. In other words, it had to look like a natural illness. You ordered the first dose slipped into her lunch, and her organs started shutting down by nightfall." Rey dug deeper, ignoring Ta’a Chume’s gasp of pain, ignoring the tears that she felt streaming down her own cheeks. "She could no longer speak, could no longer tell anyone what she was feeling, what she thought might be wrong with her. Physicians flew in from all over the Hapes Cluster but none of them could figure it out because you’d been so very thorough in creating that poison. She passed away a week later— and that threw you for a loop,
didn't it?" The Force lashed out, raking through Ta'a Chume's immobilized form, her teeth clenching
and another injured cry escaping her lips. Rey didn't stop; hatred had shrouded her completely,
blocking out the light. "You thought she would die much, much sooner than that. But my mother
was stronger than you gave her credit for— and, you know what, Ereneda?" Rey spat the title in the
older woman's face before sending her flying backwards with a vicious telekinetic shove. "So am I!"
she shouted, her fury reaching its boiling point and causing every single window in the throne room
to shatter as Ta'a Chume sagged against the foot of the dais.

For the first time in their acquaintance, Rey saw fear lurking in those cold, jade green eyes. "I did it
for Hapes," Ta'a Chume croaked. "I did it so that our house would not fall. She would have
influenced you to cast aside your birthright, to spurn the power that is your heritage. I did it for you."

"You did it for yourself!" Rey shot back. "Without a Chume'da, your reign would have been in peril.
Everything you've ever done in your miserable life has been so that you could stay on the throne—
because that's all that matters to you, because without it you are no one!" The broken glass from the
Force explosion lifted off the floor, filling the hall with a lethal silver mist. "Kalen saw through you
and that was why he wanted to change things," Rey continued, giving voice to everything else she
had seen in Ta'a Chume's mind. "He wanted true democracy for Hapes— he wanted to abolish the
Consortium so that his people would no longer be subject to the whims of whoever sat on the
Dragon Throne—"

"Don't tell me you're taking his side now," Ta'a Chume hissed. "He would have killed you without a
second thought—"

"Like you killed Teneniel Djo?" Rey yelled, and every single shard of glass hurtled towards Ta'a
Chume, slicing through the air like lightning.

The Queen Mother flinched—

— And the jagged rain froze, mere centimeters away from piercing her skin—

It would be so easy, Rey thought as the moment stretched on in still waves of silver glass. And yet...

And yet she thought about Luke, who drew a lightsaber on his sleeping nephew. She thought about
Kylo, who put a lightsaber through his father's heart. She thought about her own father, who had
slain his brother in battle. She thought about Kalen, who would have slaughtered his entire family to
destroy the old ways and how Ta'a Chume had poisoned her daughter-in-law to preserve them.
And she thought about how she herself was on the verge of killing her grandmother to avenge her mother's death.

_Around and around we go._ The crystal shards descended as Rey loosened her mind’s grasp on them, bit by bit until she released them completely. _If I strike her down now, nothing changes. We will always be like this._

"I'm leaving," she announced, fixing an icy stare on the woman crumpled at her feet. Ta'a Chume had never looked as defenseless— as _small_— as she did in this moment. It was both beautiful and terrible, how the Force never failed to cut someone down to size. _This_ was power. _This_ was her birthright, her heritage, her mother's gift. "I'm leaving, and you're not going to stop me. In fact, you're not going to stop me from doing anything I want ever again."

"And who will you turn to, pray tell?" Ta'a Chume tried to sneer but the effect was that of a predator who had lost its fangs. "When Organa makes her move, when her son discovers your secret— without my help, how will you survive the war that is to come?"

"There you go again, underestimating me. Talking to me like I'm some witless child who didn't survive Jakku and the First Order and your treacherous court," Rey growled. "I have done battle every single day of my life."

Ta'a Chume lifted her chin. "As have I, Kira."

Jaw set, fists clenched at her sides, Rey turned around and walked out of the throne room, leaving the Queen Mother on the floor, surrounded by a ring of broken glass.

Chapter End Notes

The bits where Rey muses about how worthless Hapan gemstones actually are in the grand scheme of things and how there are parallels between Kylo killing Han and Ta'a Chume killing Teneniel were inspired by comments from luciefee and _wheniconsidereverythingthatgrows_, respectively, and will be further explored in future updates.

I also forgot to include a reference link for _cyare_ in the end notes of Chapter 46, but it's _Mando'a_ for "beloved."
Chapter 48

Jyggalag Ren was not a coward. He was just skilled at calculating the odds and, at the moment, the odds were not very good.

In fact, they were downright *wretched*.

Palace troops had come rushing in when the windows of the throne room exploded and, together with the Queen Mother's Royal Guard, they were demanding entry from the Knights of Ren and Rey's own *Chume'doro*, who were blockading the doors. Servants and courtiers alike observed the tense standoff from the sidelines, and Jyggalag was convinced that they were about to become witnesses to a massacre. The Heritage Council soldiers had been easy pickings due to the open terrain and the element of surprise; now, however, it was seventeen against fifty, all crammed in a single hallway with no escape routes. Their only hope at this point, as far as Jyggalag could tell, was diplomacy— and Kylo Ren was definitely *not* in a diplomatic mood.

"Stand down!" Kylo snarled at Captain Einne Arkada. "Lower your weapons, or I swear to the Maker—"

Einne narrowed her eyes. "The safety of the Queen Mother is my utmost concern—"

"As the orders of the *Chume'da* are mine," Moreem Espara interrupted, stepping forward to stand beside Kylo. "No one enters the throne room by decree of Her Grace Kira Ka Djo."

"Is this a coup?" Einne demanded. "State your intentions, Major!"

"I have no intentions other than what my mistress commands, and she has commanded that I allow no living soul to interrupt her audience with Ta'a Chume."
"The windows just blew up!" Einne looked like she was coming down with a headache. "You can't expect us to do nothing. Stand aside, Emperor Ren, Major Espara, or I'll—"

"Or you'll what?" Kylo sneered. "My stormtroopers have surrounded the castle. There is a First Order star destroyer waiting up in the black. Unless you want Ta'a Chume'Dan to turn into a battlefield, I suggest you let the Empress conduct her affairs as she sees fit."

"The Empress..." Einne repeated, blinking. And that was how Jyggalag realized that the Hapans weren't used to referring to their Chume'da as such. It made sense, given how isolated the Consortium was from the rest of the galaxy, and he supposed that they had a hard time wrapping their heads around the fact that there could be someone more powerful than Ta'a Chume.

But Hapes was autonomous— the terms of the treaty had made that extremely clear, and soon Einne was going to call Kylo's bluff and order her soldiers to open fire because it didn't matter who was Emperor and who was Empress of the galaxy— here within her Veil, the Queen Mother was the closest one got to the divine...

The doors of the throne room swung open. A hush fell over the crowd as Rey stepped out into the hallway.

Jyggalag had heard that the Jedi girl was a force to be reckoned with in battle. Never had he believed it as utterly as he did now. Despite her bedraggled hair and torn, blood-spattered gown, Rey looked ready to lay entire worlds to waste. Her hazel eyes swept the scene, incandescent with wrath, and then—

— And then her features smoothened into an eerily calm mask. "At ease, Major Espara," she said to Moreem. Ignoring Einne completely, she turned to Kylo, holding out her hand. "Would you escort me to your shuttle, my lord?"

Kylo's brow creased in puzzlement but he automatically offered his arm, and Rey gracefully slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow. One sharp glance from her was all it took for the crowd to shift to the side, the gap forming an unobstructed path to the Fountain Palace's main doors.

It wasn't until Rey had passed by Einne that she deigned to address her. "By the way, Captain Arkada," she remarked over her shoulder with a nonchalance more suited to one extending an invitation to afternoon tea, "the Emperor and I will be dropping Cynthisa Varless off at Eremandu on charges of treason, along with footage of her interrogation as conducted by Boethiah Ren. I suggest you advise Ta'a Chume to have someone dispatched there posthaste to assess the recording and speak with Lady Varless if you have any further questions."
With that, Rey swept out of the Per'Agthra on her husband's arm, followed by his knights and her guards.

"All staff, please report to the courtyard at once." Zan's voice crackled over Alqualonde's frequency, echoing through the labyrinthine hallways of the castle. "Her Grace has an announcement to make."

Everyone hurriedly complied, abandoning their respective tasks and rushing to the aforementioned venue. They chatted excitedly among themselves as they speculated on the possible reasons the Chume'da— who had arrived at the Reef Fortress only forty-five minutes ago and had spent most of the time since packing her bags— could have called for this meeting. Some of them had already heard about the incident at the Fountain Palace from their friends and relatives who worked there, and this information was quickly disseminated to the rest of their colleagues.

However, all gossip faded into silence the moment they entered the courtyard. The Chume'da was dressed in a form-fitting gown with a long-sleeved red bodice and an hourglass skirt as black as midnight. First Order colors. Standing beside her was Emperor Ren, and behind them were six masked obsidian figures.

Her Grace waited until the last of the staff had filed in and then she spoke, sounding imperious and deadly, sounding more like her grandmother than she ever had before. "I know that some of you report back to Ta'a Chume'Dan on my comings and goings, on whom I receive as guests, and on my husband's conduct as well as mine. That ends today." One could have heard a pin drop during the brief pause that ensued; none of the listeners dared to fidget or to take more than the shallowest of breaths. "I will no longer tolerate spies in this household. If you feel that this is something you can't comply with, then I expect you to not be here when I return." Although the Chume'da kept her features impassive and her tone steady, there was no mistaking the threat that lurked behind her words. It hung in the air like the sharp edge of a guillotine. "I strongly advise you to think twice before attempting to betray me. I'm sure most of you are already well aware that I— and others like me— have ways of extracting the truth from those who are unwilling to part with it. Never forget that this castle is First Order territory. It belongs to me and to the Emperor and, here, it is our word that is law." She scanned the pale-faced crowd before her, then nodded as if in satisfaction. "That will be all. Either go back to your duties or tender your resignations. Choose wisely."

It was called the Iron Hells for a reason. Located in the Lorelli Reach, on the outer edge of the Hapes
Cluster, the prison moon orbited an uninhabited planet in the Ket system, encircled by dozens of rings fashioned from durasteel, each one spiked like a dragon's tail. The rings changed configuration at random intervals so that they could be safely navigated only by those who had security clearance from the control tower; all other unauthorized ships would either be trapped on the moon or, worse, crushed between the massive, thorny cables.

What the rings hid from the view of passing spacecraft was a barren, cratered world, sporting only chalk-like soil and a gigantic, multileveled fortress bristling with enough weaponry to repel a minor invasion. Eremandu was the kind of place where people went numb from the loss of hope. At night, there would be the occasional sob or scream permeating the air, but the dominant sound was the rattling scrape of fingernails scrabbling against walls and doors.

"Miss Sato."

Elayne looked away from the small transparisteel window of her prison cell, through which she'd been counting the stars beyond the grilles as part of a nightly ritual she'd adopted sometime within the last five years, always trying to count as many as she could before the rings' configurations changed again and blocked out the sky. She'd been concentrating so hard that she hadn't noticed the warden unlocking the door from the outside and then standing at the threshold of the cell, flanked by two guards.

"Please follow me," said Damaris, who wasn't as cruel a warden as Xylas had been, and so it was with more confusion than fear that Elayne shuffled out of her cell, meekly extending her wrists for the requisite cuffs.

"That won't be necessary," Damaris said, exchanging a quick glance with the guards.

Her curiosity thoroughly piqued by this unorthodox turn of events, Elayne was led out of the detention blocks and into the turbolift. As it glided upwards, she tried to avoid catching sight of her distorted face in the reflective metal panelling; yesterday she'd spotted new wrinkles, new strands of gray in her black hair. She had been eighteen when Iluna Varless pressed charges against her. She was in her thirties now, and aging fast. People did not tend to live long in Eremandu.

The turbolift coasted to a stop and Elayne was briskly ushered into the warden's office on the top level. The last time she was here, Iluna's daughter had made her write that testimony in exchange for her freedom— only to have her thrown back into her cell after she'd affixed her signature. That had been the day Elayne started counting stars.

Neither Damaris nor the guards accompanied her into the office. Instead, the door slid shut behind
her and she was alone save for the woman standing by the large blast-proof windows, silhouetted against a panorama of twisted durasteel rings. Elayne had seen that face before— the prisoners were occasionally herded into the auditorium to watch state announcements— and she hastily curtsied, her joints creaking in protest at a movement that had become unfamiliar to her after all these long years.

"Chume'da," she whispered, averting her eyes.

Rey’s heart went out to the waifish brunette who had just entered the office, clad in drab brown apparel. From scanning Elayne's file, she knew that the prisoner was around Kylo's age, but she looked so much older. There was something vacant about her that reminded Rey of the withered, gray-haired scavengers on Jakku, the people who had spent their entire lives picking the dunes apart for scraps, and whose souls had been picked apart in return.

"Miss Sato," Rey acknowledged. "Please sit down."

Elayne hesitantly complied and Rey claimed the chair beside hers, ignoring the way the other woman gave a visible start at this breach in propriety. She was determined that they have this conversation as equals.

"Cynthisa Varless has been incarcerated in Detention Block Lambe," Rey announced, naming Eremandu's maximum security level. "She made an attempt on my life and will likely spend the rest of her days here on this moon." She watched Elayne carefully but could detect no sign of either triumph or relief. It was as if everything had been stamped out— including the desire for vengeance. "I know what happened— the deal you struck that she reneged on— but I have a few more questions I'd like to ask."

Elayne's head bobbed in a jerky little nod as she stared down at her lap. "Of— of course, Your Grace."

"Why did Cynthisa seek you out? Do you have any idea?"

"She wanted ammunition against Ta'a Chume. Any kind of information that she could find some use for when the time was right. There were rumors that Teneniel Djo had been poisoned, but that kind of talk's par for the course when a member of the nobility takes ill. When the Royal House finally traced Your Grace's old nursemaid to the Iron Hells, Lady Varless caught wind of it— I guess
through her own intelligence network—and she had a hunch that Aletra might have told me something.” Elayne shivered, as if the memory of her conversation with Cynthisa was too painful to dwell on. "Aletra predicted that Ta'a Chume's spies would come for her because they wanted to know where she'd hidden you away. What they didn't know was that Kalen had told her about the poisoning, and she was afraid she'd end up admitting that as well, either under torture or a Gun of Command. They came for her but they were too late, because she'd already killed herself. She—" Elayne swallowed. "In the days leading up to her suicide, Aletra seemed... not just at peace, but also satisfied, in a way. I think that she was proud of herself for making that decision. Not many people can lay claim to that, after all—that they managed to stay one step ahead of Ta'a Chume until the very end."

"She chose death because she didn't want to risk revealing my whereabouts," Rey said hollowly.

"She was dedicated to the rebellion, Your Grace." Elayne shrank back even as she said this, obviously expecting an outburst of anger.

But Rey had no anger left in her bones—at least, for today. She was tired. "How did Kalen know that Ta'a Chume was responsible for my mother's death?" She suspected that this was the sort of data that had been included in the rest of Elayne's written testimony that she hadn't been able to bring herself to keep on reading, but it was better to hear all of this in person, anyway. And in a situation where she wasn't tied to a bedpost and about to be injected with a full vial's worth of Kodashi viper venom.

"The servant whom Ta'a Chume ordered to dispense the poison," said Elayne slowly, "started to fear for his life. He realized that the Queen Mother would never allow him to live, and so he went to Kalen to beg for protection. But that servant didn't act fast enough; they found his body in an alleyway in Ta'a Chume'Dan a few days later. Law enforcement ruled that it was a botched mugging, and no one gave it a second thought."

There was a part of Rey that felt a shard of fleeting, vindictive satisfaction that the man who'd assassinated Teneniel had gotten his just desserts, but it was quick to fade. Ta'a Chume would have killed him if he hadn't done as she commanded. Small lives, all expendable, all at the mercy of the powerful and the rich. "And why did Kalen tell Aletra about it?"

Elayne fidgeted, looking uncomfortable. "I do not wish to presume," she muttered. "But I think she was... closer to him than most. Something about the way Aletra looked and sounded when she spoke of Kalen—I think they were involved."

"I see." It would be impossible to confirm the truth of this. The two people who knew for sure were long gone. "I have one more question." Rey took a deep breath. "Why didn't Aletra kill me when our ship crashed?"
Elayne was quiet for a long time. When she finally spoke, there was a trace of compassion in her subservient tone. "You were just a child, Your Grace. Aletra said that your only crime was being born into the wrong family. She couldn't do it."

"And so, instead, she sold me."

Elayne flinched and said nothing.

This isn't her fault, Rey sternly reminded herself. In fact, she's probably the only one who's blameless in this whole tangled mess. She got to her feet and Elayne followed suit, gaze shifting from her lap to the floor.

"Thank you, Miss Sato. You're free to go."

Elayne curtsied again and made to leave the room but Rey stopped her with a hand on her arm, waiting until the other woman's eyes met hers in surprise to say, "You're free in every sense of the word. I'm granting you a royal pardon, as is my right as Chume'da, and there is a ship waiting to take you home."

Elayne Sato burst into tears.

In the quarters that had been prepared for her and her retinue aboard the Heresiarch, Rey breathed a sigh of relief as the emerald swirl of the Transitory Mists beyond the viewort gave way to the silver starlines of hyperspace. Her ladies-in-waiting were uncharacteristically quiet as they sat sipping cups of the tea that Vanya had brewed after ransacking the suite's pantry.

Finally, Niobe spoke. "What happens now, Chume'da?"

I don't know, Rey thought. I have to contact my father. I have to go to Dathomir. I have to figure out what to do about Ben and the Resistance. "We'll stay on Coruscant for a spell," she said at last. She needed to regroup somewhere that was far away from her grandmother's influence, and in the absolute strangest turn of events her husband was now the closest thing to an anchor she had, his presence the only thing keeping her from spiraling. "It is, after all, a stipulation in the marriage
contract that I occasionally hold court there."

And I need time to lick my wounds and come up with a plan, she added to herself, but she might as well have said the words out loud, for the girls nodded in understanding.

"Both Ducha Eriston and Elayne Sato mentioned there were already rumors that Ta' a Chume ordered my mother's assassination," Rey said. She'd briefed her ladies on what happened while they were en route to the Iron Hells. "Did any of you know about this?"

Esli, Janassa, Niobe, Vanya, and Sayl looked at one another uneasily. "As far as we were aware, it was just gossip, Your Grace," Janassa ventured. "We had no wish to trouble you with mere speculation."

And everyone bowed and smiled ever so prettily in my presence for months, Rey thought, never letting on that it was whispered about that my grandmother had my mother killed. It all came back to Ta'a Chume, of course, and how everyone feared her, but Rey couldn't help feeling she had been duped.

In a nest of vipers...

"From now on, I expect to be informed of every rumor at court," Rey told her ladies. "No matter how outlandish or insubstantial, I need to know what's going on and what people are thinking."

"Yes, Chume'da," the girls chorused, hanging their heads.

Despite the sincere contrition she sensed from them, Rey decided that if she had to stay in a room full of Hapans any longer she was going to scream. "I'm off to see His Majesty," she announced, already heading for the door. "Don't wait up."

Rey traced Kylo's Force signature to the same salon where they'd sipped avedame after her DNA test, back during the stormy days of their betrothal. He was alone, sitting on the couch in front of a steaming cup of caf, his sharp profile silhouetted against the starlines hurtling past the viewport that spanned an entire wall. She'd had some vague notion of asking if he wanted to spar— she needed to take the edge off, burn through the heartache of the last twenty-four hours— but one look at his
features, so pale and so drawn, was all it took to change her mind. He must have abandoned the peace talks on Ter Abbes, racing halfway across the galaxy to get to her on Wodan, and then he'd expended a massive amount of energy to heal her before chauffeuring her all over the Hapes Cluster with nary a single complaint. He was in no condition to spar and, if truth be told, neither was she.

Kylo's gaze flickered in Rey's direction as she moved further into the salon, the lock clicking into place behind her. "You should be resting."

She wasn't put off by the terseness in his voice; she could hear the exhaustion behind it, could see the faint tremor that ran through his gloved fingers as they curled around the cup's handle before he changed his mind and let it go, drawing his hand back to his side. "I could say the same of you."

He gestured haphazardly at the pot of caf on the table. "I wanted to stay up in case you had need of me—if you felt ill again or if you wished to talk, or—"

She sat on the couch, curling up against him as best as she could in her narrow skirt, both arms clinging to his neck. He kissed the top of her head before maneuvering her so that she was perched on his lap, his hand gently caressing the spot between her shoulder-blades as she snuggled into the comforting heat of his strong, broad frame.

After a while, the pulse of hyperspace ceased beating against her closed eyelids, and she peeked out from the safety of Kylo's chest to see an ocean of Inner Rim constellations rising to meet them on the other side of the viewport.

"We're easing out of the Hapan Spine now and heading up into the Perlemian Trade Route," Kylo rumbled. "The energy mirrors should be fully replenished by the time we get to the Darlonn sector, and from there we'll tunnel through sub-hyperspace until we hit Corusca."

"You were able to find the Spine in the middle of the Transitory Mists?" Rey marveled. "No matter how much you're paying your crew, it isn't enough. Or were you the one navigating on the bridge?"

"The latter," said Kylo. "There is an uncharted hyperlane which junctions with the Spine at the Roqoo Depot, but it requires great care to locate."

"Instinctive astrogation is such a useful little technique, isn't it?" Rey jibed, wondering if this was the same route he'd used to infiltrate Hapes the year after Starkiller Base, when they'd confronted each other at the temple on Stalsinek IV.
Kylo stilled against her. Tension gathered within him, radiating from every sinew. It seemed like an eternity had passed before he spoke again. "I didn't use the Force back then, and neither did I use it today. Han Solo showed me that route two decades ago, when he took me with him on one of his trips."

All the warmth that Rey had been feeling in that moment vanished, replaced by a harsh, biting chill that settled in the pit of her stomach like lead. After learning the truth behind her mother's death, she was now finding solace in the embrace of someone who had murdered his own father. Her psyche was still raw and bruised from the harrowing events and gut-churning revelations that had unfolded on Wodan, Hapes Prime, and Eremandu, and she reacted instinctively, trying to scramble off of Kylo's lap.

But he held her tighter, his arms constricting around her torso as if in a sudden fit of desperation, crushing her to his chest. "Please don't leave me," he whispered into her hair.

"I saw you kill him." Rey's words were muffled against Kylo's tunic, the tears that had been wrenched from her eyes seeping into the ribbed cloth. There was some distant part of her that was aware she wept not only for Han but also for Teneniel, finally succumbing to the bitter sorrow that she'd been forced to set aside while fighting her way out of the Drudach lodge and keeping up an unassailable facade as she dealt with the injustices of the past. "I saw you do it, and I just—I just forgot about it, or maybe I accepted it the same way I accepted people telling me that my mother died because she was sick—" Because that's what I do, I ignore the things that tear me apart, I keep everything separated in my head so I never have to hold them up to each other, that's always been how I've survived—

"Do you regret it?" she barked out.

When Kylo didn't respond immediately, she struggled to free herself from his grasp once more. He wouldn't let her and, oh, that was unfair, he couldn't have it both ways and neither could she, she couldn't lose herself in him now and still be able to look herself in the eye later—

"Answer me!" She was full-on sobbing, her hand clenched into a loose fist and pounding weakly on his chest. "I just want someone to be sorry, I just want one single thing to not have been done in cold blood—"

Kylo held her, saying nothing, until the worst had passed. Until the gasping, guttural upheavals that wracked her shoulders subsided into wet little snifflies and the occasional hiccup. Another glance at the viewport told her that she'd cried for so long that they were now back in hyperspace.
She closed her eyes again, exhaustion giving her no opportunity to second-guess her actions as she nuzzled at his damp shirtfront, listening to the sound of his heart.

"I used to think I knew why I needed to kill my father," Kylo said, and this time Rey could hear it—the grief that seeped through the cracks in his voice. "I used to be so steadfast, so certain in my purpose. But then I watched him fall and I was no longer so sure." Rey felt Kylo's fingers tumbling in her hair, aimlessly rumpling the careful chignon that Vanya had twisted it into earlier. "And now—now I carry him with me, everywhere I go. His death was the single greatest pain of my life until today, until the realization that I cannot be a source of comfort to you in this moment because of what I did. For as long as I live, these are the two things that will haunt me most."

She looked up at him and there could be no mistaking what had gathered in his dark eyes, what trickled down when he closed them. What gleamed in the silver light of the starlines. Dazed with fatigue, she watched his tears fall, his soft lips pressing together, thin and tight.

"Snoke promised it would make me stronger," Kylo said through gritted teeth, his sullen features contorted with the effort of maintaining some semblance of composure, and in that moment Rey saw him for the boy that he still was in so many ways. A lost child, a child of war, just like her. "He promised it would entrench me fully in the dark side and I would no longer be tortured by my inner conflict. But I am still—" He broke off, searching for the right words in the midst of the despair that must have been building up inside him for the better half of three years—almost four now. Rey didn't know what to do and so it became her turn to hold him, to pull him down to her so that he could rest his head on the top of her shoulder.

"I killed Han Solo." Kylo's voice wavered more now that she could no longer see his face, as if he could allow only aspects of himself to be vulnerable and never the whole thing. "I killed him," he repeated, caught up in the grief and the terror of it all, "and I have nothing to show for it. Just weakness. Just a dead father."

"This is not weakness," Rey told him fiercely. "Mourning Han means you have something Snoke can never understand, something he couldn't take away from you. It's not true that you have nothing." She coaxed him to lean against the couch's backrest so that she could meet his gaze, cradling his face in her hands. "You have my courage," she said, echoing the promise he'd made before they went to Ta'a Chume'Dan. "You have my strength. You have me." The pad of her thumb traced the scar on his cheek in a gentle caress. "And I meant what I told you that first day in Alqualonde, only now I think I understand it better than I did back then. No more masters."

Kylo's eyes darkened. He surged forward, slanting his mouth over hers in an urgent kiss that tasted like salt. Rey kissed him back, her heart singing with the first stab of hope that she'd felt in a long, long time. Han Solo's death had not been in vain. It had driven a crack into the shell that Snoke had
moulded. It had let the light in—a tremulous, diluted light, but perhaps enough to see by. Perhaps enough that it could be nurtured.

Perhaps enough that, given some more time, she could finally tell him everything—and he would respond not as Kylo Ren, but as Ben Solo.

In her cell on Eremandu, Cynthisa Varless stared at the wall. Detention Block Lambe had no windows, which was just as well because windows would contribute to the illusion that there was still a chance of freedom, that it would one day be attainable once more.

Cynthisa had no illusions—about freedom or, indeed, her life expectancy in this prison. Women could not be executed in Hapes, but she was a traitor to the crown. It was only a matter of days—a week, at most. She wondered, cynically, if they would make it look like an accident or a suicide, or if the Queen Mother would just say to hell with it and have one of the guards slit her throat in this very room.

No matter how it eventually happened, Cynthisa would content herself with the fact that she'd had the last laugh. Only seven members of the Heritage Council knew there was another faction that had assisted them—two of those members, Verisya and Thane, had died before they could divulge anything, and the other four could be counted on to have already gone into hiding or escaped the Hapes Cluster entirely. As for Cynthisa herself, the mental interrogation at the hands of the female Knight of Ren had been agonizing, but she'd been playing the Consortium's mind games ever since she was a child. She had managed to lock one critical piece of information away, and soon the Emperor and the Empress of the First Order would find that some of their subjects were not be so loyal, after all. Cynthisa's only regret was that she wouldn't live long enough to hear of it.

There were footsteps coming down the hallway outside. Was it merely her imagination, or were they slowing as they neared her cell?

No, she wasn't imagining it—the door was being unlocked, it was sliding open—

Cynthisa refused to turn around. She kept her gaze on the blank wall, unmoving. That was fast, even for Ta'a Chume, she mused as she listened to the sound of someone walking towards where she sat in the middle of her narrow cot. It was the sound of her fate.

Chapter End Notes
Roqoo Depot.

Ket system.
Chapter Notes

This story now has the most gorgeous book jacket ever with many thanks to the brilliant and ultra-talented lovenlu! I can’t stop flailing over it, it’s so amazing. Do check it out! ❤

Also, HI, I'M ALIVE (barely). This is a short update and it doesn’t cover as much plot as I would have liked because I’ve been so busy and I’m currently ill, but I had to post now because you guys have waited long enough and I’m leaving for Seoul in a couple of days. Sorry, I know some of you are getting tired of this whole thing being dragged out, and it looks like we might hit 60 chapters, after all D: Please just consider this a brief (and smutty hehehe) interlude before we hit the last stretch of the plot.

I’ve seen some pushback because I haven’t been able to reply to comments, and for that I would like once again to apologize. I hope to do better in managing my time this year. Rest assured that it means the world to me that you guys make the effort to share your thoughts and, for this chapter in particular, feedback would be a bright spot during my upcoming travels (it’s winter in South Korea and I have a cold sdfsghk bonne chance). I should be able to post Chapter 50 by the end of January! Kindly check the sidebar of my blog (it has to be on a browser and NOT the Tumblr mobile app) for any changes to the ETA.

I think that’s all for now. Happy New Year, my darling readers! I wish each one of you all the love and good things in 2019!

Rey couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment she fell asleep but, the next time she opened her eyes, she was tucked between Kylo’s broad chest and the loose circle of his arms as he sat back against the couch, his features relaxed in slumber, a soft snore escaping from his slightly parted mouth. He only snored when he was tired and it was with a fresh pang of guilt that she once again went over everything that had happened. She’d asked so much of him in the past day or so, culminating in her taking him to task over Han’s death, and he had neither complained nor accused her of being ungrateful after he’d dropped everything to charge to her rescue worlds away and heal her injuries and stand guard while she confronted Ta’a Chume and escort her from one end of the Hapes Cluster to the other on his warship.

He was trying. For her. He had been honest— and caring— and that was more than Rey could have said for anyone in the Consortium. Including her father, because Isolder had to have been aware of the rumors surrounding his wife’s death. Perhaps he’d even suspected Ta’a Chume’s involvement, himself.

Or perhaps he’d known all along.
Rey shoved all of that to the back of her mind for now. Unless she missed her guess, they still had an hour’s worth of lightspeed travel to go before switching to sub-hyperspace at the Darlonn sector, and she was determined to make the most out of that hour by focusing on her husband.

As if sensing the direction of her thoughts, Kylo stirred slightly, cracking one eye open. It was a testament to how particularly well-disposed Rey was towards him in this moment that she didn’t even attempt to conceal the affection that she knew was written all over her face, as clear as day.

The tips of his ears poked out from his mane of disheveled hair; she watched them turn red at her adoring scrutiny. "Go back to sleep," he murmured, brushing his knuckles along her cheekbone, and her heart squeezed in her chest and, suddenly, sleep was the absolute last thing she wanted to do.

In fact, it was a wonder she’d even managed to pass out in the first place, perched as she was on his muscular thighs, so close was she to those pillowy lips...

"I’m not tired." She attempted to channel coyness into her tone, into her gaze—a teasing hint of promise—

— But of course that completely went over the big dolt’s head—

"We still have a ways to go before hitting the Corusca sector," Kylo said, brow wrinkling. "Would you like something to eat?"

"Um— maybe?" Rey purred in a last-ditch attempt to salvage the situation. She was hungry, all right, but it wasn’t for food.

"A game of dejarik, then? Until you make up your mind?" Kylo continued, still so very charmingly obtuse. "Or— it has been a while since I last played sabacc, but there should be a deck around here somewhere—"

"Ben." She silenced him with a kiss but pulled away before he could reciprocate. "Your wife is trying to seduce you," she breathed, running her hands up his chest as she waited on tenterhooks for what he would do next. Perhaps his gaze would darken once more and he’d crush his mouth to hers in a scorching kiss. Perhaps he’d sweep aside the pot of caf and the cup and ravish her on the coffee table as they soared through hyperspace...
"I— she is?" Kylo managed faintly, blinking at her in confusion and in disbelief.

_What were you thinking?_ Rey chided herself, her cheeks heating up with the beginnings of embarrassment. _You're about as seductive as a luggabeast._ She retreated into snideness as the only defense mechanism left to her, rolling her eyes as she made to wriggle out of Kylo's embrace. "I don't know, let's check back with her in a while, shall we?" she grumped.

He suddenly clutched at her shoulders, preventing her from getting to her feet. "No, please," he hurried to say in a low, beseeching rasp. "I'm happy to be seduced." He kissed her cheeks, her forehead, the tip of her nose. "Seduce me. Please."

"I think we've already established that I don't particularly excel at it," she muttered, brushing imaginary lint from his sleeve so that she wouldn't have to look at him.

"Rey." He laughed, a hollow, short-lived scrape of sound that was pained and self-deprecating all at once. "I have been half-hard from the moment I woke up with you in my lap. You greatly underestimate your allure."

She blushed again, this time more from shy delight than humiliation. _Allure._ Who even said that out loud? It was ridiculous, but she couldn't deny that it was startlingly effective. It gave her the boost of confidence she needed to ease out of his arms and plant both feet on the floor, holding his gaze as she towered over him while he remained on the couch, his pale face turned up to her in the shimmering pulse of the starlines.

She was a mess of nerves as she reached back to pull down the zipper of her long black skirt. Kylo was too busy studying her face that he didn't seem to notice she was disrobing until the midnight-hued silk became an inky pool around her ankles and she stepped out of it. Her movements weren't graceful—she had to kick the fabric away so that it wouldn't ensnare her stiletto heels and, _kriff_, how embarrassing would it be if she'd tripped over her own discarded skirt— but the way his gaze turned reverent as he took in her nakedness from the waist down save for the white scrap of lace covering her sex made her feel nothing short of glorious.

"Force," Kylo said thickly, "I dream of those legs."

A shiver of pleasure coursed through Rey's system, but it was _nothing_ compared to the thrill that pierced her very soul when his gloved hands caressed her thighs, drifting upwards in slow, deliberate strokes until he was palming her buttocks, the leather rasping against her sensitive skin. He hooked his fingers into the waistband of her lacy white panties and that was when a brilliant idea occurred to her and she withdrew, putting distance between them, grinning at the strangled cry of protest that
emerged from his lips.

"Patience is a virtue." She would have loved to be able to purr those words, perhaps like Lairelosse would be capable of doing, but they came out breathless, just this side of giddy.

It wasn't as if the effect left much to be desired, though— Kylo groaned. Rey watched in fascination as he made quick work of the fastenings of his pants, her arousal heightened by the unthinking way he did it, so raw and frantic, as if his life depended on touching himself to the sight of her. And she hadn't even removed the top half of her ensemble yet.

Time to remedy that state of affairs.

With one fist wrapped around his length to take the edge off of the exquisite agony that had roared within him like wildfire when she started stripping, Kylo observed with hawk-like eyes as his wife—his beautiful, beautiful wife—reached behind once more to undo the clasps of her long-sleeved red top. Expectation tightened in his chest—and somewhere much lower—and then—

— Rey frowned, her nose scrunching up in concentration, her hands fumbling behind her back. "This might take a while, hang on," she mumbled. "Oh, bother—"

She was so funny, so endearing, and it felt like his whole being was paralyzed by the wave of affection that crashed over him in that moment, splinters of light chipping away at the darkness that had steadily been eroding since Starkiller Base. I'm insane about you, Kylo thought. He wanted to say it, but the words stuck in his throat like thorns. Instead, he silently waved his free hand and the Force unfastened every clasp that she was struggling with.

Rey's hazel eyes sparkled. "My husband is so clever."

"Just being a gentleman." He didn't realize he was smiling until the corners of his mouth ached with the unfamiliarity of the movement.

Her gaze turned warm and soft. "He should also smile more often," she mused, almost to herself, and then she was peeling the red top away from her skin and letting it fall to the floor.
Kylo thought at first that he had died. There seemed to be no other possible explanation. He was dead and, somehow, all his sins had been forgiven and he'd been admitted through the gates of the paradise that some cultures believed existed beyond the mortal coil. Instead of silk or lace or any such fabric, Rey's brassiere consisted entirely of strings of white pearls, tightly bound together and latched in front with an obsidian brooch that matched her shoes. The pearls shone coldly against her golden skin in the silver light of hyperspace, framing the delicate lines of her collarbones and the gentle valley between her breasts. He was at a complete and total loss for words, robbed of all higher brain functions, his stare wandering from her chest to her taut abdomen, the slight flare of her hips, the white lace at the apex of her thighs, the long, long legs that ended in black stiletto heels, and then back up again, to that face, that amazing face, those eyes he would burn down a galaxy for.

Rey bit her lip—because she apparently didn't plan on having mercy on him anytime soon—and then she took the pins out of her hair, letting the burnished mass of chestnut waves tumble down to her shoulders. By this time, every drop of blood in Kylo's veins had rushed south and he found himself mildly concerned that he'd never be able to walk properly again.

And yet, even that was a small price to pay for this moment.

There was no ceremony to Rey's steps when she finally deigned to walk over to him, no exaggerated sway to her hips, no saunter to display her figure to its best advantage. That wasn't who she was. Instead, her stride bore— not confidence, but determination, as if she'd made up her mind that she was going to see this through no matter what. It was the sexiest thing Kylo had ever witnessed.

At least, until she dropped to her knees in front of him, clad in pearls and lace and starlight.

"Rey." His voice cracked around the shape of her name. "What are you doing?"

"Thanking my husband for rescuing me," she said. "Put your hands at your sides."

He did as she commanded but, flustered because her face was mere inches from his groin at this point, he raised an eyebrow and blurted out, "You plan to show your gratitude by ordering me around?" Damn it, why couldn't he keep his mouth shut, what aspect of this situation could possibly warrant sarcasm, this was why he could never have nice things—

"No," she steadily replied, all good humor, far too good for the likes of him, "I plan to show my gratitude by doing this." And she wrapped her small hands around the base of his erection and lowered her head, licking her lips before pressing them to his tip in a soft, slow kiss.
I'm not dead, after all, Kylo thought dumbly. I'm alive but---this---this is what will kill me. He didn't dare move a muscle, afraid to scare her off. Which was ridiculous because Rey wasn't the type to scare easy, but he wasn't about to take any chances. Not when she was so very deliberately, so very experimentally trailing wet, open-mouthed kisses down the underside of his shaft, glancing up at his face every once in a while to gauge his reaction. He was slack-jawed, breath coming in short bursts, unblinking, unwilling to miss even the briefest second of searing the image of her lips on his cock into memory.

When she had finished kissing her way down, Rey paused, looking uncertain for the first time since she'd approached him to kneel at his feet. He was about to tell her that it was all right---that this was more than enough and if she could please just sit on his lap again so he could kiss her thoroughly---when she suddenly poked her tongue out and licked. A long, hot stripe, all the way up to his tip.

Kylo's spine slammed against the couch, his eyes rolling into the back of his head. Rey's tongue swirled around him, lapping up his precome, stroking and massaging in a maddening, untutored rhythm that was too much and not enough at the same time. "You are the most exquisite thing." He didn't really know what he was saying, only that it was the truth. "So perfect---Maker---Rey---"

She paused again, tilting her head inquisitively. "Are you sure?" There was a shred of doubt in her voice. "Because I kind of don't know what I'm doing---"

He was going to pass out if she didn't put her mouth back on him within the next five seconds, but neither was he so far gone that he failed to be aware of her need for reassurance. He tangled his fingers in her hair, caressing her cheek with a leather-clad thumb. "It's good," he managed to say. "Because it's you, it's good---"

She smiled at that, her Force signature glowing at his praise. And when she bent her head over him once more, this time it was to take him between her lips, and suck, and he was lost.

*  

There were some, no doubt, who would consider it demeaning for her to be on her knees, so scantily clad while he was fully clothed, engaged in an act that was, at first glance, for his pleasure alone. But Rey found that she didn't mind---how could she, when she burned with the need to do something for him, to offer him some measure of comfort when he was exhausted and aching and had done so much for her? Besides, he was utterly wrecked before her, above her, flushed and groaning with each slight shift of her mouth. This was power of a different kind and she had no compunctions in claiming it for herself.
And there was pleasure to be had here, too. Kylo tasted like clean skin and precome; it was strangely addictive, and Rey also quite liked the feeling of her mouth stretching around him, the hollows formed by her cheeks as she took him deeper. And, yes, of course it was a bit awkward, she sometimes got so caught up in it that she forgot to breathe and had to gasp for air, and there were a handful of times when her teeth accidentally grazed him and he hissed before she could pull back in chagrin, but always he urged her on, always he made her feel so beautiful, so worthy of desire, his fingers twisting in her hair and his lips spouting filthy endearments.

A wicked sort of curiosity stirred to life and she wondered just how much of him she could take. She straightened up as best as she could, unhinging her jaw as far as it would go. He slipped in a couple more inches and her eyes fluttered shut at the sensation. Stars, he was huge, he left no part of her untouched. She moaned around him and he swore, his hips bucking instinctively against her mouth, driving his length forward. It was too much— she gagged, and for all that he conscientiously tugged her hair back to give her room, for all that he whispered a hurried, broken apology, his arousal spiked in the currents of the Force, and she resumed her ministrations with eagerness, absolutely enthralled by the responses she was coaxing out of him.

It was like falling, the way they surrendered to the dark side as it sang to them both.

It was like a prayer, the way he said her name over and over again as if it was the only thing he knew.

It was like moonlight, the way he looked at her.

Eventually, she got the hang of it, managing to keep her teeth fully covered— and not a moment too soon, she thought wryly, even though he was too considerate to say anything— and bobbing her head up and down his length in obedience to the gentle alternation between pressure and slackening of his fingers in her hair, swirling her tongue around him every once in a while for good measure.

Eventually, she was able to switch off her brain and just concentrate on nothing but this. Eventually, she lost herself, too.

Once she hit her stride, Kylo wasn't able to hold out for much longer. No one had ever done this for him before, and the fact that it was Rey doing it— well, it was honestly a miracle that he'd lasted this far. As the hot, wet suction of her pretty mouth brought him to that first wave of orgasm, he was
unable to stop himself from tightening his grip on her hair, from thrusting his hips forward— she let it happen, much to his eternal disbelief and gratitude, and the glittering stream of hyperspace flickered at the edges of his vision as he came in her mouth, harder than he ever had before in his life, shuddering, gasping, mind whiting out in pleasure, blessed.

Rey didn't hesitate to swallow as he spilled on her tongue, the muscles of her throat rippling with a kind of lewd grace. He was still in a daze from the aftershocks when she pulled off of him with a slick pop that somehow made his spent cock twitch, in defiance of biology, and then she flexed her jaw as if it ached and shot him a rueful grin, all messy hair and star-bright eyes and swollen wet lips. 

My doom and my downfall, he thought hazily, his ears still ringing, staring at her with awe and reverence and— it had to be said— a trace of fear. My only one.

In his cabin on the Finalizer, General Armitage Hux's fists clenched behind his back, a nervous spasm ticking along his brow as he glared at the hooded silhouette outlined in static over the holoprojector.

"The deal was that we would get rid of them both," he spat. "What was Varless thinking?"

"She wasn't thinking, that was the problem," his contact replied. "I had my reservations about admitting her into the inner circle, but she possessed the resources and, most of all, the will to stop at nothing. Unfortunately, my gamble didn't pay off."

"Then it sounds like she wasn't the only one thinking," Hux retorted. "Of all the incompetent—"

"I'd watch my tongue if I were you, General. The way recent events have unfolded, it looks like you might soon need all the friends you can get."

Hux paused. He'd always taken great care to keep shrouded during communiques of this nature. Whoever was on the other end now, they had no way of determining which First Order officer stood behind the pre-rendered image of a rancor. It's another Hapan fake-out, he assured himself. I'm not the only general in on this.

The hooded figure took advantage of Hux's silence to continue speaking, and Hux saw red as he realized that they'd probably tossed out a random military rank in an attempt to throw him so that...
they could get a word in edgewise. "At present, I am unable to determine how much Cynthisa divulged and whether Ren is now aware of our little collaboration. I do know that a few of my colleagues managed to flee the Cluster before the arrests began, among them the four surviving members that your faction has met with. Still, I would advise that you come up with either an escape plan or a battle strategy before the *Heresiarch* makes planetfall on Coruscant."

"So that's it, then?" Hux gritted out. "The Heritage Council is just washing their hands of this entire affair? Fine allies you lot turned out to be."

"It's interesting that you should speak of hands, because mine are tied," the projection said curtly. "I've already risked too much just by bothering to warn you."

"And why did you warn me?" Hux asked, suspicious all of a sudden. "It cannot be due to a burst of magnanimity on your part."

"Because I want that bitch dead more than ever," the figure replied, a trace of anger leaking into their tone for the first time since the conversation began, "and if in the process of eliminating her husband you happen to take her out as well, then all of this will not have been in vain."

With that, the transmission came to an abrupt end, leaving Hux to gaze upon empty air.

But not for long.

Almost as soon as he drew his next breath, the holoprojector flickered to life again. Panic flared within him, his heartbeat stilling for the brief second it took to read the written summons that had appeared on-screen. Aside from his Hapan contact, no one was supposed to know about this frequency.

Least of all Snoke.
The inky sky of twenty-three-hundred, Galactic Standard Time, draped over Coruscant in a still darkness that was in sharp contrast to Rey's memories of the bustling ecumenopolis that never slept. The First Order had imposed a curfew not long after seizing power, and streets that used to be brightly lit at this time of night, forming a maze of neon if viewed from above, were now eerily quiet, plunged into a deep shadow that rolled on for miles like an endless carpet threaded through with the headlights of roving stormtrooper patrols.

Rey couldn't tear her gaze away from the illusion of nothingness that stretched out beneath her feet, beyond the windows of her room in the Citadel. It unsettled her, how much had changed in so short a time, and she perused the scene with the same morbid fascination that one would assign to an open wound. It wasn't like there was anything else to do, after all—her ladies-in-waiting were asleep in the adjoining quarters and, as for Kylo, she hadn't seen him since he escorted her to the residential wing and excused himself to attend a meeting, soundly kissing her goodbye outside her door while her ladies giggled and his knights regarded the hallway's stark metal walls with great interest.

Rey watched her reflection in the window-glass bite back a smile as she recalled how her husband had never quite managed to stop staring at her with something like stars in his eyes after their little hyperspace rendezvous. She was going to have to do that more often, it had made him so—well, happy. Who'd have ever guessed that she would be capable of eliciting the calmness that had surrounded his Force signature in the afterglow, the bliss that had softened the line of his plush mouth? Who would have ever expected that he would pull her back onto his lap and sprinkle kisses all over her face and her neck and her shoulders and the valley between her breasts, his leather-clad fingers tangled in strings of pearls? They hadn't had time to do anything else, but there had been a hint of promise in his gaze as he helped her into her clothes once more. Rey was very much looking forward to his return.

All too soon, though, her smile faded at the reality of what it was being superimposed over. A dark city, a city ruled by fear. With the quick shift in mood that had characterized her tumultuous life over the last several months, a pang of self-revulsion crawled underneath her skin. It was wrong for her to
feel such contentment with the Emperor of the First Order. She knew that, and she also knew that one day she would be punished for it.

But that day hasn’t come yet, Rey thought, lifting her chin with a sudden defiance. So—

There was a beep from the desk where she’d placed her comlink after changing into nightclothes. She tried not to blanch when she saw that the incoming transmission was from Hapes Prime—specifically, from Isolder.

"Rey." Despite the holo's soft and forgiving bluish light, her father's features were noticeably haggard. "Are you all right, vovina, did they hurt you—"

"I'm fine," she said dully, feeling a twinge of guilt at how old Isolder appeared to her in this moment, worry lining his brow. She'd shut off all communication lines after Wodan and he'd been off-world when she confronted Ta'a Chume. The guards had informed her that the prince was carrying out the Queen Mother's justice, which meant that he'd been put in charge of arresting the members of the Heritage Council. Still, perhaps she should have sent him a message— not bothering to let anyone know she was all right unless prompted was a leftover from Jakku, when no one cared. It was a tendency of hers that had driven Finn nuts during the war.

"What happened?" Isolder persisted. "Why did you leave? It's not safe—"

"Nowhere is more dangerous than Hapes right now."

"They are behind bars, every single one of them. They won't ever touch you again. I swear it."

His earnest expression, the way he spoke— Rey finally conceded that there was no way he could be aware of the truth behind Teneniel Djo's death. It was her own despair that had made her succumb to such dark thoughts. But could she stomach being the one to break the news to Isolder, when he had already lost so much?

Could she stomach being the one to keep it from him?

"Atta," Rey said, "Kalen perished by your sword on the bluffs of the Fountain Palace. Did he say anything to you? Anything that you found strange at the time?"
Isolder frowned as he dredged up what Rey knew all too well was a painful memory for him. "Before our duel, he told me that our mother was worse than what she seemed. That I had chosen the wrong side. I believed he was trying to rattle me in order to gain the upper hand and I stated as much. He gave what I can only describe as a sad smile against the backdrop of the ruined, burning city, and he said that it was too late, anyway. That the time for talking had long passed us by. And then we fought, and then it was over."

Rey clutched her silk robes tighter around her frame as she was wracked by a sudden chill. She could imagine all too clearly the scene that Isolder painted with his words but, before she could figure out how to respond, he continued heavily, "That was right, wasn't it? He was a madman. Desperate. He would have said anything if it meant that there would still be some slim chance of victory for his rebellion. He sought to turn me against the Queen Mother, didn't he?"

It sounded as if Isolder sought reassurance, and the cold that enveloped Rey grew more oppressive. More piercing. *You may not know what Ta'a Chume did,* she realized as she stared at her father's flickering visage, *but you know what she is capable of, and I think that, deep down, that means you've known all along.*

*My capacity for denial, I think I got it from you.*

"Were you aware," said Rey, "that Aletra Creel was brought back to Hapes a year after the civil war?"

Isolder froze. "I... what? Rey, that's impossible— I would have—"

She wished she could tell him that it was all right, that he wouldn't have found her sooner if he'd known; Aletra had been determined to take the secret of Kira Ka Djo's location to the grave. But her throat closed against the words, because she wasn't sure if anything would be all right ever again.

"Rey," Isolder repeated helplessly, "where is Aletra now?"

"Ask your mother," was all Rey could manage in response. And then she ended the comm.
Hux disliked Snoke's throne room on the *Supremacy*. For all its modern trappings, its cutting-edge tech, there was a weightiness in the air—an undercurrent of something primordial, something not easily understood. It was there in the way the hair on the back of his neck rose, in the goosebumps that pricked his arms beneath the crisp sleeves of his military uniform—Force energy, so concentrated that its echoes brushed against even those who were not attuned. It was something that Hux abhorred, and the Praetorian Guards that silently observed his entrance only added to the sickening mixture of revulsion and unease. As did the sight of the pale, shriveled figure seated on the throne.

"So good of you to answer my summons in such an expedient manner, General Hux." Snoke reminded Hux of a vulture in this moment, frosty gaze predatory and alert, as if waiting for him to drop dead. And perhaps he was a dead man, had been ever since Snoke first learned of his alliance with the Heritage Council—but, concerning matters of strategy, Hux knew when to trust his instincts, and instinct told him that if Snoke wanted him gone it would have already happened a long time ago.

No, the First Order's regent had something in mind, and Hux was curious—albeit also a little more fearful than he would ever have admitted.

"I'm in a rather circumlocutious mood tonight, General," Snoke rumbled as Hux stood before him. "Shall I tell you a story? There was a boy whose father hated him. Is that not so typical of how the greatest tales usually begin? The boy was a bastard. A kitchen woman's son. His father considered him frail and weak-willed, undeserving of legacy. He would carry the scar of that all his life."

Hux said nothing. Snoke smiled to himself and continued speaking, his eyes like dancing candle-wicks. "But the boy was smart. He learned how to be cunning, as most smart people do when they have nothing else to their name. He grew up in exile, and soon he dreamed of empires. And eventually he plotted to kill his father." The withered being on the throne gave a dry chuckle. "Brendol Hux underestimated you, young Armitage, and that was his fatal mistake. One I do not intend to repeat. I have watched you closely from the very beginning, and more so from the moment I made Kylo Ren Emperor of the First Order. You think he is not worthy. You think power is something that must be earned instead of given—and that, dear General, is why you hate the Force, and why you believe that you should be the one at the helm."

Hux remained silent, sensing that one wrong word from him would provoke a lethal attack. The Praetorian Guards hovered at the edge of vision like statues.

Snoke leaned back, that eerie little grin still fixed on his ancient face. "Commodore Vilim Disra is dead, by the way," he added, almost as an afterthought. "In the future, if you absolutely must cook up these trifling plots to entertain yourself on top of your day job, I would advise that you select fellow conspirators who would not crack so easily under interrogation. Weakness is not to be tolerated; your father already taught you that. But cunning—" And here Snoke's voice took on a
silken croon—"usefulness—these are things that ought to be rewarded." He perused Hux's face for several interminable moments. "This surprises you. Oh, how little faith you have in me. Did you think I would not take care of my own? That I would not have plans to lift our empire to its greatest heights?" Snoke's thin fingers clenched into a fist, pounding on the armrest to emphasize his next statement. "I want Hapes. You will help me acquire it. And then we will discuss...opportunities for your advancement. Do we have a deal, General?"

Hux stared at Snoke. After a while, he nodded and spoke his first words since walking into the throne room. "Yes, Supreme Leader."

Old habits were hard to kick, after all, and Snoke didn't seem to mind the title in any case. Everyone knew who was really in charge.

For someone whose wife had enthusiastically sucked him off and swallowed his come just a few hours ago, Kylo was markedly nervous as he knocked on the door to her quarters. Not only was it late and there existed the very real possibility that she'd already gone to bed and he was disturbing her, but—after sharing a room in Alqualonde—it felt different, somehow, to request entrance to a space that was solely hers, and to do so in the dead of night while everyone else slept on. Different, and just this side of illicit, some subtle sense of expectation hanging in the quiet air.

The Force stirred as Rey used it to slide the door open, and Kylo hesitated for several beats before walking into her chambers, the sound of metal hissing shut and locks clicking into place behind him. The lights were turned down low and she'd been sitting on the bed, but she rose to her feet at his approach, dressed in a high-necked nightgown sewn from black lace and chiffon with a frieze of dragons embroidered in scarlet thread, their serpentine coils skimming along her slight curves. Her robe was black, too, with scarlet trim, and again he was brought up short by that jolt of possessive excitement that always shivered through him whenever he saw her in his colors. Mine, mine, mine.

"Hi," Rey said.

"Hello," Kylo answered.

They regarded each other almost tentatively in the silence of her room. He wasn't sure what to do and so he followed his instincts, bending down to brush a kiss to her soft lips. It was quick and chaste and yet there was a striking intimacy to it that gathered tightly in his chest. He felt like he was being welcomed home after a long day.
And perhaps he was, in a fashion.

When they pulled apart, he belatedly noticed that an errant strand of hair had come loose from her simple bun. He reached out to tuck it behind her ear as he broke the news to her. "We're hosting a party the day after tomorrow."

"Because our last one went so well," she deadpanned, wrinkling her nose even though she leaned into his touch.

He couldn't resist tweaking that nose for its impertinence and so he — didn't resist it, succumbing to the urge after he'd finished fixing her hair and tracing the shell of her ear with his gloved fingertips. She made to playfully bat his hand away, but what she ended up doing, instead, was lacing their fingers together, placing their joined hands over her heart as she waited for an explanation.

"It would seem that Admiral Daala facilitated a diplomatic miracle in the wake of my exit," Kylo said. "The party is to celebrate the successful outcome of the Ter Abbes peace talks."

"Will it be held here on Coruscant?"

"Yes."

Rey tilted her head at him, her hazel eyes searching. "You don't appear too pleased by the prospect."

Kylo sighed. "The First Order's resources are stretched thin enough as it is due to galaxy-wide postwar rehabilitation efforts. We are spending trillions on infrastructure, agriculture, and ordnance. Every single credit counts. I would vastly prefer channeling our funds into rebuilding Ter Abbes rather than wasting them on frivolous ceremonies."

It was somewhat strange, the way she studied him just then. As if she'd never seen him before. He felt... defensive, an emotion that took him a few seconds to parse. Had she really thought that he took his responsibilities so lightly, that he wasn't more than just a figurehead? Or perhaps she believed that he was incompetent, that he knew nothing about the myriad intricacies of what made a government tick.

Seized by the need to make her understand, he trawled the Force for the secret, currently dormant thread of their bond. It wasn't something he'd attempted before, searching for the bridge that
connected them amidst the shimmering energies that in turn connected all life. But find it he did, and through it he coaxed the memories into her mind— how he’d spent the first month of his reign familiarizing himself with the state of the Empire's finances, how he’d consulted with accountants and drafted budgets over and over again. How out of his depth he’d been and yet he’d stubbornly pushed through, suffering the indignity of feeling stupid when his numbers didn't add up and someone had to correct him. How he'd done all of it instead of delegating the matter to his staff because it was a necessary skill that he needed to pick up.

Because it was a critical step towards the changes he wished to enact.

Because being a leader entailed keeping a close eye on where the money was piped into.

Because Leia Organa had once told him that, in passing, before she bustled off to attend a budget hearing at the Senate.

Kylo hadn't intended to share that last memory. It leapt to Rey unbidden, a stern reminder that the bond couldn't be fully controlled. She flinched but, after he drew back, their hands dropping between their bodies even as their fingers remained intertwined, said nothing. That in itself was a surprise; she'd always given him no quarter when it came to his parents.

Perhaps she was tired of fighting. He knew he was.

Rey pasted a neutral expression on her face. "People need to celebrate good things, though," she said, carefully steering them back to the original topic. "I'm sure Ter Abbes will appreciate the gesture."

"Which is why I approved the proposal for such an event. Doesn't mean I'm particularly enthusiastic about it."

"There are ways to cut costs."

"Such as?"

Rey bit her lip. Something flickered over her features, some conflict that Kylo couldn't determine the root of, but it vanished in an instant, replaced by determination. "You have an entire castle's worth of food and drink at your disposal, plus an army of chefs who are quite capable of crafting elaborate
"Absolutely not," Kylo said flatly. "You came here because you needed time away from the Hapes Cluster. I won't make you liaise with them on my account."

"You're not making me do anything. I'm the one who offered and, besides, I can have my ladies see to the details rather than directly coordinating with the staff myself. And," she added in a harsher tone of voice, "you and I don't need to ask for the Consortium's permission. Alqualonde is ours. I'd like to see Ta'a Chume have anything to say about it after what she's done."

Tightness settled once more in Kylo's chest, but there was nothing sweet or poignant about it this time around. It gutted him, how much Rey had been hurt when all she'd ever wanted was to find her family. She needed to regain some measure of control and, by the Force, he was going to help her do that despite his misgivings.

"Very well." He squeezed her hand. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me, you're basically outsourcing the catering from your own household," she pointed out with a wry smile. "Speaking of food, have you eaten yet? Shall I have the droids send up a few plates?"

A light dinner had been served during the meeting once it became apparent that it would run well into the night, but Kylo was unable to tell her that right away, so caught off-guard was he by her words. *Have you eaten yet?* It was such a mundane question, but it had been more than a decade since someone had cared enough to ask. He took in the sight of his wife, all cozily rumpled hair and draped in his colors, and he thought about the kiss a few minutes ago that had felt like coming home. And how all her kisses always felt like that.

"I'm famished, actually." His tone stayed calm in spite of the tantalizing idea that had started to unfurl in his mind. "There is, however, no need to call for the kitchen droids. I have everything I wish to eat right here."

And, with that, he swept her into his arms.
"Ben," Rey squealed, startled and yet utterly delighted as her husband carried her to bed, all but tossing her onto it. She hit the mattress none too gently but she hardly cared because soon he was crawling on top of her and kissing her in a blur of urgent heat, with the same earnestness that he’d applied to studying finances—the earnestness that had sparked her impulsive offer even though assisting the First Order was the last thing she should be doing. She’d glimpsed something of his heart in those memories, especially the last one with Leia, and maybe, just maybe, he wasn’t the tyrant she feared him to be, after all. The Hapes Cluster was still so isolated that she had practically no idea how the rest of the galaxy was being ruled. It was a state of affairs that she would seek to remedy during her stay here on Coruscant and, already, because of what she’d seen in the bond, she was starting to feel just the slightest bit optimistic.

Sinful lips trailed along her jawline and all of Rey's concerns—including her painful communiqué with her father earlier—fled, set aside for the moment as her body responded to Kylo's ministrations. Blindly tearing off his gloves, he fumbled with the row of gold buttons that lined the center of her nightgown from throat to navel, kissing every inch of her bare skin as it was revealed to him. She did her best to help, shrugging out of her robe as his mouth and hands drifted further down her form. He pressed one last kiss to the flat plane of her stomach before rising up on his knees to tug the open nightgown down her hips and then shed his own imperial robes, all while she squirmed impatiently on top of the sheets. Too many clothes, always too many clothes—

Kylo gave an inelegant snort as he pulled his tunic off over his head. "I can hardly parade around naked all day, even if it is for the Empress' pleasure."

"Don't tempt me to make you," Rey warned.

His gaze darkened and, stars, it did such nerve-wracking things to her system, the sight of those bedroom eyes combined with the sheer expanse of that pale, chiseled torso. To say nothing of the ache that started in her core and spread to her chest, threatening to rip her apart, when he left the bed to finish undressing and returned to her with his growing erection jutting out from the apex of his muscular thighs, so long and thick and flushed.

Mine, Rey thought happily, holding out her arms in an unspoken invitation for an embrace.

Back on his knees between her legs, Kylo leaned down to kiss her neck. "Later," he murmured before straightening up again.

She pouted. "Why?" She wanted to hold him, to be covered by him, to feel him hard and running hot against her skin...
"Because—" He lowered his head between her legs, smirking up at her in a roguish, languorous way that had her toes curling into the sheets with anticipation— "I owe you one."


Kylo would never consider himself a man of faith. He knew the Maker only as an epithet, and the molators as ghosts from his mother's homeworld. R'iia was a product of desert whirlwind and wide, open spaces; Typhojem had perished with the last of his followers thousands of years ago. And, while the Force was spiritual in nature, he did not worship it any more than he worshiped the blood in his veins or sunlight on the water or the stars in the sky.

No, Kylo was not a man of faith. But eating Rey out was the single greatest religious experience of his life. The taste of her, the way she melted under his tongue, how her nails raked across his scalp as she moaned— all of it went down like sacred wine. She made a believer out of him.

It was only the second time he'd done this— and only with her, only ever with her— but he remembered what she'd liked in that antechamber during the masquerade, the two of them painted in gold. He built her up steadily in ardent licks and kisses, nuzzling at her clit as his pleasantly aching jaw ran slick with her desire. And when he dipped his tongue into her entrance, Rey shrieked, her lean thighs latching around his neck in a stranglehold, her hips canting off the sheets to grind against his mouth.

"I'm almost there," she whimpered, sounding delirious, sounding tearful, sounding like she was afraid of what was going to happen even as she begged for it. "So close, Ben, cyare, need to come, please—"

Spurred on by the endearment uttered in the midst of her lust-fogged request, he quickly replaced his tongue with his fingers while his free hand slid over her hips, keeping her still and right where he wanted her as his lips found her swollen clit, his tongue flicking mercilessly until, yes, there it was, there she went, his beautiful little Empress falling apart so sweetly on his fingers, on his mouth, her back arching off the mattress, a hoarse cry wrenched loose from her pretty throat.

Instead of giving her time to recover, Kylo was seized by another wicked, terrible idea, curious to see just how far he could push. She had barely come down from the wave when he started over, eliciting a strangled sob of wonder and disbelief from her that made him smile darkly against her cunt.

He really could do this forever.
Rey cried out his name when she crashed into her second orgasm. The name that he had once sought to rip from his soul, it was now music to his ears. There could be no holier hymn than this. She didn't protest when he rose above her and pushed her knees up towards her chin, didn't so much as admonish him for his manhandling when he positioned her calves onto his shoulders. In fact, she didn't even seem to register anything that was happening, her hazel eyes glazed over with pleasure, her body limp and pliant beneath his hands.

She snapped back into some semblance of awareness only when the tip of his cock nudged at her entrance. "Ben," she repeated, only this time it was hushed. Awed. He was never going to forget her like this, her chestnut hair fanned out against the pillow, tears of catharsis glistening on her flushed cheeks in the low light.

"Rey," Kylo murmured in response, turning his head to press a kiss to her ankle.

And then he hilted himself inside her with a single thrust.

* *

Too much, was Rey's first thought, her head lolling back as she took all of Kylo's length. It's too much, I can't— He withdrew by a few inches, only to bottom out again with another jarring stroke that had her clawing at the sheets. Her mouth dropped open to form a tattered groan, and the look that he gave her then was feral and heated. It lit up every corner of her heart.

Perhaps she should have been embarrassed by the sounds she made when he began fucking her in earnest. Already sensitized by two orgasms, penetrated so deeply at this new angle, she was certainly louder than she'd ever been before, all shattered gasps when he sped up and lewdly drawn-out moans when he slowed down, babbling a nonsensical stream of oh, god and yes and harder and Ben.

But there was no room for embarrassment. Not here, not now. She had retreated into a very intense, primal headspace, where there was only her and her husband, and his eyes boring into hers, and his cock filling her over and over again.

Kylo leaned down, slanting his mouth over hers in a bruising kiss. She all but reeled from a fresh throb of arousal upon tasting herself on his lips, her hands leaving the sheets to dig urgent, grasping nails into his biceps, his shoulders, his back, every part of him that she could reach. His muscles rippled under her fingertips and his hips snapped against her ass, knocking a particularly undignified squeak out of her lungs. Maker, he was in so deep, she felt like she would never get him out of her system— and maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. "You're so tight," he panted in her ear, his rich, smoky baritone adding yet another layer to the delightful assault on her senses. "This was all I could
think about during my meeting, you know? My wife's tight little cunt— and how much I love fucking it—" His voice broke. He kissed her cheek sloppily, like he couldn't contain himself as she quivered beneath him. "And how beautiful you looked earlier, choking on my cock—"

Rey's eyes flew wide open at his dirty praise. A third orgasm was building up within her core, and it seemed like such an impossibility that she almost wanted to shy away from it. But, instead, she chased it, reckless, half-crazed, knowing nothing but this. "I— I loved it," she admitted, faltering and breathless with every thrust from him. "Loved putting you in my mouth— loved feeling you in the back of my throat—"

The rhythm of his hips stuttered as she felt a surge of overwhelming tenderness pour out from his Force signature, wrapping her in warmth. The kiss he gave her then was affectionate. Gentle. "Next time," he promised gruffly, nipping at her bottom lip, "I'll give you a pearl necklace to match your pretty bra."

She was no stranger to euphemisms. She knew what he meant and, oh, why did that turn her on so much? The thought of being covered in his come, how hot and thick it would be on her skin, how slowly it would drip down to her breasts— she moaned again, and felt his mouth curve into another devilish smirk. Stars, she adored him when he was like this, so playful and filthy, a stark contrast to the somber mask that he presented to everyone else. She was the only one who knew him like this, and only in brief moments, and that made it all the more precious.

And the next time he thrust into her, he hit the sweet spot, the one that set her off like no other, and Rey screamed.

It didn't take long, after that. The bed creaked obscenely as Kylo folded her in half, pistoning in and out of her, hitting that spot over and over again as constellations of light exploded before her fluttering eyes. "Missed this," he rasped, with gritted teeth and sweat-beaded brow, strong arms bracketing her against the sheets, large fingers tangled in her hair. "Missed you."

Rey nodded feverishly, yes, yes, I missed you, too, no longer capable of forming coherent sentences, no longer capable of doing anything except take it, take all of him, sobbing her joy to the heavens, begging him to take her there. Where they both could stay...

* *

By the time the third orgasm of the night swept through her, Rey was an absolute mess. Kylo followed not long after, spilling inside her with a curse muffled into her neck. He rolled onto his back beside her, and for a while the two of them did nothing but stare up at the ceiling, shoulder to
shoulder, as their racing hearts calmed and perspiration cooled on their bodies.

Eventually, his hand found hers. "Was that too— I mean—" He cleared his throat, sounding much too nervous for someone who had just completely ruined her. In truth, she had no idea if she was ever going to be able to walk normally again. "How are you feeling?"

Rey considered his question carefully. She considered the burn in her thighs, the soreness between her legs, the sensation of his come trickling out of her cunt. She considered her swollen lips, the contented exhaustion that weighed down her every limb, the ache in her throat from how enthusiastically she'd vocalized her pleasure, and how small her hand seemed, engulfed by his much larger one. She considered the solid heat of Kylo's presence in her bed and the way their breathing evened out in tandem in the quiet solace of her room.

"I feel," she finally whispered, "like a wife."

The Coins of Gauha rattled together in the blinding light shed by the gas giant Urazuun. They were not real coins, of course, but, rather, asteroids, smashing into one another at high and vicious speeds. In the short time that the Resistance had taken refuge here after exiting Hapes, two ships had already been lost to the never-ending whirl of rock and stardust.

As dangerous as it was, there was no other choice. The First Order had no foothold in this vast Core Worlds asteroid field, and that made it— relatively speaking— the safest place in the galaxy for now.

The Raddus clung to a space just outside of Urazuun's gravity field, at an angle that allowed a good majority of the barrage to be sucked up into the gas giant before it could hit the cruiser. Every once in a while, though, an asteroid— or the fallout from a collision between two of them— would batter the durasteel hull, causing the shields to groan and a tremor to pass through the conference room where a meeting was currently being held.

This was the fourth such meeting that Leia had orchestrated since the Resistance had finalized their attack plans. Like all the others, it wasn't going well.

"General," rumbled Savielk Trey'dra, "I risked everything to come here because we have long been allies— I even turned a blind eye to you making use of the remnants of our old Spynet to contact me — but you must admit that this gamble of yours is shaping up to be nothing more than a futile last stand. You are outnumbered, plain and simple."
"Savielk," Leia attempted to reassure him, "you and I have gotten out of tighter spots than this—"

He slammed a furry fist on the table. "There is already a constellation in the skies above my homeworld named in honor of Blue Squadron! Will your crusade end only when no star in Bothan Space is left unnamed?" he railed, agitated. "I promised my people when we surrendered to the First Order— no more Martyrs!"

"I see Bothawui has not yet tired of throwing that in everyone's faces, even after so many years," the gilled, silver-scaled Koll grumbled through his vocalizer mask. "If you must succumb to nostalgia, then take this into account— that we are all here today because we once fought together against the same evil that plagues us now. General—" He bowed to Leia— "The Alliance expended valuable resources to create a permanent base on Hirsi so that we would be kept safe from Palpatine. We do not forget. Our fighters await your command."

"They await to die, more like it," Savielk retorted, earning more mutters of agreement from the gathered crowd than Leia had expected.

A new voice waded into the discussion. "We also have to ask ourselves," said Miwa Bendal of Homon, "if another upheaval in governance is truly the best thing for the galaxy at this point in time."

"What are you talking about?" Leia demanded. "Of course it's the best thing—"

Miwa fidgeted. "My homeworld was poor in the days of the Old Republic, and it remained poor throughout Palpatine's reign and after he was overthrown. Lately, though— lately, we have been seeing improvements. The First Order has established a mining industry that's just starting to get off the ground. They prioritize hiring natives as workers, so Homon's employment rate has risen, and more people earn enough to sustain themselves and their families than those who can't. For perhaps the first time ever in our planet's history." Her blue eyes swept the room. "And there are many here who can report similar progress, even if they are hesitant to admit it in front of General Organa."

The words were thrown down like a gauntlet of challenge. It was a while before someone else spoke.

"The First Order is in the process of charting a direct route from the Farstey sector to the Core Worlds," Zae Verbenti, the grizzled former president of Farstey, said quietly. "Once it is completed, our ships won't have to cruise at sublight for days— consuming precious time and fuel— just to
reach the Harrin Trade Corridor, where we have to venture into the Inner Rim before we can even hit the junction that takes us to the Core. The sector governor has shown me Ren's blueprints. They are... rather efficient."

_They would be_, Leia found herself thinking. _That boy spent his childhood studying navigational charts, always eager to point out the quickest route whenever he was allowed to travel with his father._

"I think it is good," Edea Dane of Circarpous V piped up, "that Emperor Ren is young. His ideas are bold. The galactic stage was in dire need of invigoration." Very few people in the room knew that Kylo Ren had once been Ben Solo; Edea was not one of them. She continued speaking, unaware of how Leia's fingers tightened at the edge of the conference table. "He's dismantled most of the old monopolies and reportedly has a low tolerance for corruption."

"Let us also remember," gurgled Prissett Trinde, the representative from the Neimoidian purse worlds, "that his wife is Hapan. Speaking for my people, we are looking forward to the opening of trade relations with the famed Consortium, and we have been assured that the time draws near. I do not know if I wish to jeopardize that."

"You would rather jeopardize our civil rights and liberties, then?" snapped Jesmin Ackbar, Gial's niece, who now flew with Wraith Squadron. "How many people have been killed for daring to criticize the First Order—"

"And how many more have been saved," countered the former Republic senator Kur, "due to Ren's crackdown on the slave rings and organized crime?" The rest of the crowd fell silent, because Kur was a Twi'lek from Ryloth, and there were few other places in the galaxy where such an issue could be so deeply personal. "Yes, we have to be careful about what we say these days, but the tighter security measures have instilled peace and order and— forgive me for saying this, General Organa— but I campaigned for years for the Republic to take more proactive measures against the Hutts, and it is only now that something is being done!"

More mutters of agreement.

"And what happens when the First Order starts going after everyone, not just the Hutts?" growled Shriv Suurgav of Duros. "This is the honeymoon phase. I have seen it before. When Palpatine assumed power, there were also those who sighed in relief because they thought things would be better with a firmer hand at the reins. You all know how that turned out, yes? None of you would have agreed to come here today, otherwise."
As the arguments continued to fly back and forth, Leia caught Commander Larma D'Acy's eye from across the room and returned the other woman's humorless, commiserating smile. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter End Notes

Vilim Disra was first mentioned in Chapter 5.

Shout-out to Anonym1989 who was right on the money regarding Snoke >:))

Molator.
Typhojem.
The Coins of Gauha.
Urazuun.
Savielk Trey'dra.
The Bothan Spynet.
The Martyrs and their constellation.
Koll.
Hirsì.
Vocalizer mask.
Homon.
The Farstey sector.
Harrin Trade Corridor.
Circarpous V.
The Neimoidian purse worlds.
Jesmin Ackbar.
Wraith Squadron.
Kur.
Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

Dear hoomans,

I have worked very hard on this chapter, motivated by your comments that the food-giver read aloud to me honoring my greatness (as is my due). Long hours have I spent agonizing over the most effective placement of my stylistic trademark EAAAFGH and whether the raw emotion of LJJFDDT;;;;/ would better suit my purpose as compared to the simple elegance of CCCCCC. Unfortunately, the food-giver fancies herself something of an editor and she is in charge of the pedestrian task of uploading my masterpiece in its final form. Kindly hold her accountable for all errors, and thank you for the continued support.

Signed,
Darth Pancakes

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"All done, Your Majesty." Vanya's nimble fingers slid the last pin through Rey's hair, securing the Gorothite platinum crown below the topknot bun that the ladies-in-waiting had spent an hour twisting and slicking into place. She stepped back with a curtsy, the significance of the title she had used not lost on Rey as the latter surveyed her reflection in the mirror atop the steel dressing table. They were on Coruscant now, and here she was more Empress than Chume'da.

Anxiety at this new role sparked low in her abdomen but it was dampened, strangely enough, by the aforementioned dressing table's presence. It hadn't been here the last time she visited the Citadel, and the thought of His Grumpy Majesty ordering such a piece of furniture for her was both hilarious and endearing. It comforted her, at the same time heightening her eagerness to see him again.

Last night, Kylo had insisted on cleaning her up—with his tongue. Already shattered from three orgasms, Rey had briefly entertained the thought of begging for mercy when he once again stuck his head between her thighs, but she hadn't, and, stars, was she ever glad that she hadn't, because he had lapped at her so gently, not minding the taste of their combined release at all, and her fourth climax had been such a soft and languorous thing, all arched spine and curled toes and golden light and his lush mouth moaning appreciatively into her cunt. She'd slept like a log afterwards, stirring for only the most fleeting of seconds at dawn, when he crept out of bed murmuring that he had to oversee the military exercises; her eyes had slid shut again before he even finished pressing a kiss to her brow.

She'd had breakfast with her ladies at the private dining hall located in the adjacent wing, during which a protocol droid clattered up to her with an invitation to join the morning council. While Rey had her misgivings, she couldn't deny that she was curious to know more about the First Order's imperial policies—more specifically, how Kylo ruled.
That was part of the reason she'd come here, after all. To observe how he was when he was... not with her. Not just her consort.

But she'd already seen him cry over Han's death, and she'd seen how he carried some part of Leia with him still. That meant there was hope, and Rey saw no reason to believe that this meeting would prove otherwise. Thus, while her thoughts regarding the morning council were a far cry from buoyant, she was determined to put her best foot forward.

For her first day in the role of Empress proper, Rey had chosen to wear a sleek black chaughaine gown that hugged her every curve before flaring out at the knees. Framed by ruched sleeves that ended in diamond points at her wrists, the bodice was— more like a breastplate, really, albeit one smithed by a person who'd never seen a battlefield in their life. Filigreed silver metalwork clung to the swell of her chest and trickled down to her navel, of such exquisite quality that it shone like moonlight, seeded through with blood-red nova rubies to match the jewels embedded in her crown. Her makeup was similarly dramatic, all smoky eyes and pale lips.

She had to admit that she looked the part at first glance, but closer inspection revealed a different story. The line of her mouth was too soft— she couldn't seem to coach it into sternness no matter how hard she tried— and her cheeks were rosy in a way that had nothing to do with cosmetics.

She was... glowing.

Rey blinked at the mirror. She almost couldn't recognize herself, and it wasn't because of the makeup and the dress and the hair— rather, it was the quiet joy that seemed to emanate from her every pore. How young she looked. How carefree.

*Behold,* she thought, suppressing a giggle, *the power of four orgasms in a row.* She'd have to drag her husband back to bed later and find out what benefits a fifth one in the span of twenty-four hours might provide...

Shaking herself back to reality, Rey stood up and turned to face the ladies-in-waiting. There was a certain dullness in the way all five of them returned her gaze; she'd noticed the lack of their usual bright spirits earlier at breakfast, but she'd chalked it up to unease with their surroundings— or aristocratic resentment at having been told off yesterday. Now that she had opportunity to take measure of them, though, she spotted the bags under their eyes, their pinched features, and their sallow complexions. The girls looked tired.
"Did you not sleep well, my ladies?" Rey asked.

The girls exchanged furtive glances. In the end, it was Janassa who spoke up, staring down at her feet, uncharacteristically reticent. "With all due respect, Your Majesty," she mumbled, "it wasn't for lack of trying."

Rey's spirit left her body.

The other ladies hastened to reassure her while she considered whether it was possible to use the Force to evaporate one's self into a cloud of dust.

"It's good that the Emperor has such stamina—"

"— A rare thing in a man—"

"It wasn't your fault, Your Majesty, the partition between our rooms was no doubt hastily constructed—"

"— We shall invest in earplugs at once, please do not quit on our account—"

But, in the end, it was Niobe who was able to make Rey feel less mortified about the whole affair. "We are happy that you are happy," she said, no-nonsense and decisive.

"Really?" Rey's voice sounded heartbreakingly young, even to her own ears. She wasn't questioning the ladies' sentiments but, rather, her own.

It had been a while since she'd dared aim for happiness.

"Yes," Sayl confirmed, with the same abashed giggle from when Kylo had kissed Rey outside the Empress' chambers. "It is the loveliest thing, our Chume'da being wooed."
From his seat at the head of the conference table, Kylo scowled at the vacant chair between Gilad Pellaeon and Kosimo Westermal. "Was Disra aware that a meeting would be taking place today?"

Mitaka consulted his logs. "As per your instructions, Emperor Ren, a communique was transmitted last week to all officers concerned. I have here Commodore Disra's receipt of such."

"Very well. Seeing as he has already kept us waiting for thirty minutes, I hereby strip him of his position in the legislature," said Kylo. "Let the records show that, as of this moment, Commodore Vilim Disra is no longer a member of First Order High Command." He'd been meaning to get rid of Disra, anyway— the man was an absolute buffoon. Lazy and cruel. The only agreeable thing he'd ever done as part of the council was handing Kylo this convenient excuse to sack him.

Pellaeon and Westermal weren't happy about their friend's unceremonious demotion. Kylo could see it on their faces, even if they weren't fool enough to protest outright. He'd actually been expecting Hux to put up some form of argument, but the latter was holding his peace, expression carefully neutral. Maybe he hated tardiness more than he liked Disra.

Kylo's gaze swept the table, eventually landing on a bespectacled, wiry-haired captain in her late thirties— Aden Rook, who'd sent the famed Rebellion veteran Sien Sovv's forces scattering at the blockade of Coruscant after pummeling the Sullustan's ship to dust in broadsides. They said Canady had been screaming at her over the shortwave to get the hell out of there, as the First Order couldn't afford to lose her dreadnought, but she hadn't even flinched as she switched off external communications and engaged Sovv's fleet head-on. "Captain Rook, you'll be taking over from Disra," Kylo announced. "I trust that you will be more efficient at managing your time— and more respectful of everyone else's— than your predecessor."

"Yes, sir." Aden stood up with a sharp salute and briskly marched over to the empty chair at the other end of the table, taking her place with the other members of High Command. She was the only one among them who had no ties to the previous empire, and that was a good thing. She was less beholden to outdated ideals.

Before the council could move on to the next order of business, the doors slid open, drawing everyone's attention. Rey walked into the room with her head held high, looking like every dark fantasy Kylo had ever had about her come to life. He rose to his feet and his officers followed suit— some more grudgingly than others.

"Good morning," Kylo said in a low voice, pulling Rey's chair out for her once she'd made her way over to him. "Thank you for accepting my invitation."
A hint of teasing mischief sparkled in Rey's lovely hazel eyes. "Thanks for the dresser."

Kylo felt the tips of his ears turn red. He'd never been more grateful that he grew his hair long enough to keep them out of sight.

Across the conference table, Hux's blank expression had shifted. He seemed irate, pursed lips wobbling in that way they always did when he was just bursting to reaffirm his status as the constant thorn in Kylo's side. He managed to restrain himself only for as long as it took everyone to settle back down.

"Your Majesty, is this wise?" Hux demanded. "Given the recent attempt on your life that occurred in Hapan space— not to mention the Empress' former ties to the Resistance— I have my doubts as to whether her presence at a council where we discuss matters of security and state is advisable!"

"How fortunate, then, that I am not in the habit of taking your advice," Kylo coldly replied. Beside him, Rey had gone tense, all the sparkle vanishing from her eyes, and he truly could murder Hux for it. "You raised no such objections when I announced earlier that Her Majesty might be joining us, so I'm left with no choice but to assume that your sudden outpouring of concern is nothing more than a power play, during which you ingeniously failed to mention that the Empress was also a target of the assassination attempt and risked her life to save mine."

That did the trick; although it was obvious that some of the officers shared his sentiments, Hux was left with no graceful way to explain his belated reaction. Somewhere in the back of Kylo's mind was Leia Organa explaining to him that so much of politics was knowing when to be diplomatic... and when to call people out.

Still, some damage had been done. The atmosphere in the room was strained, and Kylo needed to act fast in order to mitigate it. Thanks to the incident at the masquerade, the Hapan connection— which was probably the sole reason his officers hadn't staged a coup when he married a Resistance fighter — was now more of a liability than an asset. He had to remind them what the Empire stood to gain.

"Now that we've put that foolishness behind us," Kylo said pointedly, darting one last wry glance at Hux, "it is my pleasure to inform the council that mine and the Empress' household on Hapes Prime will be shouldering food and drink for the upcoming ball, as per her suggestion. The budget that we set aside for those expenses at yesterday's meeting will henceforth be added, instead, to the budget to rebuild Ter Abbes." He paused, giving the various adjutants enough time to note the change on their datapads. "Our next order of business will be to consult with Her Majesty on how best to initiate trade with the Hapes Consortium. You may put forward whatever proposals you have and she will comment on them as she sees fit."
"Begging your pardon, Emperor Ren," Quillan piped up, "the final word lies with Ta'a Chume, surely? Should she not be present for the discussion as well?"

"Empress Kira Ka Djo will decide," Kylo said, taking far more delight than he ought to in every carefully enunciated syllable, his statement ringing weighty and measured throughout the room, "which of your proposals—if any—are suitable enough to be forwarded to the Queen Mother."

Some officers were more adept at concealing how they blanched than others, but blanch they all did. They all had vested interests in the outcome of these proceedings—in which sector would lay claim to that first glorious hyperlane straight into the heart of Ta'a Chume's Veil. Rey now held all the cards. They had no option but to be nice to her.

Under the table, Kylo reached for her hand.

She was staring straight ahead. Into nothing. Her jaw was clenched and she couldn't seem to meet his eyes. Surmising that she was rattled by Hux's protest or that she was nervous about taking center stage in the upcoming deliberations, Kylo tugged her wrist towards him, resting it atop his thigh and lacing their fingers together in a silent attempt at comfort. While she didn't resist, her hand was limp in his, and he had the strangest sensation that, if he shed his glove, her skin would be clammy to the touch.

*It will get better*, Kylo assured himself. Soon, Rey would adjust to life at his court and see all that he was trying to achieve. Soon, she would be convinced of his cause and they would truly rule the galaxy together.

* Rey felt sick to her stomach. Hux's words echoed in her ears long minutes after he'd uttered them. *Given the Empress' former ties to the Resistance*—except that she was *still* working with the Resistance, unbeknown to Kylo, and he'd just rushed to her defense in a chamber full of high-ranking First Order officers.

When the truth came out...

She remembered the panic she had felt at the masquerade when Finn and Rose made their presence known. How absolutely certain she'd been that the pain of him finding out would be too much to
bear. That certainty pierced her even more keenly here and now, surrounded by unwilling allies, sitting beside him with his hand covering hers that felt like home.

*I believe in him,* Rey thought with a sudden fierceness. *I believe that he can be turned.*

For the next hour and a half, she listened to one proposal after another, grateful for the distraction they provided. The officers were so very polite—it almost made her laugh, given that some of them had been ordering their men to kill her on sight a little less than a year ago. She wasn't remiss in her duty of asking difficult yet important questions, but it was as much to see them sweat as to discern what was best for Hapes. Rey decided she would transmit only the one she liked most to the Per’Agthra, rather than give Ta'a Chume options to choose from. Perhaps that was petty of her, but getting knocked down a peg or two was hardly the worst fate that could be levied upon her despicable grandmother.

After a flustered Ephin Sarreti took his seat, his trade proposal having been thoroughly eviscerated, Kylo leaned into Rey’s space. "You drive a hard bargain, my lady," he murmured in her ear.

"He wanted a thirty percent markup on First Order goods!" Rey hissed back. "No kriffing way!"

"You're enjoying this."

She looked at him. She'd slipped her hand free of his so she could jot down notes on her datapad, and he'd curled his fingers under his chin, propping his elbow on the armrest of her chair as a vague smirk played at the corner of his generous mouth. "Not as much as I suspect you are, my lord," she dryly retorted.

Kylo's smirk widened, infinitesimally, into a grin. It was small and lopsided but it was there, a flash of slightly crooked teeth that tugged at her heartstrings—so charming, so boyish, so something of a rogue—before he schooled his features into a more serious expression and turned to regard the council once more.

Sarreti had been the last to present. Rey set aside her datapad and sat a little straighter as she addressed the gathering of her former enemies. "Thank you for your cooperation," she told them sweetly, but it was the kind of sweetness that had just enough of a sarcastic bite to make the less crafty ones flinch. "I shall take some time to review your offers, the best of which will be forwarded to Ta'a Chume'Dan posthaste. Rest assured that my judgment will be free of bias and concerned solely with the most mutually beneficial arrangement for our two realms," she concluded in a tone of voice that made it exceedingly clear that, should the mood strike, she would not be above selecting only the proposals from the officers who had pissed her off the least during the war.
Beside her, Kylo disguised his amused snort as a hasty cough. Upon collecting himself, he nodded at Mitaka, who promptly checked his own datapad before saying, "The next item on today's agenda is the creation of additional protocols for the Sovereign Expansion and Terraforming Decree..."

Rey listened with an interest that was, unfortunately, quick to diminish. Leave it to the First Order to make altering an entire planet's surface topography sound horribly dull, buried underneath legal technicalities and the finer details of equipment bidding. Regardless, it was her job to pay attention, and so she did. Somewhere along the way, Kylo's hand drifted beneath the table to rest on her knee, his fingers absentmindedly stroking haphazard circles over her chaughaine skirt. Reveling in the casual touch, she was content to write down important points and stay quiet and unobtrusive.

Until—

"Hang on." Rey interrupted Admiral Siralt's enumeration of the worlds that were set to undergo the procedure. "The Empire plans to terraform Crul?"

Siralt nodded. "That is correct, Your Majesty."

"The whole point of terraforming is to make uninhabitable planets habitable— but people already live on Crul," Rey argued. Kylo tightened his grip on her knee, as if in warning, but she ignored him. "The Crolutes and the Gilliands live there."

"The terrain is ninety-eight percent lagoons and shallow seas," Siralt explained, a bit testily, "which is, of course, unsustainable for humanoids—"

"For humanoids, yes, but a primarily aquatic planet seems pretty sustainable for its native aquatic species," Rey snapped. "You'd be displacing them— it's true that they can survive on land, but surviving and thriving are two entirely different things, their home is in the water—"

"This should be a discussion for another time." It took Rey a few seconds to process that Kylo was the one speaking, his words terse and cold. His hand was no longer on her knee. "Let's move on to the next point of order."

She turned sharply to the side, glaring at him. He refused to meet her eyes, looking instead towards Mitaka with an air of brittle command. "But—" she started to protest, only for something inside her to shrivel when he spoke over her. As if she'd said nothing at all.
"The next item on the agenda, if you please, Lieutenant."

Rey fumed silently through the discussion of several more administrative and legal matters, but she wasn't one to be cowed. Her teeth bared when the council opened the floor to the issue of lowering the age of criminal liability to thirteen or its equivalent in non-humanoid species.

"Juvenile delinquency is rife amidst the Core Worlds," Hux was saying. "While piracy and the slave trade are being kept in check, it is more difficult to ensure peace and order planetside, especially in slum districts. This new measure will lower the urban crime rate because, as you all know, local syndicates frequently take advantage of the fact that minors cannot be imprisoned under our current laws and they have them carry out the grunt work—"

"So we should be going after the syndicates," Rey snarled, "not the children forced into running errands for them—"

"Your Majesty, these errands include theft, destruction of property, and the proliferation of black market goods!" said Westermal. "Left unchecked, these children grow up to be criminals as well, continuing the cycle—"

"And how exactly will the cycle be ended if they grow up as prisoners instead?" Rey thought of Elayne Sato, numb and dead-eyed in the Iron Hells. She thought of herself, fighting for scraps in the desert, using any means necessary to survive. "What happens at the end of the sentence? You dump them back on the streets, no education, no respectable skill sets, a black mark in their record—"

"Which would still be the case if we turn a blind eye to their wrongdoings, only at least they'll have been kept out of trouble for a few years and will think twice before doing anything that could land them in jail again!" Hux retorted. "These urchins do not contribute anything to social progress, they have no utility—"

"Utility?" In her ire, Rey wasn't even conscious of both her fists slamming down on the surface of the conference table, the cool metal thudding against her flesh. "People are not things!"

Kylo had so far been observing the verbal battle with no discernible reaction other than a steadily clenching jaw. At Rey's outburst, however, he spoke up. "It is apparent that this policy will need
further review. It will be placed on hold while I take the Empress' points into account."

"You can't be serious," Rey said while Hux and Westermal looked like they were holding their tongues from saying the same thing, albeit for a reason far different from hers. "The fact that you're not going to shelve it entirely— this is wrong—"

"There is no room for moral indignation at my council," Kylo brusquely interrupted her through gritted teeth. "The Empire bases its rulings on what is best for the galaxy, not on sentiment. If that is unacceptable, my lady is free to take her leave."

Rey gaped at him. She didn't need to cast her gaze around the table to see the otherwise disgruntled officers' satisfaction that she was being put in her place. She felt it in the air.

*But what is my place?* she thought mutinously. *I was invited; I have a right to be here and to ask questions. I am in a position of power, and if I can use that power to make sure that even just one child escapes the wastelands people have built around them—*

"I apologize for my unprofessional behavior, my lord," Rey said, lifting her chin, her eyes spitting fire even as she willed her voice to remain calm. "You are right in that we must always have the galaxy's best interests at heart— which is why I shall be submitting a counterproposal." She could swear that a good majority of High Command stopped breathing. "For school-type rehabilitation centers instead of prison setups to house minors who have broken the law. I can do that, I assume?"

"You may submit a counterproposal, yes," Kylo replied. And if Rey hadn't known that face so well, if she hadn't spent an inordinate amount of time studying every inch of it, she would have missed the nigh imperceptible softening of his features, belying the grimness that dulled his tone. "Whether I will find it suitable is another matter entirely."

"I will also submit," Rey continued, "an objection to the terraforming of Crul and other inhabited planets."

It was like a duel. Testing the opponent's limits, waltzing into his space, waiting for what would make him strike. It might as well have been just the two of them in that packed boardroom.

But Kylo did not strike. Instead, he nodded— or, well, it was barely a nod, over before she could blink— *over before any of the spectators could determine that he had agreed,* remarked the canny voice in her head that had taken root during her time with the Hapes Consortium. "Lieutenant, the
next item on the agenda," he ordered Mitaka while never taking his dark eyes off of Rey.

Mitaka cleared his throat. "The last matter to be discussed for this morning is the ratification of the Enhanced Security Decree."

"I'll postpone the final reading until further notice. Mark it as pending for now," Kylo said without missing a beat. His officers stirred as if a current of shock had spread among them but, before Rey could wonder why, Kylo spoke again. "Session adjourned."

The Emperor had dismissed them in time for lunch, which Hux, Pellaeon, Westermal, and Sarreti took at a lakeside villa far from the Citadel—far from prying ears.

"That didn't go so well," Pellaeon remarked, sipping his glass of wine.

"Didn't go so well?" Westermal repeated with a scoff as he hacked at his venison with rather more force than necessary. "It was a disaster! Now that Ren's withholding approval, the terraforming bids will have to be pushed back."

"Poor Kosimo," Hux said dryly. "No tech windfall for you until the next quarter, probably. Your mistresses will have to settle for the lower grade furs."

"Don't act so high and mighty, Armitage," Westermal growled. "If I recall correctly, two of your pet projects were shot down today."

"Speaking of the Criminal Liability Amendment and the Enhanced Security Decree, I thought those were already in the bag. After months of preparation!" Sarreti lamented, helping himself to more Traladon goulash. "Are we back to square one?"

Hux shrugged. "I shall file a report with Snoke. Ren will soon come to his senses."

"Will he, though?" asked Pellaeon. "The man is whipped. I thought he and the Jedi girl hated each other, but that no longer seems to be the case."
"Perhaps he just has a soft spot for women," mused Sarreti, prompting his fellow officers to lapse into a spite-laden silence as they each pondered Aden Rook, the newest addition to High Command. Below the porch they were dining on, noonday sunlight glimmered on the azure surface of the lake, the warble of birdsong permeating the spacious, open villa.

"This won't do," Pellaeon finally declared. "With Disra eliminated from the council and Rook taking his place, we are outnumbered."

"Siralt's on the fence," Hux noted. "He has his fingers in the same pie as Westermal, so the Empress' little stunt with the Terraforming Decree might tip him over to our side."

"One can only hope." Westermal drank from his glass, expression souring despite the fine vintage. "What the hell happened to Disra, anyway? Where is he?"

"I've no idea," said Hux. "My attempts to contact him last night were unsuccessful. In any case, we can manage just fine without him. I'll double down on Siralt."

"In the meantime, I, for one, would not mind throwing a wrench into the imperial marriage," Sarreti muttered, obviously still nursing a grudge against the Empress for brutally ripping his trade proposal to shreds. "And I think I know how."

Pellaeon leaned forward eagerly. "What do you have in mind?"

Hux's lip curled as he studied his cohorts with pale eyes that bore a trace of disdain. "Are you going to break them up?" he mocked. "Is this amateur hour?"

Ignoring him, the other men continued their discussion. Hux shook his head and returned to his lunch. What they were planning was beneath him, but he'd let them have their fun. Perhaps their scheme, ludicrous as it was, would even prove effective in sending the Chume'da scurrying back to the Hapes Cluster— and out of his hair.

One could only hope, indeed.
It was a wretched state of affairs, Kylo reflected bitterly, that the amount of tense meals he'd shared with Rey during their marriage so far vastly outnumbered the pleasant ones.

They were seated at opposite ends of a long metal dining table, the distance between them spanned by hunks of Kommerken steak, buttered fern potatoes, Xizor salad, vagnerian canapes, and a pitcher of cloudy Endolian ground-apple juice. Although it was a paltry meal by Hapan standards, Rey ate vigorously, which was a far cry from out of character for her but, this time, Kylo had a sneaking suspicion that her fanatical attention to the Citadel's uninspired culinary offerings stemmed, in part, from her desire to avoid having to speak to him.

It had all gone wrong so quickly, that council. Quickly and terribly enough that his initial eagerness for her cooperation left him feeling like a fool in hindsight.

He had to fix it.

He had to try to understand.

"Unkar Plutt is from Crul, is he not?"

After such a prolonged silence, the question fell from his lips like dead weight. *I saw it in your mind once, I saw him, all that he did to you.*

Rey stilled, cheeks bulging with a mouthful of steak and potatoes. Finally, she swallowed. Without chewing. Kylo tried not to wince.

"Do you think I shouldn't care what happens to Crul because of my experience with Plutt?"

He frowned. "It's not that. I merely wonder—" What *did* he wonder? He paused as he tried to organize his disjointed thoughts. "Why you feel the way you do," he said at last. "Why your—compassion, for lack of a better word, was so quick to arrive."

"As I told your weaselly little general, people are not things. They are not instruments for my vengeance. Unkar Plutt," Rey said with a careful deliberateness, "deserves whatever suffering will be heaped upon him in this life and the next. His homeworld, however, does not."
"They won't suffer. I'll give you a copy of the blueprints so you can see for yourself that there'll be more than enough aquatic terrain left by the time we're done."

"And what about the Veins?"

His brow furrowed. "Pardon?"

She sighed, putting down her cutlery so that her hands were left free to gesture. "There are certain currents beneath the seas of Crul that the Crolutes and the Gilliands hold as sacred. Some of them run from one hemisphere to the other, then loop back again. Like blood." He watched her hands move in the sunlight, mapping it out for him, the ice moon glinting on her ring finger. "These currents are called the Veins. All together, they form the heartbeat of the planet, their tides dictating Crul's culture and way of life. The terraforming process will undoubtedly interfere with the paths of these currents. To phrase it in the context of the inhabitants' point of view, you would be cutting off the circulation. And that's not all." Rey's eyes flashed as she warmed to her topic. "Ithor is on the list, along with Crul, and you can't do that because even the Ithorians themselves don't venture onto the surface of their planet. They built their floating cities to avoid damaging the Mother Jungle in any way—because it's their goddess, because it's holy to them."

"Crul is strategically important," Kylo said. "It would serve as an adequate staging point for any excursions into the Lannik Wilds, which, owing to its proximity to Hutt Space, will allow us to monitor the Cartel. And we need Ithor for its andurite."

"Utility, again?" Rey's shoulders slumped. "You're not listening to me."

"I am," Kylo insisted, stung. "And I'm telling you that these old religions are precisely that—old. Outdated. They have no place in the greater scheme of things."

*Like the Jedi, he didn't say. Like the Sith.*

"I suppose you asked the people of Crul and Ithor what they thought about their hokey old religions, and I suppose they enthusiastically agreed with you."

It would have been far better if she'd yelled. As it was, her quiet, contemptuous sarcasm wore at his nerves that had already started to fray during the council meeting and, before he knew it, he was snapping at her, frustration rendering him heedless of his words. "I don't need to ask anyone, least of
all those who have submitted to my reign!"

Rey narrowed her eyes at him. "Is that so? It sure seemed like you cared an awful lot about your lackeys' approval when you basically told me to shut up in front of the entire council!"

"Those same lackeys were present at the coronation where you swore your obedience to my will," he reminded her vehemently. "By arguing with me in public— by questioning prospective laws that I have spent months working on— you are in direct violation of those vows." Rey paled as if she'd been struck; his heart cracked in half at the sight, but there was no stopping now. Kylo's entire being was borne on waves of slow-simmering fury that it had to be like this, that they always had to put on a show. "How am I to hold on to my authority if I am seen to let my wife flout it at every turn? We are not in the Hapes Cluster anymore, Chume'da."

Rey pushed her plate away, ceramic scraping against metal. "Do I stop having a mind of my own the moment I exit the Queen Mother's Veil, then?"

"Of course not." Kylo's fists clenched against the urge to hurl his own plate at the nearest wall. It had been a while since he'd longed for the satisfaction of something shattering at his rage, but being surrounded by the trappings of the First Order always did that to him. Like a wash of darkness slowly spreading through his soul like an oil spill. "You are asking me to cast aside what thousands of men and women have worked for all these years. You must realize the gravity— and also—" He was not prone to faltering in his speech, but now he stumbled over words that could never be said fast enough to catch up with his racing thoughts. "And you must also realize— far from implying that you don't have a mind of your own— I'm giving you the opportunity to change mine."

She raised a skeptical eyebrow, and yet he pushed on. "Make all the counterproposals and objections that you wish and I shall study them. Make everything formal and aboveboard so that, if I decide that you do have a case, I can push for it without giving my officers the impression that I am just blithely dismantling the foundations on which the First Order was built!"

An eternity passed before Rey spoke again.

"If you decide," she repeated woodenly, "that I have a case."

Kylo felt the skin under his left eye twitch, that tiny nervous spasm that he couldn't fully stamp out of himself. "Yes," he confirmed in a low, strained whisper. "If I decide."

He wasn't a doormat. He had told her that, once.
Rey took a deep, shuddering breath. "If we believed in the same things, this would be a very different conversation."

"We don't." His gaze dropped to the half-finished meal set before him, because he could no longer bear to see her in the same room and yet so far away. "We never have. But I had hoped— and am still hopeful— that we might be able to work together."

When he dared to look up, her features were— oddly arranged. Like she'd pasted the remnants of determination over some deep, all-encompassing sorrow. "I can. Work with you, I mean. I'll try." She sounded as if she was attempting to convince herself. To convince them both. Her chin lifted in that way he knew so well, defiant against all odds. Then she stood up. "I'll start now."

"Where—" The question hitched in Kylo's throat. Insecure, needy. "Where are you going?"

"Back to my room. I have policy to write." Rey was already halfway to the door as she said this, but her steps slowed at the last minute. Hesitantly, she glanced at him over one slim, black-clad shoulder. "I'll see you at dinner this evening?"

An olive branch, extended with shyness, with bravery, because his wife was always so quick to forgive. Even after he'd run roughshod all over her in public. Even after he, in his panic, had sought to quell her inner fire because of the precarious position it put him in, during a council meeting that he admittedly should have briefed her on beforehand so she wouldn't have been caught off-guard by the First Order's style of governance.

But, what with one thing and another, he had failed to think the matter through...

"I apologize, cyar'ika." He'd never meant it more. Every word. "I have an audience with Snoke that is long overdue. I won't be back until late."

"Okay," Rey said in the smallest voice he'd ever heard. "Then I guess I'll just—" She jerked her head towards the door— "see you. You know. Whenever."

And then she left.

Kylo Ren sat alone at the dining table, amidst dark metal walls that felt like they were closing in on him, same as the blank ceiling over his head, same as the rest of the impenetrable fortress that was the
"I hate this place," he said out loud, talking to himself like a madman or a fool, testing the sentiment on his tongue. Wondering at it even though it was the truth. "I hate it."

Chapter End Notes

The scene with the ladies-in-waiting is dedicated to LilibethSonar, who called it xD

Traladon goulash.

Kommerken steak.

Fern potato.

Xizor salad.

Vagnerian canape.

Endrolian ground-apple juice.

The Veins of Crul are my own invention, but there is EU basis for the Mother Jungle of Ithor.

The Lannik Wilds.

Andurite.
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

Before anything else, there is some spanking during the frickety-frack in this update. Nothing rough or overly detailed, but I realize that this can still be a trigger for some people so I've sectioned it off with the usual asterisks in between scene breaks. If you would like to avoid reading that section, skip the text after the asterisk when you get to the sentence "The sound burst from her lips like droplets of lightness." Resume reading below the asterisk after the sentence ending in "vanished into the ether."

Thank you to jackpotgirl for our gorgeous new cover, and to Syfy for including LWABOC in their fanfiction celebration series! You can read the full article and their interview with me here!

I continue to absolutely adore all the insights and speculations. I may not have the time nor the home Internet to respond but, rest assured, dear readers, that I am taking note of your comments and they're greatly helping me develop Ben and Rey's individual characters and relationship in what I hope is an organic manner as we gear up towards what I also hope will be a satisfying resolution.

And, last but definitely not the least...

*Happy Valentine's Day!*

*Love, Thea :)*

The Empress of the First Order spent the afternoon studying.

Upon entering her chambers, it took Rey all of five seconds to decide to change out of her restrictive formal attire and into leggings and a tunic, and all of an hour to abandon her uncomfortable desk in favor of the floor, sprawled out on her stomach, crownless, barefoot, surrounded by datapads. The bed would have been softer, easier on her bones, but she didn't want to risk falling asleep— not when there was so much work to do.

Rey had never actually written policy before. She had, however, read enough of it in the last several months to be more than familiar with the language. Still, for her arguments to be even remotely convincing, she needed to back them up with a ton of research, and so she had four datapads projecting various relevant documents while she jotted down notes on a fifth, her stylus scratching frantically as minutes turned into hours.

She threw herself into her work because she believed in it— and also so that she wouldn't have to
dwell on what had happened during that council and the disastrous lunch that followed. Now that the shock had worn off, the humiliation she'd felt at her husband treating her like a nuisance was screaming to be examined, as well as the crushing sense of rejection that had numbed the pit of her stomach when he turned down her tentative peace offering that they have dinner together.

But she couldn't afford to think on these things. It would make her too angry— too sad—to cooperate, and she'd told Kylo that she would. There were far more important things at stake than her pride.

It was in the middle of reading an absurdly dry First Order report on current prison conditions that Rey found her mind wandering to the last item on that morning's agenda. The one that Kylo had postponed final deliberations on, much to the surprise of his officers. A nagging suspicion tugged at her that her presence had been the catalyst, that he'd put it off because of the possibility that she might object yet again.

Opening a new tab on her datapad, Rey searched for the Enhanced Security Decree that Mitaka had mentioned. Her query came up blank. There were no state-approved press releases on the HoloNet, no files on the First Order's intranet—or the layer of the intranet that she had access to, anyway. Her fingers hovered over the keypad as she contemplated whether she could push her luck with some light slicing, but in the end she decided against it.

That could always be her last resort. When it came to acquiring information, she had other means at her disposal.

Rey picked herself up off the floor and poked her head into the adjoining quarters, where the ladies-in-waiting were busy planning the menu and logistics for tomorrow's ball. "Niobe, Janassa," she called, "could I speak with the two of you for a moment?"

Snoke wasn't angry with him.

It was odd to realize that upon walking into the throne room of the Supremacy. There was no threat poised to strike in the Force, not even the slightest tinge of disappointment.

Instead, Snoke merely observed Kylo's approach with a canny expression on that ancient, ruined visage. "Your life has been quite eventful of late, my dear boy," he remarked after Kylo had knelt before him. "I hear that you abandoned the Ter Abbes peace talks to rescue your war bride."
Rey had been more than capable of rescuing herself, but Kylo had no wish to call further attention to her. "Yes, Master," he confirmed instead. "She was abducted—"

Snoke waved a dismissive hand. "I don't require an explanation. You did what had to be done, of course, and Admiral Daala managed to clean up after you so no irreparable harm was done. I cannot fault you for wishing to protect... our investment."

Kylo tensed.

"I am intrigued, however, by what transpired at your council session this morning."

Ah. There it was. The other shoe, dropping soundly.

"The grapevine has it that your feisty little Chume'da fancied herself in charge for a short while. Good on you for quickly disabusing her of such an erroneous notion." The wizened regent smiled. "She obeys you now. Shutting up when you tell her to. Perhaps you are a man, after all."

"The differences in mine and the Empress' ideologies are unfortunate but not unexpected," Kylo stiffly replied, ignoring the barb even though it stung his chest. Ignoring how what he and Rey shred had been whittled down to something so simplistic and so crass. "We have agreed to work together."

"So I've heard. A counterproposal and an objection— how quaint." Snoke chuckled. "I never thought I'd say this, but marriage suits you. Now you are an expert at telling women what they want to hear."

Kylo stared at the floor, suppressing the urge to clench his fists—a mannerism that Snoke would be all too familiar with.

The being on the throne regarded him in silence for a while before adopting a more businesslike demeanor. "I trust you will pay no heed to your wife's bleeding heart and expedite at your next council the mandates that you failed to ratify today. The Enhanced Security Decree, in particular, needs to be implemented as soon as possible. You have a lot of work ahead of you and that is the only reason I shall demur from further instruction this evening. Now—" Snoke abruptly changed the subject before Kylo could respond— "why don't you catch me up on the state of your reign, young Emperor?"
Kylo took a deep breath and gave his report. On the new policies he'd enacted, on the morale of his troops, on the continued search for the Resistance. On anything that wasn't Rey. And yet, as he spoke, there was a small and secret part of him that couldn't help but think of how he would rather be with her back on Coruscant at this very moment. Eating dinner, stealing kisses, hell, even arguing—he'd take all of that, any of it, over this red-and-black throne room, this meeting with his master.

Snoke did not pick up on these thoughts. They were guarded, kept safe, by something. By someone. Kylo no longer had the energy to ponder the nature of this presence—he knew only that he was grateful for it.

When he was done, Snoke offered a curt, satisfied nod, and Kylo was duly dismissed. He turned around and headed for the doors, slightly puzzled by how... easygoing Snoke was today. Beneath the usual patronizing remarks, the old man was practically cheerful, by his standards, and that meant that something had worked out in his favor.

Kylo wasn't about to pry. He just wanted to get out of the Supremacy, out of the Unknown Regions, and back to Rey.

"One more thing."

The casually uttered words stopped him in his tracks.

"Ease up on the Hutts," said Snoke. "Your new measures are crippling their operations and that might cost us another useful alliance in the future. Cease and desist, Emperor Ren. That is an order."

The TIE Silencer made planetfall on a world cloaked in velvet midnight, ion engines roaring hushed over a sea of high-rises. No windows shone in the dark, nothing stirred in the streets. It was surreal, a ghost city, unfolding in the moonlight.

The landing— on a dock atop one of the towers in the Citadel, illuminated by beacons of scarlet and amber—was rough. Kylo was too infuriated to bother with finesse. Tearing out of the cockpit, he stormed inside as, behind him, his starfighter was lowered into the hangar bay. By the time he reached his quarters, his temper had hit boiling point, his emotions a sickly mess, welling up beneath his skin like pools of hot tar.
"Emperor in name alone?" Rey had asked on their wedding night.

There was a pitcher of water on his desk, alongside an empty glass. Kylo hefted up the pitcher and—after some deliberation that lasted all of three seconds— hurled it at the wall, where it splintered into pieces with a satisfying cacophony, water and crystalline fragments spilling everywhere.

Still, it wasn't enough. The dark within him cried out for a kingdom's worth of mindless destruction. It wasn't long before he threw the empty glass at the wall, too.

More.

His hand flew to the lightsaber hilt at his utility belt. Everything that followed was stained red, the shriek of broken kyber piercing his ears as he scoured deep gashes along the floor and the walls, as he hacked at his desk and at the holoprojector, as he shattered the windowpanes.

He'd done everything for Snoke. What had he gained, what was he left with?

"Just weakness. Just a dead father."

Subordinates who would turn against him if Snoke gave the word.

A wife he couldn't fulfill his promises to, or else Snoke would give the word.

Just a title that meant nothing.

The door— the one that led to the 'fresher connecting his room and Rey's— burst open, its security lock swinging off the hinges, blasted apart by the Force. She stood there, at the threshold, dressed in brown leggings and a simple gray tunic, her saberstaff blazing at the ready, humming a sonorous counterpoint to the erratic song of his own blade.

They stared at each other across fizzling circuitry and wreckage. The passage of time melted away; it could almost have been the war again, the two of them on opposite ends of a battlefield.
"I thought you were being attacked." Rey extinguished her saberstaff, cinching the hilt to her waist. "Or something."

"Or something." Kylo echoed distantly. He considered how he must look to her, red-faced and wild-eyed and surrounded by all that he'd destroyed during his tantrum, and shame rose slowly, like bile. But he was also afraid; if she were to berate him in his current state of mind, he would lash out at her. And if she showed him compassion, he might still do the same, anyway.

Rey stepped further into the room, her gaze wary as she extended a hand to telekinetically draw the curtains over the broken windows, obstructing the flow of the chilly evening breeze. "Fine time to redecorate."

Kylo hung his head. It was his turn to deactivate his lightsaber, tossing it carelessly onto the bed—the only piece of furniture that had escaped his wrath. "Did I wake you?"

Rey nodded. "All for the best. I fell asleep on the floor, so you probably saved me from a really bad back in the morning."

"What were you doing on the floor?"

"Researching." She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "For the documents I'll be submitting to you soon."

A good man would have come clean. Would have admitted that Rey had been right, that whatever power he had to rule came only from Snoke. Would have set aside, for the sake of being honest, the fear of losing her.

Kylo was not a good man. And despite what he'd promised as they lay tangled up in the sheets the morning after the masquerade ball, he was not strong enough to try to be better.

"He was weak and foolish, like his—"

Kylo shook his head, clearing away the cobwebs, forcing down all that he found so hard to swallow. "My meeting did not go as smoothly as I'd expected," he told Rey before she could press him for
"Yes, I hope so, too." The softening of her features almost made him seize with guilt. Her gaze flickered over him from head to toe and he realized that she was scanning for injuries—as if he needed to be reminded yet again of his helplessness and how completely at Snoke's mercy he was. How he had in the past—and would continue to in the future—let his master do anything to him, because when all was said and done Snoke was all that Kylo had left. Everything else—his marriage, his reign—was tied up with Snoke's goodwill.

Kylo didn't want Rey's pity. What he wanted, right here and now, was to feel in control of something for once.

"Come here," he said gruffly.

She raised an eyebrow at him and didn't move.

At first, it hit like another staggering humiliation but, before he could reel from it, she nudged at the fickle, dormant bond like he'd done last night. The difference was that it was thought instead of memory that she channeled through the Force. She wasn't rejecting him. She knew what he wanted, what he needed. You can have this, she said, in that intangible place that existed solely for the two of them, but on my terms.

"Chume'da." His voice cracked. "Please."

Rey approached him with caution, hazel eyes searching his face. It was dread over what she might find written there that made Kylo close the space between them with an impatient growl, pulling her to him and slanting his mouth over hers in a rough kiss.

She opened up for him with a sweetness he didn't deserve, a wildflower bowing before his tempest of rage and longing and confusion, her left hand cradling his scarred cheek while her right wove gentle fingers through his hair. It was this gentleness, more than anything, that ended him—more than the taste of her mouth, more than both the elegant length of her spine and the hourglass flare of waist to hips molded by his wandering palms, which finally came to rest on her bottom, cupping the pert cheeks as his lips and tongue coaxed out her tremulous sighs.

It wasn't long before he pushed her onto the bed, looming over her as he stripped down only to his trousers while she watched, pupils blown wide. She was on her knees on the mattress, waiting for
him the way she'd been on their wedding night, only this time her skin was flushed with arousal, her nipples pebbling through the thin fabric of her shirt.

I'd burn it all down if I could, Kylo thought bitterly, before he could stop himself. I'd destroy everything for this.

If only I could do that, and still have you.

Rey's hair was in the same bun it had been done up in that morning, albeit rumpled from sleep. Kylo worked on tugging the whole intricate arrangement loose as soon as he joined her on the mattress, pressing her body down to meet the sheets while he peppered more rough, biting kisses on her lips, her neck, her collarbones. He was single-minded, ravenous, and she let him take the lead, let him peel her leggings and her underwear down her thighs, let him unbutton and pull her shirt down to her midriff so that those small and perfect breasts of hers were exposed above the bunched fabric still somewhat held in place by her utility belt. The saber hilt glinted at her side, flash of cold metal in the low light, and it hit achingly close to another long-buried fantasy, one that had taken root on several occasions during those war-torn years, when he stumbled back to his quarters after she'd bested him in combat or given him and his troops the slip.

"The scavenger is distracting you," he remembered Snoke telling him once, all hardened disdain. "I expect you to get yourself under control, and soon, before I am forced to assume that you are no longer worthy of my tutelage." The Supreme Leader's mouth had twisted in a sneer. "What I wouldn't give for an apprentice not made of flesh and blood."

Those days were as good as another life. As good as a time that had happened to someone else. And yet— there was some dark, primal corner of Kylo's mind that responded to the sight of Rey like this, that remembered how he'd dreamed of taking her like this, the two of them furious and vengeful and consumed by that battle high.

In a daze from the strange interplay of past fantasy and present moment, he grabbed his wife's wrists, pinning her hands to the sheets above her head. Rey looked distinctly unimpressed by this— but also slightly curious. Unresisting. That was all the encouragement Kylo needed to lower his mouth to her chest, to suck on her nipples until she was gasping and arching beneath him, her wrists straining within the confines of his fingers but miraculously not wrestling free of their grasp. Although he switched from one breast to the other every time she cried out when it was too much, that was the only mercy he would grant, and soon she was a panting mess, squirming and flushed all over, wrapping her thighs around his hips in a valiant attempt to rub herself against the bulge in his trousers, her desire for friction burning through the currents of the Force.

Kylo felt oddly triumphant. Despite all his shortcomings as a leader and as an apprentice— and no matter what anyone said or believed— this, he was good at. Making Rey unravel, making her want
him above all else.

It was, in its own way, a kind of peace.

He lifted his head from her breasts, his free hand drifting downwards to lightly trace the wet contours of her entrance. Rey's surprised hiss at the initial contact tapered off into a moan when he slid two fingers inside her, crooking them gently against her walls.

"Roll over." His command was a low, husky murmur in her ear. "Get on your hands and knees."

There it was again— that same unimpressed look, flitting across her face. But then she bit her lip, curiosity winning out, and the twin sensations of gratitude and disbelief, which he would probably always associate with her for the rest of his life, swelled in Kylo's chest like a supernova as his wife— his strong, brave, beautiful wife— did as she was told.

Only for you, Rey thought as Kylo's fingers slid out of her and she assumed the position he'd requested, letting him shove a pillow between her hips and the mattress. I'd only ever do this for you.

Now devoid of his broad frame pressed against hers, she shivered in the cold night air that leaked in through the broken windows, flowing around the curtains. She stared at the headboard, scenes of destruction lingering at the corner of her eye as she listened to him undo the fastenings of his pants. He needed this, and she gave it willingly, but then the bedsprings creaked when he leaned forward and his hot breath rasped against her cunt, and she conceded that perhaps there might be something in it for her, after all.

Rey slumped down on her elbows with a throaty cry as her husband lapped at her slickness, his big hand squeezing her ass. He was sloppy and relentless and it was just what she needed after he'd sucked her nipples raw. Her core tightened as an orgasm approached like a wave in the distance, inexorably rolling towards her over this sea of black silk—

Kylo pulled away before it could break.

Rey blinked.
"How dare—" she started to say, started to crane her neck so she could glare at him over her shoulder, but the rest of this affronted reprimand— the rest of all coherent thought— fizzled into nothingness as he sank his cock into her, barely giving her time to adjust to the sheer size of him before he began to thrust.

It was so different, not being able to look at his face. Not being able to kiss him and to feel his heartbeat while he moved inside her.

But perhaps it was different in a good way. Kylo alternated between deep, rough strokes and the slower, sensual circling of hips against her backside, occasionally bending down to dot kisses along her spine, finding the places she had discovered to be achingly sensitive the night she healed him in this very room.

With the way he was filling her to the brim, with how her overstimulated breasts brushed back and forth across the sheets with each thrust, with the way her swollen clit caught at the edges of the pillow, it was small wonder that she came so soon, the orgasm blindingly startling and swift, her sharp cry stifled into her arm.

As soon as he felt her spasm around him, Kylo abandoned all attempts at tenderness. His fingers latched on to the utility belt around her waist, using it to pull her back onto his cock, over and over again. Despite her blissed-out state, Rey couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at that, at how readily he did it, and a memory rose up from the lust-fogged depths of her consciousness.

"You thought of me— even before? Back when we were still—?" she'd asked, and he had nodded, drunk on brandy, his dark gaze melancholy and honest, although slightly out of focus.

"Husband," Rey said now, the word breathless as Kylo rode her, "you've— ah— imagined this before—"

His pace faltered. That was all the answer she needed.

Rey giggled.

The sound burst from her lips like droplets of lightness, so blessedly welcome after the trying events of that long day.
From behind her, Kylo let out an exasperated grunt, punctuating his next thrust with a large palm coming down on her ass.

She started. It wasn't hard enough to hurt— or, rather, it hurt just enough to play off the pleasure she was currently experiencing. A lush kind of sting.

She giggled again.

He spanked her a little bit harder this time, although he was quick to soothe the blow with a gentle caress. Rey buried her face in the folds of her arms, stifling a delighted squeal into the sheets as she wiggled her ass against his hips as best as she could. He took her up on her invitation, landing a few more light spanks as he fucked her from behind with her breasts spilling past the tunic pooled at her waist, her saber hilt cold against her skin.

I love this, Rey thought hazily as her giggles soon became interspersed with hitched, shuddery breaths at the addictive cocktail of pleasure and illicit thrill, her eyelids fluttering as she snaked her hand downwards to rub haphazard circles on her clit. I love discovering new things with you, I love being playful with you—

I love—

Her clit throbbed against her trembling fingertips. She came again, with her husband's cock twitching inside her and his breath hot on the back of her neck, and the half-formed thought vanished into the ether.

Kylo pulled out as soon as Rey went limp below him, her second orgasm a wild, sighing song in the Force. He rolled her over onto her back, straddling her lithe torso between his thighs. She blinked up at him, languorous, catlike, a drowsy yet mischievous sparkle in her hazel eyes.

"You," he growled, his fist pumping furiously along his length, "are a plague on my sanity, wife."
Rey’s answering smile was beatific.

A low groan hitched in his throat as his come spilled all over her bare breasts, thick white ropes against her golden skin. He wrung the last few droplets out onto her collarbones, but even the sheer, debauched pleasure of this act— of marking her as his— couldn't drown out the sardonic, self-loathing thought that at least he'd kept one promise.

She opened her arms to him. He collapsed on top of her, utterly spent, pressing his forehead against hers for several long minutes, her fingers clasped together at his nape as he held still, just breathing her in until the pounding of blood in his ears gradually faded into the blessed, silvery quiet of afterglow.

It was a while before Rey broke the silence, her tone sleepy yet warm and content as she nuzzled at his ear. "Thanks for my new pearls."

Kylo closed his eyes, muffling a soft, rusty laugh into the crook of her neck. And he allowed himself to believe— for the moment, at least— that all burdens could be lightened.

In the conference room aboard the *Raddus*, Leia Organa solemnly regarded the Mid Rim leaders comprising the last group that she would be meeting with.

"I know the Republic has failed many of you," she said, silhouetted against the thorny labyrinth of fast-moving asteroids that glittered in the black. "I know that you are tired of war. But, in a vast galaxy like ours, with so many different cultures and belief systems, who is to say whose voices deserve to be heard and whose are to be silenced? Yes, things are shaping up to be good now— for some of you. What happens when they take a turn for the worse? What happens if the Empire decides that your voice no longer matters? What are your options, where will you run?"

She paused to let those questions sink in, then continued in a firmer, more argumentative voice, the voice that had won many a debate in the Senate halls.

"You speak of the Republic's corruption, its inefficiency; remember that, during the days of the Republic, corrupt officials could be arrested or removed from office, and that laws could be modified or overturned with a vote. That is not the case with this government that the First Order has established. Some of you support the Emperor's policies and are impressed with his capabilities, but
even the most capable of policy-makers do not live forever. How can you be sure that his heir will prove just as outstanding? Will your children and your children's children suffer under the next Emperor's reign? In the long run, democracy will always be the only way forward, the only way those in power can be held accountable to the people they serve. Believe me when I tell you that, if you stand with me— with us—" She indicated the Resistance officers gathered around her— "Then you will be standing on the right side of history."

Another pause as she looked around, trying to determine who had been spurred into action and who needed more convincing.

"I know that you are tired of war," Leia repeated, her gaze lingering on the older, more familiar faces in the gathered crowd, "but that is exactly what the First Order is counting on. That you're exhausted, that you have nothing left to give. That you've been knocked down so many times that you can no longer get back up. Well, I'm asking you to prove them wrong. I'm asking you to give freedom another chance. I'm asking you to not let darkness fall on the galaxy. Not while there is still a spark of hope left."

The Mid Rim leaders trooped out of the conference room after Leia's speech, some grave and thoughtful, others muttering among themselves.

When the last of them had gone, Amilyn Holdo walked over to Leia's side. "Think you convinced them?"

"Whether I have or not, it's out of my hands now," Leia replied tersely. "We attack in seven days."

And, in Hux's cabin on the Finalizer, shimmering in bluish holo-light, the hooded figure of his Hapan contact tilted their head as they contemplated the plan he had outlined.

"I fail to see what's in it for me," they finally said.

"As part of the Empire, the Hapes Cluster will naturally be subject to our laws," Hux explained. "These laws will include provisions for who will assume leadership of the Consortium."
"Ah. A puppet government."

"The galaxy is vast. You'll be left mostly to your own affairs."

"You will forgive me for not quite believing that," the figure drawled, "but it's the only option left to me, with most of the Heritage Council dead or in hiding or behind bars. Very well, then. I'll do it. And... I'm going to send you something. A small token, if you will, just in case things go south on my end. Don't bother trying to crack the file— it comes with a remote decryption sequence that can only be activated by yours truly."

"What is it?" Hux asked.

"Now, now, General." The Hapan wagged one slim finger at him. "It's good manners to let a lady keep her secrets."
Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

So avamarga_drew last chapter's pearl necklace scene and it is extremely NSFW and glorious. Thanks, girl! :D Was also able to update two days ahead of schedule because everyone's comments, tweets, and asks have been giving me so much life (and writing fuel). I have some free time coming up this week so hopefully I can catch up on responding, but for now let me just say that I love you all so much and I'm so happy that you're taking this journey with me <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The freighter from Alqualonde landed on a rooftop grid in the Citadel at eight in the morning and was immediately lowered into the hangar bay, where its crew unloaded tray after tray of food and several crates of wine that a small army of First Order droids promptly whisked off to the kitchens under the eagle eye of Zan the castle steward, who reeled off an endless litany of strict instructions on storage, reheating, and serving to a frazzled-looking Lieutenant Mitaka dutifully taking down notes on his datapad.

His lordship Aleson Gray had hitched a ride and was now updating Rey on the situation back in Hapes, the two of them speaking in hushed tones underneath the freighter's wing while the Chume'doro and the ladies-in-waiting hung back, glancing warily at the stormtroopers, officers, and ship mechanics going about their business in the crowded hangar.

"Most of the nobles who were arrested cracked easily enough under interrogation, ratting out plans and allies in exchange for some form of clemency— at the very least, more comfortable accommodations," Aleson reported with a wry smirk at how predictably self-serving his fellow aristocrats were. "However, none of them were capable of divulging their ringleader's identity. It appears to be a secret known only to the inner circle— and those people managed to flee before the first wave of arrests."

"Nice early warning system they've got there," Rey commented. "It's someone close to Ta'a Chume, no doubt."

"She thinks so, too."

"The Queen Mother takes you into her confidence now?"
Aleson snorted. "She is more well-disposed towards me, given my dashing rescue of her beloved granddaughter. Who apparently laid waste to her throne room, for some reason?"

At this transparent attempt to pry, Rey rolled her eyes and changed the subject. "I think interrogating Cynthisa Varless again wouldn't hurt. She might know more than she let on at her first inquest."

"About that." Aleson cleared his throat, markedly more somber now. "Lady Varless was found dead in her cell. The official statement is that she took her own life, but no further details have been provided."

"Oh," was all Rey could say for a while. And then, "Do you think...?"

"Women can't be executed in Hapes, but the Queen Mother's justice is a law unto itself," Aleson curtly replied. "That is what I think."

"It's also possible that the Heritage Council's ringleader wanted vengeance for their botched plans or to ensure Cynthisa's silence." Rey passed a weary hand over her face. "I feel like there are all these layers upon layers, and I don't know how to unravel them without sending the whole thing crashing down over my head. Over everyone I'm trying to protect. Over the galaxy I'm trying to save. I don't know where to go from here. Who to trust."

"Go where your heart tells you to, and trust yourself." A gentle, encouraging smile softened Aleson's handsome features. "You once jumped in the line of blaster fire for someone you barely knew. Be the person who does things like that."

"It wasn't really out of some sense of compassion," she couldn't resist correcting him. "If my fiancé had killed you, we'd have had a diplomatic crisis on our hands."

"And you stopped him, averting said crisis," Aleson smoothly countered. "So, from now on, follow your instincts, Chume'da."

As she watched Aleson board the freighter after they'd said their goodbyes, there was a prickle at the back of Rey's neck indicating that she herself was being observed. She looked up; Kylo and some adjutants were gathered one level above, by the row of windows that offered a view of the hangar
bay. The adjutants were speaking to him but he seemed like he was barely paying attention, gazing
down at Rey with a distracted frown.

Rey dimpled up at her husband with a cheerfulness she— didn't exactly feel, after all that she and
Aleson had talked about— but, if Kylo was in another one of his sour moods, there could be no
harm in trying to alleviate it.

He froze for a second, as if she'd startled him. As if the mere experience of someone smiling at him
from across a distance was a strange new thing that he had no idea how to respond to properly.

Rey's heart ached. Eventually, Kylo offered her a stiff nod from behind the window-glass before
turning back to the adjutants. Away from her.

Her smile dimmed now that there was no one to see it— no one that she cared about, anyway. He
was so different here in First Order space. Harder. She thought back to last night, how he'd taken her
from behind amidst the wreckage, lips searing, hands rough. It was a side of him that would not have
gone amiss in the time before their marriage— and, indeed, for a while there, it had felt like they'd
been thrust into their old roles. The Jedi Killer and the Jedi.

It had been exhilarating, in its own way, more so because she was falling and he'd caught her
afterwards, pressing their foreheads together, her last memory before she drifted off to sleep the rasp
of his warm breath against her jaw.

She'd woken up alone, in her own quarters, and had seen neither hide nor hair of him until this
moment in the hangar bay.

Rey wondered if they'd misstepped. If perhaps she should have attempted talking to him first— about
his meeting with Snoke, about everything that had been off-kilter between them ever since they made
planetfall on Coruscant. But the look in his wild eyes had been so lost, so desperate, robbing her
mind of all other paths of action except the one that led to her giving him what he craved.

And it was only now, in the cold light of day, that she could admit to herself that she hadn't wanted
to talk, either. Hadn't wanted a repeat of their fight in the council room and at the lunch that
followed.

It had scared her, how much it had hurt, how low her heart had sunk, how deeply his rejection of her
dinner invitation had cut. She had no desire to feel any of those things again.
Her quiet little exchange with Kylo had not gone unnoticed; as the entourage filed out of the hangar, Janassa wasted no time in flitting over to Rey's side, casually keeping pace instead of maintaining a courteous distance, which was as sure a sign as anything that she had something she wished to discuss.

"The Empire does not appear to suit the Emperor, Your Majesty," Janassa remarked. "I never thought I'd say this, but he was positively radiant in Hapes compared to... well, to this."

"He has a lot on his mind." Even to Rey's own ears, her explanation sounded more like a justification. A weak excuse, haphazardly packaged, repeated over and over again to make years of drought and sand more bearable. They'll be back. One day. I just have to wait for a little while.

"Hmm." Janassa's lips pursed. "I ran into Lieutenant Mitaka just outside Emperor Ren's chambers earlier this morning. He was overseeing some repairs, some replacement of furniture?"

Rey said nothing. Janasssa frowned, drawing herself up to her full height, dark eyes flashing, hinting at the countess that she would one day become. "Chume'da. There are men whose hearts are wastelands. Seeds may be planted— may even be tended— by those who come to care for them, but — whether or not anything grows, that is no one else's burden to bear but his."

Rey thought of her spinebarrel, that thorny little plant she'd found and potted and watched bloom. She thought about how anything could grow in the desert, even her own self.

_I believe in him_, she repeated silently, and then she nodded at Janassa, telling her to oversee the kitchen preparations with the other ladies, before taking the turbolift to go to her husband.

Kylo dismissed his adjutants at Rey's approach; the huddle of junior officers nervously saluted the Empress before walking past her and the _Chume'doro_ who had stationed themselves at the far end of the hall to give the imperial couple a modicum of privacy.

Rey wanted, so badly, for Kylo to draw her close. To perhaps kiss her on the forehead like he sometimes did. But, instead, he merely nodded at her as she joined him by the windows, the frenetic activity of the hangar bay nothing more than vague, soundless stirrings beyond the plane of his black-robed shoulder.
"What was Gray doing here?" he asked.

They were getting better at using the Force to gauge each other's moods; after a moment's concentration, she was able to pick up on the thread of resentment that lay coiled beneath his too-calm tone.

Rey had to take a deep breath to curb her annoyance. They'd already been over this. The masquerade, the room of gold, the music and his mouth and her sighs— You're the only one I'll ever —

But maybe it wasn't that. Maybe he just simply didn't like the man, which she supposed was understandable.

"Lord Gray flew over to give his report on the Heritage Council investigations," Rey explained. "Apparently, they have yet to uncover the identity of the 'future Queen Mother' that Cynthisa mentioned— and, speaking of Cynthisa Varless, she is dead. They found her body in her cell at Eremandu."

Kylo had the grace to look abashed for his veiled critique of Aleson's presence. "I can send my knights to conduct more exhaustive interrogations, if that is your wish."

"I don't think it will do much good, considering that the prisoners were already subjected to the Gun of Command. But thank you for the offer."

Kylo angled his profile towards the windows, as if suddenly entranced by the view. "With the Heritage Council's ringleader still at large, it might not be in your best interests to return to the Hapes Cluster just yet."

There was a question in his statement. An unspoken note of vulnerability that seemed to slide between Rey's own ribs. "I can't stay away forever," she said slowly, "but, yes, I'm staying here for now."

The expression that came over his face just then couldn't be described as anything else but a spasm of relief, and yet it was edged by something that called anxiety to mind. Before she could pry, he raised his mental shields, cushioning the blow of the gesture by turning back to her and taking her hands in his.
"I bruised these last night," he mumbled, running his thumbs along the delicate veins of her wrists. The wrists that he had grabbed and pinned over her head. "I healed them after carrying you back to your room. You hardly stirred."

"Which means that I trust you," Rey said.

Far from being reassured, Kylo only looked pained. He brought her wrists to his lips, closing his eyes as he kissed each one gently.

"Do you— do you want to talk about what happened at your audience with Snoke?" Rey ventured. "We can sit down, have tea—"

But he was already shaking his head.

*You told me once that you wanted us to talk more,* she wished she could remind him. She'd brushed him off with a flippant, grumpy remark at the time, but now there was nothing else that she yearned for more fiercely than for him to open up to her again. Those moments on the *Heresiarch*— when he'd bared his soul to her in the light of a million stars— it all already felt long gone. He regretted his father's death and yet he didn't appear ready to renounce Snoke; he had little patience for his officers and yet he had treated her rudely to appease them. She didn't know how to connect all these pieces of him, how to join them up to form a man she understood.


He swallowed at the sound of his old name. "I... it's just administrative matters. Snoke and I don't always agree. I need some time to sort things out in my head." He gave her hands a comforting squeeze before letting go. "But I'll take you up on that tea. We have a couple of hours before my next meeting."

It was so simple a thing, sitting with one's wife at a small table on a balcony overlooking the cityscape, sipping violet-hued murrh tisane from ceramic cups, picking at little platefuls of denuba sandwiches and boozy, nut-flecked ryshcate. It was so mundane an act, and yet there was a lightness to it that Kylo had never thought he would experience on Coruscant— or anywhere else in the Empire, for that matter.
The pleasure was marred by his guilt at not telling Rey the truth about how he'd been commanded to ignore her attempts to change First Order policy, but Kylo stubbornly quashed this feeling, determined not to let it intrude on the last few peaceful moments that they would have before their next big blowup—one that he feared there would be no coming back from. There was a noose around his neck, tightening with each hour that passed. He felt like a man living on borrowed time, and so he had no qualms about staring at her from across the table, committing to memory her features that were not yet distorted in contempt at his spinelessness.

Which was how he noticed the tiny crease between her brows every time she raised the cup to her mouth, the subtle way she wrinkled her nose as she drank.

"You don't actually care for tea at all," he realized out loud. "Do you?"

Rey pushed the barely depleted cup away as promptly as if she'd just been waiting for an excuse to drop all pretense. "It's leaf water," she muttered defensively.

Kylo's lips quirked. "Then why did you invite me for...?"

"Well, breakfast was only an hour ago so it's too early for either brunch or lunch," Rey sniffed. "And, besides, that's what we do in the Hapes Cluster when we want to have a chat, we serve tea."

"Yes, I suppose caf would be out of the question, given that no one in the Consortium seems to have any idea how to make a proper roast."

"Knowing you, you've already guzzled down a whole pot of caf to start your day. Any more might make you all..." Rey gestured vaguely with one hand. "Jittery."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Are you cutting me off, Chume'da?"

"I didn't say that." Rey bit into a slice of ryshcate with a certain pointedness. "Drink your tea."

Kylo chuckled. Ah, stars, she made it so easy for him to do that, in her presence. His foot slid across the floor beneath the table, nudging hers in an almost playful manner. "If you don't like tea, then what do you like?"
Rey chewed on her bottom lip as she contemplated her answer. "Hot chocolate, I suppose."

Without further ado, Kylo beckoned a server droid over and issued clipped instructions for a batch of the aforementioned beverage to be prepared. He detested hot chocolate, but it was worth it to see the simple, uncomplicated joy that lit up Rey’s hazel eyes. It was a sunny day, but the breeze that rippled through her chestnut hair carried a glacial tang from the ice fields at the pole, an unmistakable sign that the seasons were turning and the year would soon be coming to an end.

Two months, Kylo mused. He had been married for a little over two months now. So much had happened within that span of time. So many things had changed.

"Why do I get the sense that you're... reflecting?" Rey asked with a slightly puzzled frown. "It's not— I don't see it in the Force, I just sort of..." She trailed off, as if searching for the right words. "I can tell from the look on your face, maybe."

"We've been spending a lot of time together," Kylo carefully pointed out, although he, too, was rattled at how accurately she'd read his expression. A faint jumble of memories tugged at his consciousness— memories of times his parents had known what the other was thinking or feeling even without the benefit of a Force bond. "As a matter of fact, that's what I was reflecting on— how it's been a while since the wedding. How, two months ago, I would have scoffed at the thought of sitting here with you." The confession came easily, gliding on the crest of an abrupt, all-encompassing urge to be honest with her about this because he couldn't be honest about everything else.

"It has all been rather surreal," Rey conceded, "but— um— not necessarily in a bad way." The smile she gave him then was small and shy but so full of tremulous hope that he blinked. "I'm not used to being able to read people's expressions, or having to. Obviously it's a survival skill in Hapes, but back on Jakku—" She pantomimed the act of wrapping rags around her head. "We wore masks most of the time, and I'd go days without seeing another humanoid. So, people's faces— your face— for me, it's like an open book. Or a new programming language." A slow, pink flush crept onto her freckled cheeks, enchanting in artlessness. "It's fascinating. Even before. Even on that day..."

She trailed off, but Kylo knew what she meant. How could he not? That day was, quite literally, carved into his skin. But she wasn’t talking about their duel in the snow, that savage dance through frozen woods that had ended with him falling at her feet, blood-stained, heartsick, a boy without a father. No— she was referring to the interrogation room. Cold metal, harsh lights. Their gazes colliding as a black helm slammed into the ashes.

How she had peered up at his bared features with a mixture of surprise, curiosity, and bewilderment.
"I remember thinking," Rey said thickly, "that you looked so young."

Kylo ducked his head. They were getting into dangerous territory and, fortunately, she seemed to realize that as well, because she changed the subject. "Speaking of masks, I haven't seen yours in a while."

"I destroyed it," he said, not looking at her even though it was a relief to finally admit it to someone else.

At the periphery of his vision, Rey went still and sharp and tense. Seconds stretched into minutes, all silence and whispers of winter.

"It's just as well," she finally said in a purposeful tone that inexorably drove his eyes to her face again. "Leaders shouldn't hide behind masks. My father told me a few days ago that the Queen Mother doesn't walk among her subjects, and that didn't feel right to me. At all."

"No?" Kylo questioned.

"No," Rey confirmed. "People need people to lead them, not the divine."

The server droid returned with a tray bearing a pot of hot chocolate and two empty mugs garnished with a sliver each of tang bark. Rey took over, pouring out generous helpings of the rich concoction for Kylo and then for herself. Holding his gaze over the rim of her mug as she sipped, she mirrored his actions from earlier, her foot teasingly nudging against his as another smile played at the corners of her lips.

Kylo smiled back. The hot chocolate was overly sweet and cloying, a poor match for the vegetal sandwiches and the sugary ryshcate, but somehow—somehow—it was the best thing he had ever tasted.

The Star Home drifted towards the Rynmar Trail, a castle mounted on wind-sculpted basalt glittering in the blackness of space like a spiky crown, larger than worlds.
Wearing her own crown of ice, Ta'a Chume sat in the throne room, watching her courtiers make their exit. She'd ordered them to leave her in peace for a while; there would be enough politicking ahead on this, her annual tour of the entire Hapes Cluster. A tour she would spend granting titles and territories she'd stripped from the Heritage Council to those more deserving.

It would be her last tour. Of that, Ta'a Chume had no doubt. This past year, her body had been holding itself together with gilded string and royal spit, but string and spit all the same.

With the iron-wrought self-control that only the legendary Queen Mothers of the Hapes Consortium could possess, Ta'a Chume stopped herself from wondering if she'd done the right thing, if her gamble would pay off. It was too late to change her plans even if she were so inclined. There was nothing left to do but wait. Let the chips fall where they may.

Her son entered the throne room as soon as the last courtier had left. It was the first time she'd seen him in two days. Before departing from the capital, she'd asked Daemora AlGray— who would be holding down the fort in her absence— where Isolder was, and the other woman hadn't known, either.

*You always were my softer child,* Ta'a Chume mused as the prince strode towards the throne. *You took after your father.*

"Did you just dock?" she asked.

It wasn't until he got close that she noticed he was paler than usual, rage lurking deep in those blue eyes that reminded her so much of her late consort.

"I came from Eremandu," Isolder said. "I know about Aletra Creel. Why didn't you tell me she'd been found all those years ago?"

Ta'a Chume wasn't completely blindsided by this. She'd been expecting it.

But that was the thing about reckoning. No matter how much one prepared for it, it always came as a surprise.
What surprised her even more, however, was that—as she looked at her son standing before her trembling in this vast and starlit hall and steeled herself to finally confess her one great sin—she realized that it was going to be one of the hardest things she would ever have to do.

Kylo fiddled with his silver cuff-links as he waited outside Rey's quarters. Such as they were, they provided the only splashes of color on his formal but austere black robes. Moliere would probably throw a fit if he could see his erstwhile client now.

Kylo grimaced as he remembered the pompous tailor, the antics of whom were downright absurd in contrast to what had transpired at the masquerade. The danger lay in how easy it was to take the superficial, ostentatious Hapans for granted—beneath all that preening were routine assassinations and guns that could control people's minds and a navy capable of wiping out an entire system in a single blow.

With him in the hallway were his knights and Rey's guards, the two factions making little effort to conceal their distrust for the other. Caught in the middle of this web of suspicious glances, Kylo squinted at the chrono mounted to the wall a few feet away and heaved a sigh. "My lady," he said into the nearby intercom, "we are expected at the ballroom in five minutes—"

The doors in front of him parted with a hydraulic hiss, and he found himself on the receiving end of a crash course in shutting the hell up.

Rey's dress was dark red, almost purple, and fitted to every inch of her torso as snugly as if she'd been poured into a bottle of ruby-toned wine. The sleeves were conservative, long and fluted, the cuffs melting into rivers of red that trailed past her knees and hid her hands from view, but the neckline—oh, the neckline. It plunged low enough to display the smooth, sun-kissed ivory plane of her sternum, the sides of her breasts peaking out from finely-woven layers of lush shimmersilk shot through with ethereal gemweb everlilies that dripped down, down to her trim waist, down over her lean thighs, down to tangle in the fiery flares of her skirts. The Empress' crown was set atop a neat arrangement of glossy chestnut braids. A rueful, apologetic smile was on her red, red lips.

"Kriff."

"Sorry!" Obviously embarrassed that she'd kept the host of people outside her quarters waiting, Rey scurried out into the corridor and slipped her hand into the crook of Kylo's elbow without preamble. "I had a bit of a fashion crisis—moved too fast and ripped the other gown—"
I wouldn't mind helping you rip this one, too, Kylo thought as he led her to the turbolift at the end of the hallway. The Knights of Ren and the Hapan guards and ladies hurried after them, but Kylo's pace was swift and sure. He all but pulled his wife into the turbolift, the doors closing before any of their respective entourages could join them.

Rey's apologetic smile, which had faded into one of confusion within the past several seconds, bloomed into a full-on mischievous grin as they began the descent. Kylo was all too happy to press his lips to that grin as he backed her up against the wall, her hands carelessly knocking his own ceremonial crown askew so that she could run her fingers through his hair.

While he had grown to utterly adore all the different ways Rey kissed him, this was his favorite—when she did it like she was starving, like it was the last thing she would ever do, her tongue delving boldly into his mouth and her teeth catching on his bottom lip. They were four levels away from the ballroom area when she twisted her head away to gasp for air; he bent down further, first to nibble gently at the invitingly bare slope of her neck, and then to dip his nose into the valley between her breasts, sparing a few precious seconds to nuzzle contentedly, inhaling her sweet, wild scent.

"Force," he groaned into her skin, roughly palming one breast as his lips dotted a trail of kisses towards the other, "I came on these last night."

"I might let you do it again sometime," Rey said breathlessly, "if you're very, very good—oh, Ben—yes, like that—" She threw her head back, whimpering as his mouth latched onto her nipple, sucking hard through the thin fabric of her bodice. His hips slotted against hers, grinding his growing arousal into her belly—

—and the turbolift slowed down, coasting to a stop—

Kylo had enough presence of mind left to slam a heavy hand on the button that prevented the doors from opening. Rey worked fast, fixing her dress, rearranging the crown on his head, rubbing away the smudges of her lipstick from his mouth.

"Give me a few more minutes," Kylo grumbled, glancing down at the bulge in his trousers.

"Same," Rey quipped, gesturing to the prominent, silken outline of her hardened nipples.

They regarded each other in silence for a while, the only sound filling the cabin that of breathing patterns being coaxed into a semblance of regularity. It was Rey who cracked first; the line of her
mouth trembled open in a burst of laughter, her slim shoulders shaking as she burrowed her face in Kylo's shirtfront. After a while, he laughed, too, soft but genuine, wrapping his free arm around her waist.

Oh, this happiness. He had no right to it, even as it pierced his heart and he let it unfold.

"Ready?" he asked when they'd quieted once more, his lips brushing against her temple.

Rey nodded, stifling one last giggle into his robes. Kylo released the button, the turbolift doors parted, and, together, the imperial couple stepped out into the ballroom of the Citadel.

Isolder of Hapes was crying, fists clenched at his sides, tears streaming down his face. The Queen Mother looked on from the white throne, unmoving.

"I deemed it necessary at the time, my son."

Ta'a Chume had no equal and, thus, she would not apologize. If there was a part of her that wished she could, it was hidden away, buried underneath years and years of duty.

"Kalen knew," Isolder said in little more than a whisper, his gaze cast to the side as if fixated on ghosts that had sprung up in the far corners of the room. "He knew and he tried to tell me, and I would not listen."

"Isolder—" Ta'a Chume started to say, but she was interrupted by a bitter laugh. The kind of laugh that could only come from a man who had witnessed the very depths of some insurmountable horror and would surface from it forever changed.

"There is a part of me that is unsurprised by this. Which, I suppose, is as scintillating an indictment of your character as any. But then what does that make me?" He was so soft-spoken, even in his anger. Always her softer child. "For more than a decade I've shied away from what I suspected to be true, all out of some misplaced sense of loyalty. And fear. Fear because—" Isolder swallowed. "Because no matter what else you are, you are still my mother, and I did not want it to be true. I was a blind and I was a coward, and I let you sink your claws into my daughter sixteen years after you murdered my wife."
Ta'a Chume remained silent. Watched her son's tears fall. Met his eyes as they snapped to her at last, burning with revulsion and with sorrow.

"I hope Rey never comes back," he spat. "She deserves better than us."

"She has to come back," the Queen Mother tonelessly replied. "She is She Who Will Come After, and she will come after me."

"Certainly a fine web you've spun." The prince's shoulders slumped in resignation. "I have accompanied you on this tour every year for as long as I can remember. Ever has it been my duty. But, this time, I want to make it absolutely clear that I am only doing this to ascertain for myself that the former Heritage Council territories have been adequately neutralized. I am doing this to protect my daughter's birthright— if she still desires it. I will make it clear to her that she has a choice in the matter, as was Teneniel's wish."

"Kira ran out of choices a long time ago," said Ta'a Chume. "As did I."

Isolder shook his head wearily. "One can always choose to be a good person, Ereneda. You never have." He turned to leave the room. "And you never will. Not if it stands in the way of getting what you want."

Chapter End Notes

Murrih tisane.

Denuma sandwich.

Ryshcate.

Hot chocolate has a longer Wookieepedia article than some planets, and that amuses me to no end.

Rynmar Trail.

Rey's gown is based on this Valdrin Sahiti called to my attention by ReyloWarrior and audreyfan4ever.

Many thanks to mnemehoshiko for her input on the Ta'a Chume and Isolder bits!
Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

Narrator voice: She was not, in fact, able to find time to catch up on comments. I'm sorry! I've been focusing on writing because the end is like... so near and yet so far xD This installment was supposed to be so much longer but I ran into some pacing issues. I definitely think we might end at 65 instead of 60, but I'll let you guys know for sure at around Chapter 56 or thereabouts. Massive thanks to ReyloRobyn2011, hi_raeth, and Anonym1989 for their inputs on this update! I would never have been able to post so (relatively) soon without their help and, of course, the encouragement of my darling readers. THAT'S YOU! :*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Knights of Ren, the Hapan *Chume'doro*, and the ladies-in-waiting had stopped in their tracks and were now staring, dumbfounded, at the turbolift doors that had slammed shut before any of them could follow the Emperor and the Empress inside. Buttons lit up one by one, tracking the imperial couple's descent to the ballroom level, and a handful of seconds passed in awkward silence as the entourages who had been so *unceremoniously* left behind tried valiantly to pretend that they hadn't just seen Kylo Ren struck speechless at the sight of his wife and then all but *haul* her into the nearest private space like a randy bantha.

The button for the ballroom level remained illuminated for a worryingly long while before the turbolift embarked on its ascent once more.

"I am *not* going in there," Meridia said loudly.

"Not until a cleaning droid disinfects every inch first," Mephala added, just as loudly.

The twins had given voice to what everyone else was thinking, but Niobe rolled her eyes. "I assure you, *that was hardly* enough time for Their Majesties to carry out their activities to their liking." She exchanged baleful, haunted glances with the other ladies. "*Believe* me," she continued with a delicate shudder.

Moreem Espara, who took her duty as the leader of the *Chume'da*'s Royal Guard and all the loyalty and decorum that required very seriously, was compelled to speak up. "I do not think it seemly for us to speculate on the length—" Clavicus and Jyggalag sniggered, and the major gritted her teeth— "of time, or any other aspect pertaining to Their Majesties' private affairs."
"Besides," Vanya piped up, "they are newlyweds."

"It's only been two months, hasn't it?" sighed Hircine.

"Don't remind me," growled Boethiah. The turbolift doors slid open and she shook her head as the ladies-in-waiting shrieked and shoved one another playfully to determine who would be the first to enter. "I feel like I've aged a decade since that blasted wedding."

* 

Given all previous examples of First Order aesthetic that she'd borne witness to thus far, Rey wasn't surprised that the party decorations consisted of nothing more than red-and-black banners lining the gray walls from ceiling to floor, crisp and ubiquitous, stamped with the insignia of the sixteen-rayed sun that always made her think of bear traps and sarlacc's jaws before anything else. There were no floral arrangements, no crystal sculptures, no blazing chandeliers; the dance floor was little more than an afterthought, a space cleared between the cocktail tables and the buffet. Most of the attendees were in military dress uniform but quite a few had by their side men and women in civilian formal attire; spouses, Rey guessed, or otherwise— during the war, Resistance agents had occasionally infiltrated similar affairs, and hiring a drop-dead gorgeous escort to accessorize one's arm for the evening was part of the culture. Server droids wove through the crowd, keeping the Hapan gold at a steady flow.

There was a band, and Kylo and Rey's entrance was heralded with an abrupt pause in the music as the party-goers who were sitting down stood at attention along with those who'd already been on their feet. Admiral Daala stepped forward and spoke to Kylo in hushed tones; he nodded, lightly brushed the hand of his unoccupied arm over Rey's fingers that were curled at his elbow, and then led her to the group of Ter Abbes delegates that Daala summarily ushered them towards. The music started up again as Rey took a deep breath and pasted on the polite, neutral expression she had learned in Hapes, and she approached the guests on her husband's arm, on the swell of violins.

"Emperor," they murmured, bowing their heads. "Empress."

* 

For the most part, the Ter Abbes delegation was cordial, their gratitude to the First Order for the successful peace talks evident— and their fascination with the Hapes Consortium even more so.
"They say that the streets of Ta'a Chume'Dan are lined with gold and the Queen Mother bathes in mesa goat's milk twice a day to retain her eternal youth and beauty—"

"Empress, is it true that your people have developed a rose cultivar the petals of which are pure diamond—"

"I hear tell that dragons lair in the mountain caves of Hapes, and the royal family can speak to them —"

Rey did her best to field the rumors and inquiries, careful to conceal her mirth at the more outlandish ones. She did manage to get in a subtle quip about how rapidly gold and diamonds would devalue if they grew on trees— or streets and roses, as it were— and, beside her, Kylo snorted behind the rim of the glass of lemon water that he was nursing.

One of the Ter Abbes officials, a portly man by the name of Dei Lysscol, seemed to be giving the Emperor as much of the evil eye as he could get away with. Rey waited until she and Kylo had drifted away to mingle with other attendees before asking what that was about.

To her great surprise, a faint pink flush crept up the inch of bare neck that her husband's collar exposed. "There may have been a slight breakdown in negotiations."

"How so?" Rey prodded.

Kylo was suddenly very interested in his cuff-links. "Lysscol and I disagreed on the urgency of my exit, and the diplomacy of the manner in which I resolved it left much to be desired."

She was no fool. She knew his darkness well. She'd seen the look in his eyes outside the cabin on the Druadach, surrounded by the bodies of men he'd killed for her. It didn't bother her as much as it should have— in all honesty, it was strangely exhilarating, to be fought for with such fierceness.

Yes, Rey was no fool. She knew that she carried some of that darkness, too.

Before she could say anything in response, a quartet of officers approached to pay their respects and Kylo took it upon himself to make the introductions. There was a gaunt, brown-haired captain named Sibos Tammis, whose prominent cheekbones gave his skull a lantern-like appearance; there was Colonel Kaplan, whose gray-eyed gaze was bewilderingly cold until Rey learned that he served on
the Finalizer, which meant that she and Finn and Poe had made his life hell during the war; there was Captain Moden Canady of the Fulminatrix, the Mandator IV-class Siege Dreadnought that had made Rey and Finn and Poe’s lives hell during the war; and, finally, there was Nartano Rourke, whose unassuming appearance belied the fact that he was head of the tech division, responsible for all the advancements that had given the First Order their brutal edge.

Speaking with Tammis and Rourke was not a problem but, with Canady and Kaplan, Rey had to struggle not to glare.

"Ah, Empress Djo," Canady said in extraordinarily dry tones, "what a joy for us to be formally introduced, at long last."

"The pleasure is all mine, Captain," Rey said stiffly.

Canady nodded, and—That's that, she thought, with no small amount of relief.

"Your Majesties."

Kylo and Rey turned around.

Ephin Sarreti was smiling at them, chest puffed out, graying hair slicked back. At his side was one of the most beautiful women Rey had ever seen—beautiful enough to give the Hapans a run for their money. She was taller than Rey and appeared to be in her early fifties, with large blue eyes, full lips painted a deep amethyst shade, and a white streak running through her tousled dark hair. Her figure curved like an hourglass wrapped in a slinky black gown that provided, along with the matching evening gloves, a dramatic contrast to her smooth porcelain skin.

Kylo tensed at the sight of her. Rey felt the muscles of his arm coil beneath her fingertips at the same time that a flare of—disbelief, panic, fury—crackled through his Force signature before he barred his mind from her senses. She turned her head to blink up at him, confused; his features were frozen in profile, as good as any mask.

"May I introduce," drawled Sarreti, "Madame Lota of Belsavis."

Madame Lota inclined her head graciously. "It is an honor to make Her Majesty's acquaintance," she said to Rey. Her voice was low-pitched and sensual, like smoke. "We hold the Consortium in high
"Yes," Rey confirmed. "In Hapes, women keep their surnames after marriage, and children take the mother's name."

"I don't suppose you're accepting citizenship applications," Madame Lota said wistfully, waiting until Rey chuckled before her sapphire gaze swiveled to Kylo. "The good Emperor and I have already met, of course."

Rey heard a swift intake of breath from behind her. She glanced over her shoulder to see Tammis, Rourke, and Kaplan watching the exchange with something like trepidation, while Canday scowled as if his wine had suddenly turned to vinegar.

"Truly, Madame?" Sarreti leaned forward, looking for all the world like he was about to indulge in a delicious secret. "A most excellent coincidence! May I inquire as to the details?"

A nerve spasmed in the hollow beneath Kylo's eye. "I went to Belsavis on First Order business," he gritted out.

Madame Lota's amethyst lips stretched into a smile. "Yes, business," she crooned, and something about this moment made Rey feel as if she'd been plunged into an ice bath.

Kylo shook his elbow free of Rey's grasp and closed his gloved fingers around her upper arm, pulling her away from Sarreti and Madame Lota and the rest of them without another word. She looked back just in time to see Madame Lota's mouth moving as if she were making a quip to the men, who all burst into uproarious laughter—except for Canady, who merely shook his head in disgust and stalked off.

"What..." Rey's voice trembled for some reason she couldn't understand. She swallowed the lump in her throat and tried again. "What was that?" she asked Kylo as he steered her towards the opposite end of the hall. "What sort of business—"

"It's nothing," Kylo snapped. "It's over and done with."

The fact that she nearly flinched at his brusque tone made her see red. It was too much on top of everything else that had happened these past few days, up to the encounter with Sarreti and Madame
Lota that had left her feeling inexplicably vulnerable. She hardly recognized herself as this person who would even entertain the prospect of quavering at harsh words from somebody else.

Kylo had told her that he wasn't a doormat. Well, neither am I, Rey decided with a hot surge of indignation.

She dug in her heels, stopping Kylo in his tracks, forcing him to look at her. She raised an eyebrow, staring him down.

It took him a few seconds to relax his grip on her arm. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I didn't mean to snap."

That was all he said. He offered no further information on the nature of his business on Belsavis. That was all she would get for now. Her instincts cried out that something was still amiss, but they were in the middle of a crowded ballroom, several pairs of eyes already darting over to their little scene. Kylo's own eyes were lowered to the floor, to hide the misery that only she in her close proximity to him could spot. He gave every indication of wanting to be anywhere but here, and all of a sudden she felt the same.

But they were the Emperor and the Empress. They had to be here. They had to carry out their roles.

Rey drew herself up to her full height, Kylo's gaze flickering back to her at the slight movement. She nodded in calm acceptance of his apology, and then took his arm again and let him escort her to another group of First Order officers and Ter Abbes delegates alike.

Eventually it was time for dinner and, much to Rey's chagrin, she and Kylo were sharing a table with some members of High Command, Gilad Pellaeon directly to her left. She should have reviewed the seating arrangements—it had quite fled her mind without Lairelosse around to harp on the importance of such details—but it was too late to do anything about it now.

After pulling Rey's chair out for her and seeing her comfortably seated—his hand lingering on the round of her shoulder with affection or contrition, or perhaps a mix of both—Kylo headed for the podium, along with Daala and a couple of representatives from Ter Abbes. The band stopped playing, and the speeches began.
At first, Rey listened with all the solemn respect and gravity that was due, but the Ter Abbes official who spoke first was astonishingly long-winded. Most of the audience's eyes started to glaze over at around the fifteen-minute mark, Rey's included, and it was with something like relief that she turned to Pellaeon when he coughed discreetly from beside her.

"How is Her Majesty enjoying the ball?"

"I'm having a lovely time, Admiral," Rey lied through her teeth. "And yourself?"

"It's tolerable," said Pellaeon. "Consortium events are far grander, of course. We still talk about your wedding, but you have brought a little of that glamor with you and, for that, we are much obliged." He tapped his wineglass, filled with the gleaming Hapan gold that had been delivered from Alqualonde. "Still, this ball does have its merits. A colorful roster of attendees, wouldn't you say?"

"I suppose," Rey cautiously agreed, wondering what he was getting at. And why he was being so pleasant after that unmitigated disaster of a council meeting.

"Madame Lota even saw fit to make it all the way out here from Belsavis," Pellaeon continued, gesturing at the next table.

There was a smattering of polite applause as the first speaker wrapped up his speech and introduced his colleague. This time, Rey didn't even bother with an initial pretense of listening, as she saw her chance to get to the bottom of the confusing encounter from earlier. "You know Madame Lota, Admiral?"

"Oh, yes." Pellaeon's answering smirk had an edge to it that set off the warning bells in Rey's head. "An extremely wealthy woman, and powerful in her own right. She has Belsavis in the palm of her hand. While I cannot lay claim to ever having availed of its services, I hear it's a fine establishment she runs. She started on Spaceport Row and worked hard until she was able to transfer her girls to an upscale district more befitting of their charms, and now they serve only the most exclusive clientèle."

And, just like that, Rey knew. She knew and, because she was her father's daughter, she fled from the knowledge, her heart slamming against her ribcage with every racing beat as she quickly turned away from Pellaeon. At the front of the room, Daala was speaking— when had she taken the stage? — and her voice was faint over the ringing in Rey's ears. Another ripple of applause, Daala introducing the Emperor, people rising to their feet, holding wineglasses at the ready for the toast, Kylo stepping up to the podium— Rey didn't remember standing along with the other attendees, but her body must have operated on autopilot while her mind tried to hold itself together—
"Quite the institution, Madame Lota's House of Flowers," Pellaeon remarked from worlds away. "Finest pleasure palace in the Ninth Quadrant."

Inside Rey's chest, something cracked. Into messy halves, the jagged, splintered edges scraping at her soul. She'd already known, and yet hearing it confirmed aloud made it more difficult to breathe with each second that passed. Kylo was now speaking but, as with Daala, Rey couldn't make out his words over the roar of an anguish so fierce that it numbed and burned her at the same time. She replayed the encounter with Madame Lota in her head, how the woman had smiled, how Tammis, Rourke, Kaplan, and Sarreti had laughed...

Humiliation set in, striking worse than it had when Kylo chastised her at the morning council. He'd lied to her in front of Madame Lota and his officers. He'd made her look like a fool. He had lain with others before their marriage, which she could hardly hold against him, but what about—what about afterwards? There'd been that month of radio silence before she invited him to Alqualonde, then the few days they'd been separated before Wodan. It was possible. Who was she to say?

But...

*I have no right to be mad.* The realization brought with it a wave of pain sharpened by a resigned sort of helplessness. *I'm lying to him, too. I went into this knowing full well that I would betray him.*

*I deserve this.*

Tears sprung to Rey's eyes, but she refused to let them fall. She was still the *Chume'da*, she was still the Empress, and she would not break down in this First Order ballroom. Teneniel Djo had gone through worse than this, had faced a hostile court with teeth bared and eyes flashing, had fought until the bitter end.

*I am my father's daughter,* Rey thought as Kylo proposed a toast welcoming a reunified Ter Abbes into the Empire's fold, *but I am also my mother's child.*

She raised her glass along with the rest, and she did not cry.
Rey had no idea how she managed to get through dinner. How she was able to force down her food, speak when spoken to without screaming, and refrain from cringing every time Kylo glanced at her or when some part of his broad frame brushed against hers in the small space. He reached out once, in a bid to peer past her mental walls, and it was with no small amount of vindictiveness that she closed her mind to him, remembering how he'd done the same earlier.

He did not try again.

Still, he was obviously aware that something was wrong. Perhaps she was as transparent to him as she'd thought he was to her, before all this. Before he became a man who also kept his secrets. It was a taste of her own medicine, really, and it was all the more bitter because it was justified.

_I want to go home_. The notion dug into Rey and would not relinquish its grip all throughout what passed for dinnertime conversation at their table— talk of sectors that needed to be brought to heel, disparaging remarks about the former Republic, high praises for the Empire past and present. Rey bit her tongue into silence, not just because the simple act of maintaining her composure was sapping all the fight she had left, but also for the sake of not blowing her cover. She needed freedom of movement within the Citadel, and it would be a mistake to continue jeopardizing that after the council meeting where she'd been caught off-guard.

_I want to go home_. Not to Hapes, where they'd killed her mother and had plotted to kill her, but to her friends, wherever they were. What existed between her and Kylo had been a balm to her loneliness, but now she couldn't even take refuge in that— or hide behind it, to be more accurate. It ate at her, this sudden, soul-deep need to be with people she could trust and who, in turn, she was not secretly sworn to betray.

After dinner came dancing, more drinking, more socializing. Rey did none of these things, waiting instead until Kylo was embroiled in conversation with some Ter Abbes delegates to excuse herself and slip out onto one of the adjacent balconies. Only his gaze followed her— she was all too aware that he needed to keep up appearances, and he'd already walked out on the people of Ter Abbes once. That would probably buy her enough time to get some fresh air and marshal her remaining strength for the rest of the night.

The ladies-in-waiting— who were never far from Rey's orbit even though they had sat with the junior officers during dinner and were now surrounded by starstruck admirers who jumped to cater to their every whim— made to accompany her out of the main ballroom, but Rey shook her head as she passed them by. The girls deserved a night off and, in any case, she wanted to be alone.

Unfortunately, the balcony was already occupied.
Rey frowned at the slender, cloaked silhouette lurking in the shadows, just out of reach of the light spilling from the open doors.

"Tired of schmoozing, Your Majestyness?" Boethiah asked, sounding bored as usual. Sounding like she'd be filing her nails if it weren't for the fact that her hands were encased in gauntlets.

"Could you go stand guard somewhere else?" Rey asked. "I'm really not in the mood."

"This is my post," said Boethiah. "If you have a problem with that, you can bring it up with Lord Ren—"

In Rey's anxious, vulnerable state, it was all too easy to remember what happened the last time she'd clashed with the Knights of Ren— with Meridia and Mephala, to be exact. On the Heresiarch, and Kylo telling her that she had no power over them. How had she let herself forget that? How could she have so thoroughly labored under the delusion that things had changed? "Well, of course he's going to back you up," Rey spat at Boethiah, her tone dripping with contempt. "You darksiders stick together, after all—"

Boethiah pushed off from the wall she'd been leaning against and cornered Rey in a flash, backing her up against the balcony railing. "Don't talk about him like that." The words were a guttural, vocoded snarl, moonlight glinting off a blank obsidian helm. "You weren't there on that night— you didn't see—" It was clear that Boethiah was referring to the night Luke Skywalker had almost killed his nephew, judging from the way her Force signature shook with terrible rage before it warped into a sardonic bite— "and, with all due respect, Chume'da, for someone so smart you sure don't understand just how far Lord Ren is willing to go for your sanctimonious ass, even though it would be so much easier for him to throw you to the wolves."

Rey narrowed her eyes at the other woman. "What are you—"

"Why do you think Snoke hasn't sent for you yet?" Boethiah savagely interrupted. "Do you even know what it takes to hold that old bag off like that? Lord Ren is protecting you, he has cast aside an empire's worth of responsibilities for you, he has placed himself at his master's mercy for you. The absolute least you could do is have the decency to respect that, and to stop asking him to kneel when he's already crawling!"

Rey looked away. She had no idea how to deal with this right now, no idea how to parse any of it. Boethiah, in turn, had no idea what had happened in the ballroom. It was all just too much, and Rey wasn't going to make it—
No. She had to.

She couldn't bring herself to meet Boethiah's gaze again, but at least she was able to smooth her features into something unaffected, something resolute. It didn't seem to work, however; the knight studied Rey for a long, long time, before finally taking a step back.

"I don't get paid enough for this," Boethiah muttered under her breath as she spun on her heel and left the balcony.

Chapter End Notes

Mesa goat.

Sibos Tammis.

Colonel Kaplan.

Moden Canady.

Madame Lota's House of Flowers.

Spaceport Row.

Belsavis.

Ninth Quadrant.

Special shout-out to Cherrymaja who called the brothel plot point coming back into play sdfsghdf
Chapter Notes

Thank you, dear readers, for all the encouraging comments, and much love to uncawanwo for this beautiful moodboard, kayurka for another glorious masterpiece of a fanart, and maggienhawk for commissioning this exquisite piece from reylocaligraphy and framing it in their home. I'm so honored!

For this installment, a special shout-out is in order to everyone who participated in my Twitter poll when I went full Libra and couldn't decide what scents to use (don't worry, vanilla warriors, I gave you rights xD), and it was pepparmint who reminded me of the amazing perfume that is Velvet Rose & Oud by Jo Malone. *chef kisses*

I hope you guys like this chapter, and please do comment if so moved! The motivation is much needed and highly appreciated! ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He was going to flay Sarreti alive.

Not that he could actually do that— aside from commanding the fourth largest fleet in the First Order navy and being an influential member of the Imperial old guard, Ephin Sarreti was also one of Snoke's pet favorites, which served as more than adequate license for him to do whatever the hell he pleased. Add to it the fact that Kylo had no irrefutable evidence that Sarreti had brought Madame Lota to the ball to antagonize him on purpose— and the shrewd proprietress must have been paid an exorbitant sum, for her to throw discretion to the wind like that—

Still, fantasizing about the man's slow and painful death was cathartic, in its own way. It was also, at the moment, the only thing keeping Kylo from causing another diplomatic crisis by bashing someone's teeth in during the ball that was held specifically to celebrate a hard-won peace.

Anyone's teeth would do. He wasn't very particular, although he wouldn't exactly complain if it were Sarreti's.

Kylo pushed his anger down, recognizing it for what it was— a mental smokescreen to distract from the guilt and panic that had been threatening to overwhelm him since he turned around and saw Madame Lota standing there, on Sarreti's arm. It wasn't a blast from the past— it was a goddamn concussion missile, and he hadn't known what else to do except spout the first lie that came to mind, snapping at Rey when she pressed him for details.
He couldn't shake it from his memory, how she'd tensed as if stopping herself from flinching at his harsh tone. How she'd silently accepted his apology with a grace that he didn't deserve.

He had to make it up to her. She'd already been through so much; he'd brought her to Coruscant to protect her, to make sure she wouldn't get hurt again, but he was doing a piss-poor job. He had to tell her the truth, set things to rights— but she'd been skittish all throughout the meal, perhaps due to his burst of temper, and then she'd gone off to the balcony. It was very likely that she would resent his intrusion and things would only get worse between them.

As he stood there, paralyzed with indecision and not hearing a single word of the amusing anecdote that one of the more loquacious Ter Abbes delegates was currently relaying to their circle, Boethiah materialized beside him.

"The Empress is on the balcony, my lord," she said in low tones so as not to be overheard by the nearby guests.

Kylo frowned. "You left her there unguarded?"

"Three Chume'doro are stationed right below while the rest have eyes on her from the other balconies," Boethiah pointed out. "She also told me in no uncertain terms that she wished to be alone. But I think you should talk to her."

Boethiah wasn't the type to stick her nose into other people's business, so the situation had to be more dire than Kylo previously assumed. The guilt rose up again, stronger now, and he left for the balcony without another word.

* *

The guests that Kylo had been conversing with—or who, to be more accurate, had been conversing around him—watched his rude exit with some confusion before their gazes flickered to Boethiah for answers.

"Sorry, your honors," the knight drawled. "The Emperor's got some peace talks of his own to attend to."
Rey clutched the balcony railing, pressing her fingertips to the cold, smooth metal. The night spread out below her feet, a still, dark sea, although the nearest buildings reflected the glow emanating from the Citadel, which was all lit up for the occasion.

She'd closed the balcony doors with a flick of her wrist in order to block out the music and the chatter coming from the ballroom but, a few minutes after Boethiah left, that wave of sound washed over her when the doors opened once more. Rey didn't turn around, not as the noises of the party were muffled yet again following the familiar hiss of metal panels sliding shut, not as she felt Kylo's tentative approach, not as he stopped directly behind her, a veritable brick wall of solid heat at her back.

"Rey," he murmured, almost in her ear.

A fierce pang shot through her with an intensity that took her breath away. How many women's names had he said like this, pitched low and rough and intimate? Had they been as beautiful as Madame Lota? Had he slept with her, too? Each silent question that Rey tortured herself with was like a knife slipping between the ribs and, dear stars, why did it hurt so much? How could something fill her with so much pain that her lungs might as well have been fashioned from broken glass?

"I just need a few more minutes." It was a miracle, really, how composed she managed to sound—self-assured and nothing at all like some lost, foolish girl wondering if her husband had been unfaithful. "Just getting some fresh air."

She couldn't tell whether he believed her or not. Her mental shields were raised so high that she couldn't read his Force signature at all.

"If you're not feeling well—" His voice was careful and strained, effectively confirming that she was a bad liar, and now she had no idea whether he was playing along for her sake or his own—" we can leave early."

"No, we can't," Rey scoffed, all too aware that the Ter Abbes delegation would view a premature exit as an insult.

"We can," Kylo insisted. "If you want to leave, then we'll leave."

"For someone so smart you sure don't understand just how far Lord Ren is willing to go for your"
"sanctimonious ass," Boethiah had said. And although Rey had belatedly mustered enough inner equilibrium to take offense at that last bit, the overall sentiment wormed its way through her hurt, echoed by Kylo's words to her just now and giving her something to cling to. "He has cast aside an empire's worth of responsibilities for you." And that seemed like it would soon include the responsibility to maintain this newfound diplomatic relationship with Ter Abbes—all because he was concerned about her.

She owed it to him to say what was on her mind, even if the outcome were to end up being what she feared.

Perhaps what she feared most.

She turned around to face him, tilting her chin up so that she could look into his eyes—those lovely dark eyes, flecked silver by starlight, the eyes that she once thought had only ever burned for her and her alone. In hindsight, it had been naive of her to project her own lack of experience on him. They'd never talked about it but of course he had lain with others, it was so obvious now—he knew what he was doing in bed while she just—just always muddled through, clumsy and hesitant and with no hope of ever comparing to women like Madame Lota—

"Just tell me one thing." Her voice cracked but she stubbornly pushed on. She'd decided to do this and she would see it through until the bitter end. She knew no other way to live. "Did—did you go to the House of Flowers after we were married?"

Kylo went pale, tensing as if he'd forgotten how to breathe, swallowing as he realized he'd been caught in his lie. But she couldn't—wouldn't—be mad at him for lying. She'd been doing the same since day one. Come to think of it, she had no right to take him to task for betraying his vows to her, either. Not when she was also going to betray him in the end, like she'd always known she would have to.

"I understand why you didn't tell the truth in front of all those people," Rey said as calmly as she could manage, her gaze fixed on Kylo's features, deathly still save for the odd tremor here and there—beneath the eye, at the corner of the mouth. Although, his stillness was in its own way telling; it was as if he believed that one false move could mean the end of all things. Or maybe she was just projecting again. "That was an impossible situation Sarreti put you in. I just—I think it would be good to clear the air. I know ours isn't a conventional marriage and you did tell me that first day in Alqualonde that our arrangement could be purely physical—" She hadn't even known she remembered his words from back then until they spilled from her mouth in paraphrase, unearthing shards of doubt that had been lodged deep in her heart, and she started to speak quickly, without thinking, speaking solely so that such an act would drown out the jagged current of this fresh pain—"and, really, it's all right, you said you wouldn't expect anything else from me and it's my fault for—"
for not affording you the same courtesy, kind of—"

Oh, *bother*, she was crying. She was crying and not making any sense, his face swimming before her blurry vision in a puddle of shadowed angles and ivory skin. "You're not obligated to me in any way —" And he really wasn't, even the Consortium itself took a somewhat dim view of monogamy, but she'd hoped, *oh*, how she'd hoped, that she would have been enough — "but I— I would truly like to know, so that I can comport myself properly, going forward— although I'm not as comfortable with it as I probably should be—"

A large, heavy hand clamped around her hip at the same time that its partner pressed into the small of her back, and before she knew it she'd been hauled up against Kylo's broad chest, crushed tight in his embrace as he buried his face in the crook where her neck met her shoulder.

How strange, she thought distantly, that she was the one sobbing but he shook like a leaf in the wind, even as he held her with seemingly no intention of ever letting go.

"I have not been with anyone else since the day I saw you again in Ta'a Chume'Dan." The words were mumbled yet urgent, etched into her bones with every movement of his lips. "I have never even *entertained* the thought of it. Not once. Even before we— consummated, I did not wish to be the kind of man who would dishonor his betrothed or his wife. And after—" He raised his head, gazing down at her so that she could see each and every flicker of emotion that crossed his starkly handsome face. "After our first time, I knew that there could never be anyone else for me." His fingers dug into her hip. "No one but you, Rey," he promised softly. "Until my last breath, and in the life after. I swear it."

It was both relief and fear that made her sob even harder in his arms. Relief that he hadn't cheated, and fear because— because she didn't *deserve* his devotion. Not in the face of what she was sworn to do in the end. She collapsed against him, wetting his shirtfront with her tears, wishing she could— spin this scene out, make it last forever, or, failing that, take him with her to the nearest ship, fly them both to the very edges of the galaxy, beyond the Empire, beyond the Resistance, beyond Hapes, beyond Snoke.

"Don't cry," Kylo pleaded, scattering desperate kisses on her hair and her temple, each one fiercely tender but also somehow a sledgehammer blow to her heart. "Please, *cyar'i ka*, I hate it when you cry —"

*I have to tell him*, Rey thought frantically. *About the Resistance, about all of it. We'll figure it out together, we'll get rid of Snoke, we'll negotiate with General Organa— we will survive this, me and him—*
She pulled back to look at Kylo, her secret already on the tip of her tongue. "Ben," she croaked, "there's something I—"

The doors opened, and the party's jovial roar hit like a ton of bricks, shattering the moment as Natasi Daala strode out onto the balcony.

Rey panicked. She couldn't let anyone, least of all a First Order admiral, see her like this, tear-stained and broken. She made to turn away but Kylo's leather-clad palm cupped the back of her head, gently pushing until she was once more snuffling against his chest. He angled his body towards Daala, careful to shield Rey's expression from view.

"What is it?" he snapped at the officer, sounding impatient and annoyed as Rey listened numbly to his heartbeat racing against her cheek, her eyes closed in the warm, dark safety he provided.

If Daala was at all surprised to find the Emperor and the Empress locked in an embrace, she masterfully kept it to herself, stopping at a respectable distance from them and addressing Kylo in a clipped, professional manner. "Your Majesty, I apologize for the intrusion but we have just received a high-priority communique from the Braxant sector."

"Braxant?" Kylo repeated, sounding even more annoyed. "Has Disra deigned to speak to us lesser mortals at long last? He had better have a good reason for skipping out on the morning council and on this event."

"I would say that he has an excellent reason," Daala said humorlessly. "Commodore Vilim Disra is dead. His body was salvaged from a canal on Bastion fifteen minutes ago."

* *

One by one, with military precision despite hours of free-flowing Hapan gold, the members of First Order High Command filed into the conference room with the party still in full swing one level below. They had to make this quick or else the guests would start getting restless, so Kosimo Westermal took it upon himself to dispense with the pleasantries, asking Kylo point-blank, "Do we know who did it, Your Majesty?"

"Not yet," Kylo tersely replied. "Captain Rook, I'm putting you in charge of the investigation. Leave for Bastion within the hour—and assume command of the Braxant sector while you're at it."
Rook gave a brisk nod. "I shall carry out my duties to the best of my ability, Emperor Ren."

"Surely Commodore Disra's second—" Hux started to protest, but Kylo silenced him with a glare.

"Would that Jair Montag's competence rivaled his ambition but, alas, it does not," Kylo said. "The only time he was successful in keeping track of his superior was when sanitation droids found Disra floating in a canal with a crushed windpipe. No, Rook will be the one to take over."

"The investigation is a mere formality, of course," Pellaeon opined. "We all know who's behind this. It seems that the Resistance is finally making its move."

"And why would their opening salvo be the assassination of a commodore stationed in the Outer Rim?" Daala countered. "You give Organa far too little credit. It's true that she and Disra were old enemies, but she would never consider his demise worth putting the rest of us on alert."

"We should all be on alert," Admiral Siralt muttered darkly. "That might be the Resistance's plan—to pick us off one after the other."

Unease rippled through the rest of High Command. Hux spoke once more. "Our path is clear, Emperor Ren. The Enhanced Security Decree must be implemented as soon as possible. We've put it off long enough, and Disra paid for it with his life." He held Kylo's gaze with an air of resolute challenge as nods of agreement bloomed all around them. "The time for mercy is over. We must strike fear."

* *

Rey absconded from the ball as soon as it was polite to do so, claiming a headache. Kylo hadn't returned from his emergency meeting yet and so she left a message with Captain Canady who, despite his perennially sour demeanor, promised that he would let the Emperor know, regarding her with a trace of sympathy that would have made her hackles rise in self-defense if she'd had any energy left.

She was so drained by the time she returned to her quarters, her mouth aching from false smiles, that she didn't protest when Eslí and Sayl—the two ladies who had sleepily seized the opportunity to make their exit as well—drew her a hot bath in the enormous crystalline granite tub. The Citadel didn't have much in the way of bubble baths or therapeutic oils, but the freighter from Alqualonde had brought with it, at the ladies' request upon seeing the dismal state of their room, some floral
arrangements and scented candles. And so it was that Sayl lit the wicks and Esli sprinkled rose petals on the water before they, at Rey's insistence, went off to bed.

Once she was alone, her hair pinned up and the scent of vanilla, roses, and agarwood wafting in the air, Rey closed her eyes, sinking into the tub until she was submerged from the neck down. Warmth and fragrance unfolding all around her, she slowly began to drift off—

— And was startled awake by the door bursting open.

The door on Kylo's side of their shared 'fresher.

He had divested himself of much of his ceremonial attire. He stood there in shirtsleeves and black trousers, lips parting wordlessly at the sight of her in the tub, laying back amidst a swirl of red petals, veiled in candlelight.

She stared back at him, surprised and slightly embarrassed, and after a while he cleared his throat. "Canady said you had a headache. I'd planned to go to your room, see how you were doing—" He nodded jerkily towards the opposite door— "but you're not there. Obviously."

The fact that he was clearly flustered made her smile a little. "No, I'm not," she agreed. "And I can Force-heal, in case you've forgotten."

"I haven't." Kylo sounded breathless, and Rey wondered if he was thinking about the first night she'd spent here, two months ago. "So— you're all right, then?"

She shrugged. Bathwater sloshed above her chest at the movement, scattering the rose petals. His gaze darkened and, in spite of the emotional upheaval of the last few hours, a faint throb of yearning curled low in her belly. "I just wanted to rest. Some peace and quiet. A headache seemed like the most acceptable excuse."

Now he looked stricken. Guilty. "In that case, I'll leave you to it. I apologize for the intrusion." He hesitated, swallowing. "And for what happened earlier. I should have told the truth when you asked. Again, I am sorry."

He turned to leave and she suddenly very much did not want him to go, so she blurted out, "How is the Disra situation?"
It was the wrong thing to say. She realized that almost immediately. The beginnings of a scowl marred Kylo's features as he stopped in his tracks, casting her a look that spoke volumes about the complicatedness of the entire affair.

"Disra was strangled by an unknown assailant. That's all we know for now. But if I had to guess..."

He trailed off, but the unspoken words hung in the air. Like the aroma of flowers and spice and resin.

Rey shivered despite the water that was kept at a comfortable warmth by the tub's temperature controls. Assassination wasn't the Resistance's style, but perhaps they were getting desperate. "There's no proof yet."

"There isn't." Kylo's agreement sounded more like the only small mercy he could grant her for the time being, and Rey could do nothing but thank the stroke of fortune that had made Daala interrupt them on the balcony. Tonight was not the perfect opportunity to reveal her continued involvement with the Resistance.

The silence stretched on, during which Kylo glanced from her to the door and then back again. Eventually, he squared his shoulders, as if he was nervous but had made up his mind about a particular course of action.

"May I kiss you good night?" he requested, his tone oddly formal.

Rey would never have been prepared for that question in a million years, but her reply was immediate, instinctive, falling from her lips in a rush. "You may."

* *

He approached her slowly, afraid she would spook. The combination of sweet and musky aromas wreathing the air made it difficult to think, as did her wide eyes and the tantalizing glimpses of her lithe form beneath the sea of rose petals.

Difficult to think, and easy to push aside all other concerns. Disra's murder, the Enhanced Security Decree—those were problems for another time.
For now, there was only Rey.

Kylo dropped to his knees beside the tub, unable to shake the feeling that he was supplicating to a goddess. And perhaps he was, her bare skin golden in the flickering candlelight. He curved an arm behind her wet shoulders and leaned in, slanting his mouth against hers in a kiss that was meant to be brief and chaste. However, the plan quickly went south, as always seemed to be the case with all his plans whenever Rey was involved. After what had happened at the party, the moment their lips touched was an explosion of the purest relief, a reassurance and a benediction all at once. She returned his kiss fiercely, tugging him closer by the collar, and he let himself be drawn in, a willing captive, not at all minding that she was getting water all over his shirt. His head swam with the taste of her.

Just as he was about to deepen the kiss, though, Rey suddenly stiffened and then pulled back, turning her face away. Tears had spider-webbed at the corner of her lashes; he hadn't noticed until it was too late. He gripped the edge of the tub, not knowing what was wrong, not knowing what to do.

"I know I'm not good at it, the whole kissing thing and everything else," she said curtly. From what little of her profile he could glimpse at this angle, her expression was defiant yet resigned. "I use my teeth too much and I'm clumsy and it can't be all that pleasant—"

"They all looked like you," Kylo blurted out, leaning further over the water's surface, his arm pushing at her shoulders in a frantic attempt to gather her close, to get her to turn to him.

Rey stilled. She couldn't seem to bring herself to meet his gaze just yet, but he could see her brow wrinkle in confusion.

"After Starkiller Base, during the war, you were— you consumed my thoughts. A fever I couldn't shake." He spoke rapidly, earnestly, struggling to put into words the travail of those two long years. "I wanted to make you pay— for besting me, for rejecting my offer to teach you, for being there when I— when he—" The sentence stuttered to a halt in Kylo's throat and he found himself unable to complete it. But she had to know what he meant, she had to remember that he'd looked up, into those eyes of hers that had borne witness to Han Solo's murder, as the red light dimmed and the grenades went off. "I hated you," he continued in softer tones, even though it hurt to admit, "but I stand by what I said— you were magnificent in all that snow. It was the kind of hatred that turned into obsession and, while that is normally the purview of the dark side, it was different for me. You were different. I couldn't focus, I was not centered— no matter what I did, no matter how hard I tried."

Kylo paused for breath. Rey said and did nothing, didn't even so much as move a single muscle
while waiting for him to continue. And when he did, it was with a lost boy's shame, with a doomed man's gallows-rhythms. "The Supreme Leader was angry. He told me that he expected me to do whatever it took to replenish my connection to the dark side. I held that to be the same as forgetting you. In the state I was in, I would have done anything. I did." His vision had gone suspiciously blurry at the edges; he had been unprepared for this, for how much it would ache to relive those days. "And so I went to the pleasure houses. I had never lain with anyone before then, and the only women who stirred my interest— they had brown hair like yours, eyes the same color as yours, a similar build. It took me a long time to admit, even to myself, that I chose them because they reminded me of you." He tried not to blink but of course it was a lost cause; the wetness slid down his cheek, hot and bitter along the line of his scar. "I didn't think I would ever have you," he whispered thickly. "Back then, for me, you were just a dream."

He hung his head, awaiting her judgment. He fully expected her to be angry or disdainful or repulsed — or perhaps a mixture of all three— and he couldn't blame her. It would only be what he deserved. He stared unseeing at the swirl of rose petals in the water, steeling himself to be treated with contempt. To be sent away.

Thin fingers hooked underneath his chin, coaxing his gaze upwards. Soft lips pressed to his own, gentle and rough all at once.

It felt like grace.

*]

Rey kissed her husband with a ferocity she hadn't even known she was capable of showing. The insecurity that had overcome her earlier was still there but, this time, it served to sharpen the possessiveness that was roaring through her bloodstream, set alight by Kylo's confession. Mine. The thought echoed amidst the chambers of her heart, its clamor drowning out any misgivings about their future and all nervousness at not being able to measure up to his past. He wanted to be mine from the start, he is mine now, he will be mine always.

It was apparent that her intensity had caught him off-guard. He started to draw back— whether for air or to set a new pace, she didn't know, but she was having none of it, chasing his mouth, grabbing fistfuls of his shirt at the same time that her fingers worked blindly, agitatedly, to pop open its buttons.

She managed to unfasten only a couple before impatience reared its head. "Take your clothes off," she grated out against his lips, hardly recognizing her own voice, dark and demanding as it was. She could have used the Force, like he'd done on her bodice during the hyperspace run to Coruscant, but there was something satisfying in his haste to comply as she sat back in the tub, her core clenching in anticipation as his body was revealed to her, sculpted and massive, pale skin gilded by candlelight.
Rey fully expected Kylo to clamber into the tub as soon as he finished undressing; instead, he stood there and waited, head slightly bowed, dark eyes fixed on the floor, his expression shy yet oddly determined. It slowly dawned on her that he would not move an inch until she told him to, that this was his way of making amends— giving back the control he’d wrestled from her last night.

She would be lying if she said she didn't like it.

She liked it very, very much.

He was already hard, his cock pointing towards her with an eagerness that made her blush. Even as she said, "Come here" in a tone like steel.

A shiver went through him at her command, almost imperceptible enough that it would have escaped her notice if she hadn't been scrutinizing him so closely. She tumbled into his arms the moment he joined her in the water, maneuvering him so that he was the one leaning back against the granite while she straddled his lap and kissed him until they were both breathless. She dropped her mouth to his neck, sinking her teeth into lean muscle in a way that made him cry out and instinctively buck his hips, his erection sliding against her all hot and wet as she trapped it between her thighs and rubbed herself alongside the length of it, the warm bathwater making everything floaty and slick and smell like roses. He clutched at her sides, obviously intending to lift her onto his cock, and she would have let him, she wanted to let him, but—

— But there was a part of her that demanded he never forget this night. That he never even so much as thought of those other women ever again. It was that part of her that won out, because she was from Jakku, and on Jakku—

— You fought for what was yours—

Her fingers encircled his wrists, gently but firmly pushing them away. "Keep your hands to yourself, Your Majesty."

Kylo's jaw dropped. "Rey," he groaned, staring up at her in a kind of disbelief that was tinged with no small amount of awe.

Her own hand dipped beneath the water, wrapping around his length. He let out a choked sob, his head falling back to expose the white column of his throat as her fist moved up and down in slow,
careful strokes. Bit by bit, she made a mess of him in the hypnotic, flickering glow of the candles, the flush of arousal staining his broad chest nearly as red as the rose petals that surrounded them.

"Need you," he finally said in hoarse, garbled entreaty. "Please."

And it was what Rey had been waiting for. Her fingers flew up to grasp onto his shoulders for purchase. Her hips swiveled in the water as she notched his tip into her entrance. Their gazes met and she bit her lip and pushed down and—

— Oh—

She took him to the root, the stretch of it eased by the water. "No," she heard herself murmur as his eyes started to flutter shut. "Look at me, Ben."

His brow furrowed with the effort to obey but he did, something vulnerable and open shadowing his features, his dark gaze drinking her in while she rose above him, her hands pinning his shoulders to the stone for balance. She reveled in the worship in his stare and in each strangled sound he made, rolling her hips against his, desperate to burn away everyone else who came before. The Force fed on her possessiveness, the candles around them blazing higher on their wicks. What was roaring through her was not the light, but it wasn't darkness, either— how could it be, with those tears in her husband's eyes? With the way his breath hitched?

"Rey." Again, the shape of her name was a lovely, broken thing in Kylo's mouth, uttered in tandem with the almost violent twitch of his cock inside her. He was close. "Please— let me touch you— let me make my wife come—"

She couldn't help but kiss him for that, pulling away before he could reciprocate. She slipped him out of her in the same movement and, stars, the whimper he made at the loss of contact, like she'd broken his heart—

"You first," she whispered in his ear, thrusting forward, sheathing him inside her once more. "Come for me first, Emperor Ren."

Water lapped at Kylo's bare skin, a myriad soothing currents that offset the unyielding granite against
his spine when he lay back, completely in the thrall of Rey's cunt wrapped tight around his cock and her small, freckled breasts bouncing in front of his face, draped in rose petals, unbearably erotic. He could do nothing but take it, his eyes rolling into the back of his head as the Chume'da rode him to within an inch of his life. It wasn't long before he was moaning, praises and pleas dripping from his lips in a jumbled, nigh insensible stream, the rocking and swirling of her hips spurred on by his words—so beautiful, cyar'ika, so good to me, Empress—

"You should have been my first," he gasped out, and her eyes darkened as she fucked him harder, his goddess and Her Grace all at once, "you will be my last—my only—"

He crashed into orgasm, spilling inside her with a force that flashed white heat along the edges of his vision and bled his mind dry of all rational thought. She leaned forward, offering him her breasts in silent yet imperious command, and, blissed-out and grateful and dazed, he automatically took one nipple between his lips, sucking sloppily as his thumb honed in on her clit beneath the water.

Rey hissed from the sharp pleasure and then she was unraveling around him, too, with the softest of cries, her body collapsing on top of his, the two of them lost in the warmth and the roses and the candlelight. In the fever of it all.

From where he stood by a viewport in the Star Home, at the top of the staircase leading into the hangar bay, Isolder frowned at Ta'a Chume's approach. He'd managed to get through the Gallinore visit without speaking to her more than was necessary, but it seemed that his luck had run out as they cruised away from the planet's orbit.

Ta'a Chume stopped beside him, one hand gripping the rails as if for support. She didn't have her guards with her, and her breathing sounded a bit more labored. "Now that Gallinore knows you are with me, word will have been sent back to Hapes Prime that you're onboard this ship," she remarked, as casually as if she were talking about the weather.

Isolder's frown deepened. "And so?"

"And so," Ta'a Chume echoed, looking not at him but at the constellations spread out before them, tinted emerald by the omnipresent Mists. Instead of answering his question, she changed the topic. "Your daughter is too soft-hearted, and much too in love with her husband, but I believe she shall suit. She takes after me more than she cares to admit."
"If that is your idea of a *compliment*—" Isolder bit out, only to fall into silence when Ta'a Chume suddenly glanced at him with an emotion that was indecipherable but, nevertheless, more than she'd ever shown him all his life.

"I did all I could," she said tersely. "Believe that, if nothing else."

Frustrated with his mother's word games, the prince shook his head and stalked away with every intention of leaving her there by the viewport.

"Isolder."

Something in her voice made him pause. He turned around, their eyes meeting in the silver light.

Ta'a Chume held out her hand—

— And the *Star Home* exploded. A slow yet steady conflagration of fire and smoke, impossible to stop, blossoming in fiery petals against the blackness of space.

By the time it was over, nothing remained of the millenniums-old flagship of the Hapan Queen Mothers, save for shards of debris that floated, weightless and aimless, through the currents of zero gravity, in a wash of charred metal and basalt and transparisteel.

In the early morning hours of Galactic Standard Time, Lieutenant Dopheld Mitaka poked his head into the room where Rey and the ladies-in-waiting were eating breakfast, and announced in grave tones that the *Evenstar* had made port at the Citadel.

Rey stood up, puzzled as to what Aleson's ship was doing here, and went over to where the lieutenant hovered at the doorway, the ladies trailing behind.

Mitaka seemed unable to look at her directly. "I shall fetch the Emperor," he mumbled, scurrying off.

As Rey watched him go, she heard footsteps coming from the opposite direction. She turned to the
source, as did her ladies and the *Chume'doro* who were stationed outside the dining area.

Aleson Gray and Lairelosse Yliri strode into view, rounding the corner in swift strides, their faces pale. Before they were within arm's length of Rey, though, they stopped in their tracks. Aleson dropped to one knee at the same time that Lairelosse sank into a deep curtsy that spread the panels of her wide skirts across the floor.

Rey stared down at them, uncomprehending. Gasps rippled from behind her, followed by the rustle of silk as her ladies adopted the same curtsy as Lairelosse. There was movement at the periphery of Rey's vision as her guards knelt like Aleson.

It was Lairelosse who broke the deathly stillness. There was a faint shimmer of tears in her dark eyes as she looked up at Rey and called her—

— In a quiet voice that rang through the silence of the hallway—

"*Ereneda.*"

Chapter End Notes

*The Braxant sector.*

*Bastion.*

*Gallinore.*
Chapter 56

LISTEN I KNOW IT'S BEEN A HUNDRED YEARS AND I'M SORRY. I was on a business trip in the U.S. sdfsghk but I'm back now! Refreshed and refilled with glorious purpose!

A few things before we begin: Thank you to galactilicious for the lovely art, SithSpence and his editor Keybumblebee for this amazing recording of Kylo's dialogue in the last chapter (FAIR WARNING: I EXPIRED ON THE SPOT, IT'S MY GHOST TYPING THIS), The Lords of the Sith Podcast for reccing LWABOC during their panel at Celebration in Chicago (several people sent me videos of the moment and I cried like a baby), and, last but definitely not the least, the Reylo Fic Recs group on Facebook for voting this story Best Epic-Length Fanfiction, Best WIP, Best Characterization, and Best Plot Twist in the Canon-Compliant/Divergence categories of their fanfic awards! I remain totally bowled over by how kind and supportive this fandom is. You guys are, quite simply, the best. ❤

I hope this chapter makes up for the long wait and I'd appreciate your feedback as I work on the next one! Please do mind the angst tag, but remember that there will be a happy ending. LOVE YOU MY REYLOS

Kylo would already have disliked the governor of the Fakir sector under normal circumstances but, on this morning in particular, there was no one he hated more. Claermoore was Hux in thirty years, pompous and shrunken and long-winded, with a nasal bent to his tone that was interrupted every so often by a rattling tobacco-stained cough as he droned on and on about border fortifications in the Bakchou Arm. Kylo had no choice but to listen to him and to the other regional governors present at this meeting, even if there were infinitely more pleasant ways to start the day.

Lounging in Rey's bed, for example. Although, judging from the time displayed on the chronometer that Kylo furtively inspected, she would probably be having breakfast right about now...

As he had his back to the doors and was trying to pay attention to Claermoore's report, he didn't notice that Mitaka had entered the room until the lieutenant addressed him in low, urgent tones. "Your Majesty, a ship has arrived from the Hapes Cluster. Lord Aleson Gray and Ducha Lairelosse Yliri are currently with the Empress."

Kylo motioned for Claermoore to continue speaking— in part so as not to disrupt the flow of the consultation, but also to mask what he and Mitaka were talking about from nearby eavesdroppers. "Why was I not informed when they made planetfall?" he demanded quietly.
Mitaka paled. "You were unreachable by comlink, sir, and they insisted that the matter couldn't wait."

Kylo began to fume. While he had deactivated his comlink for the sake of this meeting, that didn't give Aleson Gray any right to barge into his city unannounced. But— that was a gut reaction, sharpened by his intense dislike for the Hapan aristocrat, so he willed his temper to cool. Besides, there was something about the nervous energy Mitaka was giving off that made him uneasy.

"What has happened?" Kylo finally asked.

Mitaka lowered his voice even further— almost to a whisper now, barely audible over Claermoore's rundown of optimized defense strategies. "Earlier this morning, Ta'a Chume and Prince Isolder were on the Star Home when it was destroyed in an explosion upon leaving the planet of Gallinore." Kylo's heart stopped cold long before Mitaka continued, "All souls lost, Your Majesty. Lord Gray and Ducha Yliri came here to deliver the news... and to bring Empress Djo back to Hapes for her ascension as Queen Mother."

* *

Claermoore stopped speaking and all heads turned to Kylo Ren as he abruptly got to his feet. Before anyone could inquire as to what the matter was, the Emperor left the room, Lieutenant Mitaka hot on his heels.

"What was that all about?" Claermoore demanded, annoyed.

Tolth Gosular, the governor of the Varvenna sector who had been seated closest to Kylo Ren, gave a bored shrug. "Something about Hapes."

Claermoore rolled his eyes. "It's always something about Hapes, these days."

* *

She had retreated to her chambers. He followed her Force signature there, each dull roar of pain that she emanated coursing through his own system. He was barely aware of Mitaka and his knights
trailing after him, or of the officers and staff scurrying out of his way as he stormed through the metal labyrinth of the Citadel, or of the Chume'doro standing guard outside Rey's door. Two of them moved to block his path, silent and stone-faced; Kylo sensed his knights bristle behind him and knew without looking that they were reaching for their weapons, but he held up a hand in a wordless order for them to stand down. Rey was the ruler of Hapes now, as well as the last surviving member of the primary Royal House. It stood to reason that her people would take no chances.

Focusing a calm gaze on the two Chume'doro in front of him, Kylo removed his lightsaber from his utility belt and handed it to Mitaka, keeping his movements deliberate and slow. Only then did the women stand aside to let him— and only him— pass.

Rey swiveled to face him the second he entered her quarters. She was standing by the windows, its blinds drawn against the early morning light. Her eyes brimmed with unshed tears; he saw at once that she was struggling to hold herself together in front of Aleson, Lairelosse, and the ladies-in-waiting. Kylo stopped in his tracks, confronted by the raw grief on her expression— the same grief that had torn through him every day since Starkiller Base, even though he had no right to it. He didn't know what to do, what to say.

And so he knelt. His eyes fixed on Rey's face, framed by muted, covered sunlight, he went down on one knee in helpless reverence, a sovereign humbling himself before his equal.

Before She Who Had No Equal.

"Kira Ka Chume," Kylo whispered. The weight of the title filled the otherwise silent room. "My armies are yours, Ereneda." For vengeance, for conquest, for whatever she wanted. I will raise them in your defense, I will stand at your back that the world might never overtake us.

She was not alone, even if the universe insisted on trying to make her so.

"Leave us," Rey said to the Hapans, her tone remarkably composed, her eyes never straying from Kylo's face. It was only when they were alone that she allowed her slim shoulders to sag, that she let her tears drip down her cheeks.

"I don't care about armies," she snapped, the last vestiges of composure finally slipping away. "I don't care about being Queen Mother. I don't want you to kneel. I just—" She swallowed, burying her face in her hands, the black off-shoulder gown she wore lending her silhouette an aura of elegant despair. "Please, Ben," she grated against the flesh of her palms, "just hold me—"
By the time he reached her she'd been overtaken by a fresh wave of tears. He wrapped his arms around her, wishing he could absorb her sorrow— feel all of it, so that she wouldn't have to. Her fingers clutched pathetically at the front of his tunic as she leaned into him like he was the only thing keeping her upright. "The last time I spoke with my father, I was angry," Rey sobbed, the confession muffled against Kylo's chest. "I never got to tell him— tell him that I l-loved him—" She stumbled over the simple word, as if struck by how saying it at the opportune moment could have changed things in her mind. "I didn't know it would be the last time— how could I have known—"

A memory hit Kylo just then. Not of his own father, but of Leia, and the last time he'd spoken to her, mere days before the fateful night he destroyed Luke's temple. She'd asked him how he was, her smile weary yet hopeful, cast in bluish holo-light. Still smarting as he was from the very public revelation that Darth Vader was his grandfather, his responses had been surly and he'd ended the comm before Leia could finish saying goodbye.

Many, many years had passed since then. What would he have changed, if he had known what was to come after?

Rey shuddered against him, drawing him back to the present moment. "And m-my grandmother," she whimpered, so brokenly that Kylo's heart gave a sickening lurch. "She was horrid, but— but now I don't have a family anymore—"

Again. The unspoken sentiment echoed through the air. No family again.

"I'm your family," Kylo said before he could think better of it. Rey blinked up at him with red-rimmed hazel eyes; he closed his, embarrassed by his own boldness, and he pressed their foreheads together as his next words emerged in a gruff murmur alongside her wet cheek. "We're married. I can be your family. We can start over. We won't make the same mistakes.

Rey began crying even harder, and it was with a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach that Kylo realized he had somehow made things worse. Is that so much of a surprise? inquired his bitter inner voice. You are a paltry substitute for all that she has lost.

But there was nothing he could do except hold her for as long as she let him. And she did, until all of her tears were spent.
It was almost noon by the time Kylo left Rey's chambers. Mitaka had capably shepherded Aleson and Lairelosse to one of the meeting rooms and served them food and drink— it was a sign, Kylo thought sardonically, of how rattled these people were that they seemed to have completely bypassed the modest selection of teas and juices and gone straight for the liquor. Aleson offered him a grim parody of a toast when he entered the room.

"How is she, Emperor Ren?" Lairelosse asked once Kylo had taken a seat beside her.

"She's sleeping," he replied. Rey had cried herself to exhaustion, and he'd lain in bed with her until she dozed off, whimpering fitfully even in the depths of unconsciousness. He hadn't wanted to leave her like that, all curled up beneath the blankets in her formal gown, makeup smeared and hair bedraggled, looking so achingly small and vulnerable, but he needed to talk to the Hapans. There were plans that had to be made.

"When Her Majesty wakes up," Lairelosse said slowly, "Lord Gray and I must take her back to court. Hapes is currently in an uproar. She should be crowned as soon as possible to avoid any complications that would result from a lingering power vacuum."

Incensed as he was by the omnipresent cloud of political machinations that hung over everything, even loss itself, Kylo knew that the Ducha Yliri was right. "I will take Rey back to Hapes myself," he growled. "On my dreadnought, guarded by my troops."

Aleson opened his mouth as if to argue, but Lairelosse quelled him with a sharp glance. "That would be for the best," she conceded. "These are uncertain times. The Consortium needs to see that the new Queen Mother is in a position of strength."

"And to maintain that position, all of her enemies must be dealt with," said Kylo, his mind racing. "The First Order will personally take charge of the investigation into the Star Home's destruction. I believe that this unfortunate event could have been prevented had you apprehended all of the Heritage Council members— this is obviously the work of someone who's managed to stay hidden in the shadows. Now that my wife is poised to ascend, she has an even bigger target on her back. I won't be taking any chances."

Lairelosse pursed her lips. "That is a matter of jurisdiction. Of sovereignty. You will have to discuss that with Kira Ka Chume herself, Emperor Ren."

"I will," Kylo declared, narrowing his eyes. It was surreal to hear Rey being referred to as the Queen Mother. To be reminded that he was now married to the most powerful woman in the Hapes Consortium.
A woman that he would protect until his last breath.

Strange how some things could be known at a level that was soul-deep. Strange how some things could be felt all the way to the bone.

Aleson knocked back a generous amount of brandy. It was impossible to tell whether the sour expression that crossed his features was due to the fiery alcohol or the prospect of the First Order impinging on Hapan space. "We should get going as soon as possible," he told Lairelosse.

"We can wait a couple of hours or so," said Lairelosse, much to Kylo's surprise given her practical nature. Her reasoning soon became clear, however, when she continued, "Her Majesty needs to regroup. To rest. She will require all of her fortitude for what lies ahead."

*

Rey woke up numb. It was iciness, it was a lead weight, pervading every inch of her body. Her throat had coalesced into one huge, dry lump, and her eyes were swollen. There was a migraine building up in the back of her head.

She felt like shit.

There was no comfort to be had, not even in remembering Kylo's awkward yet sweet attempts at it. I can be your family, he'd said, so tender and sincere. If only he knew how impossible that was in their current situation, with everything being based on lies and subterfuge.

"I have to tell him." Rey said the words out loud to a quiet room, unoccupied save for her own self. Hearing them made it more real, made such a course of action solidify in her mind, gave her something to focus on aside from her father's passing. In her shattered state, there could no longer be any space for doubt. She would tell him, she would tell Ben, and he would help her, and together they would defeat the evil that loomed over the galaxy.

He was her last hope.

There was a tentative knock on her door. Rey opened it with a tired wave of her hand as she sat up
and Janassa entered, the face that was as beautiful as a cool, forested dusk drawn into pensiveness.

"Ereneda," the younger girl said, and Rey's stomach couldn't help but turn uneasily. "I realize that now is a bad time, but last night you impressed upon Niobe and myself the urgency of the information that had to be acquired."

Rey suddenly wanted to cry again. It couldn't be anything good, not when her lady-in-waiting approached with eyes darkened by both trepidation and concern. But there were no tears left to shed. She was all wrung out, and so she merely waited for Janassa to continue.

"It took a while but, once the officers were in their cups, they spoke more freely among themselves and to us, and it became easier to overhear things and suss out details," said Janassa. "The Enhanced Security Decree is one of General Hux's pet projects, boasting express approval from Snoke. Emperor Ren is expected to sign it into law any day now. It... it basically makes aboveboard and legal what the First Order has been doing to stamp out all instances of rebellion, and it is designed to implement those countermeasures on a larger scale." She swallowed, and then began to solemnly tick items off on her fingers. "Suspension of right to trial for suspected rebels. The definition of rebel expanded to include sympathizers and bystanders who fail to alert the proper authorities of any rebel activity or presence, and acts of rebellion to include criticizing the government via any medium and failing to show the proper deference to all First Order representatives. Minors may be arrested in accordance with the law lowering the age of criminal liability. A scorched-earth policy for worlds suspected of harboring or having harbored any single member of the Resistance. And— and, finally, capital punishment for all those charged with rebellion."

For several long moments, Rey could do nothing but stare at the wall over Janassa's shoulder. The truth was that this hardly came as a shock. She'd always known that the First Order wouldn't stop until they had absolute control over the galaxy— why else had she fought with the Resistance, taking up the mantle of Jedi? It had been to prevent this very thing from happening. And given how Kylo had canceled the discussion of this potential law at that ill-fated morning council— because, she realized now, of her presence and her objections to the previous decrees—

She'd always known, hadn't she?

And yet there was still that one last glimmer of hope. It was stubborn. It remained.

"I'll talk to B— to the Emperor," Rey told Janassa quietly. "This can't be allowed to happen. I'll make him see reason."

Janassa nodded. "As you say, Your Majesty."
There was something else in her eyes as she curtsied and left the room— something that gave Rey the nagging suspicion that Janassa pitied her. It ate at her pride, sinking deep beneath skin like a particularly sharp thorn. The feeling persisted half an hour later, when she went off in search of her husband, and—

— And when she knocked on his office door and he let her in, blinking up from a slew of documents scattered all over his desk, Rey was struck by the oddest feeling as his gaze met hers. The mellow light of late afternoon seeped in through the window-glass, falling in splinters on Kylo's dark hair and his pale face. Maybe it was the Force trying to warn her, or maybe it was just pure human intuition similar to the way the older scavengers on Jakku could tell when a weather storm would descend upon them later in the day; whatever it was, Rey looked at Kylo in that moment and felt like she was never going to see him again.

"Ben," she said, her voice cracking just the slightest bit, with every last ounce of fear and of hope, "we need to talk."

Kylo had been getting his affairs in order in preparation for another absence from the capital. Although High Command would be less than thrilled, he was banking on mollifying them by finishing as much work as possible before he left. Still, it was without a second thought that he dropped everything when Rey walked into his office.

She was still wearing the now slightly wrinkled gown from earlier this morning and she'd obviously run a brush through her loosened hair. Her face, however, was scrubbed clean, all freckled and wan and so, so beautiful, even in the depths of sorrow. Another wave of protectiveness coursed through him as he stood up and went over to her. "What is it?"

Rey took a step back. Was it a rejection, or merely a need for distance to discuss something important? Before Kylo could dwell on it, she spoke again. "I know about the Enhanced Security Decree."

He blanked out. For only the briefest couple of seconds, but it was a stark sensation nonetheless. He had been afraid this day would come but, now that it was finally happening, he had no idea what to do. "How did you find out?"

Her eyes flashed. "Does it matter?"
His fists clenched. "Yes."

"Fine." She bit her lip, then continued, "You didn't want to discuss it while I was present at the council, so I had my ladies ask around last night. Your officers were certainly more forthcoming than you have been."

Kylo's first reaction was fury— fury that she would go behind his back like this. But it was quickly eclipsed by shame; he'd been doing the same thing, after all, and it was because of his cowardice that they were having this difficult conversation the day the last of her family had died. "You should have learned of it from me. I regret that you did not," he said, in the softest tone of voice he could muster. "I was planning on waiting for the right moment to bring it up."

"There is no right moment," Rey said. "I will always be against this, no matter what. Ben—" She clutched at the sides of his arms, turning an earnest, pleading expression up to him. "You can't mean to go through with this. It's madness."

"It will ensure safety and peace throughout the galaxy," he replied, echoing words that Snoke had told him long ago, back when the decree was in its early stages. "The innocent will have nothing to fear."

"How can you determine anyone's innocence if you won't even give them a fair trial?" Rey argued. "How can there be peace if you raze entire planets to the ground? How can people feel safe with the threat of execution constantly hanging over their heads?"

"That is an exaggeration," Kylo said through gritted teeth, willing himself to be patient, to be gentle, because Rey had only ever deserved gentleness— from him and everyone else. "The decree is intended to patch up the cracks in our security and constrict Resistance movement. I've held off on ratifying it to give people time to adjust to how the First Order does things— give them the opportunity to renounce traitorous allegiances once they've seen for themselves how the system has improved under a post-Republic leadership. I won't sign this law if I don't deem the galaxy ready for it. But I think it is, Rey."

Her slim fingers tightened their grip on his sleeves. "If you truly believe that the galaxy is ready to submit to total authoritarian rule," she said slowly, "then why is the Resistance still at large?"

Kylo shook free of her grasp and made to turn away, stung, but she refused to let him, stepping into his space so that he had no choice but to look her in the eye. "Ben, listen to me," she begged him.
"There will always be those who think things can change for the better. That's simply the way people work. If you ratify this decree, you'll be legalizing the massacre of thousands. Maybe not now, maybe not for another few years, but it will happen."

"Then it will happen," Kylo said stonily, "for the greater good. The Resistance has already assassinated Disra—"

"There's no proof of that yet!"

"Who else could have been responsible?" he countered, which made her clamp her lips shut, obviously having no answers for him. "Shall I let this go on unchecked? Will all my officers be killed one by one because I was too weak to do the right thing?"

"This is not the right thing." Rey sounded on the verge of tears once more, and Kylo's anger and frustration with their circumstances found new lease. He was going to make her cry again. He was always making her cry. "I understand that the majority of High Command might be pushing for this and I understand that Snoke wants this law to be enacted right away, but you are the Emperor, Ben. You don't have to bow to anyone's demands—"

"Except yours, I suppose?" he couldn't stop himself from retorting, because she'd struck a nerve.

Rey shook her head vehemently. "I'm not demanding anything. I'm asking that you think about this, that you take my opinion into consideration. That we work together, as you promised we would. I'll — I can buy time, I'll do it your way, I'll file a formal objection along with the others I'm writing. I can make more counter-proposals—"

"It's too late for that." Kylo moved away then, brusquely stalking back to his desk.

"It's not," Rey protested, chasing after him. "You can postpone ratification, like you've done with the terraforming decree and the proposal to lower the age of criminal liability—"

"I can't postpone ratifying any of those anymore," Kylo interrupted, a bitter, defeated edge to his voice. He sat down, shoulders slumping, filled with regret and exhaustion and despair for what was to come.

Rey stopped short, staring down at him from across his desk. "What do you mean?" He could feel
the onset of a slow shock radiating from her Force signature, the growing sense of dread. She knew what he was about to say but she would make him say it, anyway, damning them both.

"Visra's assassination has thoroughly rattled High Command. Even the more moderate among them wish to be reassured of the First Order's hold on the galaxy—of our capacity to restructure it and to maintain control. Snoke wants all these laws to come to fruition as soon as possible. If I were to delay, I would have neither his support nor the majority's." Kylo gazed up at his wife, helpless yet resolute. "I'm signing all three of those decrees, Rey. I am sorry."

*

Time, it seemed, had frozen. This moment, suspended in afternoon light, marked by the echoes of Kylo's declaration ringing in her ears. Rey could feel herself start to shut down, unable to handle yet another devastating blow in the span of less than a day.

She had to focus while she still had her wits about her. There was one more thing that she could still do, there was still a way for this to be salvaged.

She could tell Kylo about the Resistance. If the truth ever came to light that the Consortium had sheltered General Organa's forces for almost a year, there was no doubt that, under the Enhanced Security Decree, the alliance would founder and the First Order would be crying out for Hapan blood. Perhaps she might even be able to talk him into her vague, half-formed plan that they defeat Snoke together... 

But so many lives hung in the balance. Could she really risk it all based on a what if, on what she and Kylo had found with each other that existed only between the two of them? No matter the steadfastness of his devotion, he remained volatile in all other aspects. It had only been a few hours since he promised her his loyalty and held her while she grieved, but hadn't he spat in the face of her last crumbling hope just now?

"There are men," Janassa had said, "whose hearts are wastelands. Whether or not anything grows, that is no one else's burden to bear but his."

How long could Rey continue carrying this burden, on top of everything else that had already been placed on her shoulders? She remembered the pity in Janassa's expression and she found herself growing more furious with each second that passed of her standing there and staring at her husband while a fresh reserve of tears waited to fall. This wasn't her—this pathetic, weepy thing, reduced to begging a man to see reason. She'd arrived on Coruscant looking for Ben Solo but her earlier instincts had been correct. He would always be just another dream.
It was Kylo Ren who lived on.

Rey squared her shoulders. And made her choice.

"I see," she said, calm and bleak all at once. "In that case, I believe we're done here. I'm leaving."

"I'm going with you," Kylo said. "We'll take the Heresiarch and its full military complement—"

"No," Rey growled. "You can stay here and sign your precious decrees."

He flinched. "I realize you are angry, but take my dreadnought— or some of my troops, at the very least. It's not safe—"

"No," she repeated.

"Rey." For a second Kylo looked as if he would get to his feet, but he froze when her eyes narrowed in warning. She watched his right hand spasm like he was about to reach out to her in silent entreaty before he thought better of it, placing his gloved fingers flat on his desk instead. He swallowed. "You can't—"

"On the contrary," Rey said, and only then did she allow a sliver of icy rage to leak into her tone, "I can do whatever I want. I'm the Queen Mother of the Hapes Consortium."

And, with that, she spun on her heel and left his office. She almost looked back, but managed to stop herself at the last possible second. It felt like a hollow victory.

Chapter End Notes

The Fakir sector.

The Bakchou arm.

The Varvenna sector.
Chapter 57

Thank you so much to everyone for the warm welcome back and all the lovely comments on the last update! I'm slowly but surely catching up on replying, and I really can't stress how much you guys inspire me to give my best to writing this fic. In my hubris, though, I thought I could crank out longer chapters and finish at sixty, but that's no longer possible due to pacing issues and my current work schedule, so we are extending the projected total chapter count to sixty-five. SORRY :(( Nevertheless, I hope y'all like this update and that you'll let me know your thoughts!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Knights of Ren stationed in the hallway looked askance at Rey as she stormed out of Kylo's office, the doors sliding shut behind her with a ringing, sibilant finality. She cut a vicious glare in their direction, daring them to say something, itching for a fight, but whatever they saw on her face made them back off; she could feel the wariness in their gazes even from behind their black helms, but there was something else there as well. It almost made her smirk.

There was, after all, only a few degrees of separation between wariness and fear.

I should be feared, Rey thought vindictively, shouldering past the knights. I've been playing nice for too long and I have nothing to show for it. But that also means I have nothing left to lose.

Except for her friends in the Resistance, and all that was good, and just, and right.

Was it coincidence, then, that she saw Nartano Rourke heading towards his office, his back turned to her, just as she rounded the corner on her way to the turbolifts? Was it a stroke of luck that this particular corridor was otherwise deserted? Or was it the will of the Force?

Whatever the case, it all clicked in Rey's mind like the last piece of a puzzle sliding home. And she knew what she had to do.

Shielding her energy signature to avoid detection from the darksiders on this level, she gathered the Force to her like a cloak, manipulating the surrounding light waves to visually mask her presence before she reached the hallway's surveillance camera's field of vision. And then she hurried over to Rourke, managing to squeeze in behind him just before the doors of his office could close. He whirled around but it was too late, they were alone, and with a flick of her wrist she telekinetically
lifted him off his feet and sent him slamming against the wall, his back hitting the metal panels with a
dull thud.

Rey truly couldn't tell if she was acting irrationally— lashing out against the events of the day, the
unfairness of it all— or if she was thinking clearly for the first time in a long, long while. She knew
only that she had to save the Resistance and that she had to stop the First Order. She knew only that
Rourke, the head of the Empire's tech division whom she had met at last night's ball, was the key to
doing so.

Without saying a word, she looked into Rourke's wide, panicked eyes as her own narrowed into slits,
and she tore from his mind every last bit of information about the sub-hyperspace drives. How they
worked, how to disable them, everything, everything.

* *

Seated stiffly at his desk, in an office where the air still seemed to echo with accusations, endings,
and words unsaid, Kylo went through the rest of his workload on autopilot. He read letters, signed
memorandums, and affixed curt reprimands to shoddily written reports. There was a fanatical
determination to his industriousness because he knew that, if he let his mind wander back to the
argument that had resulted in his wife walking out on him, he would break. All his pride— all his
dignity— scattering like a house of cards before a mighty gale.

Kylo was certainly no stranger to giving vent to his emotions, but this— he dammed it up, because it
frightened him. It was a pain that threatened to sear, to encompass, to numb his fingers and crack
something in his chest into two. He couldn't remember ever having played host to such an ache
before.

That's a lie, his inner voice jeered, the mists and the metal bridge and the red light and the touch of a
callused hand to his cheek unfurling across the surface of his mind. The last time you felt like this, it
was because of someone you loved.

Kylo's breath hitched, pushed out from burning lungs. He blinked at the dangerous, unwelcome
stinging in his eyes. He scrolled down the holographic dossier he was perusing, no longer able to
make sense of the words. He did not know how much time had passed before Mitaka entered his
office to bring him the news.

"Sir, the Chu— the Queen Mo— the Empress—" Mitaka's brow creased as he stumbled over which
title to use— "is leaving."
"All right." Kylo returned his gaze to the dossier. "Tell the Heresiarch to dispatch a TIE fighter squadron to escort Lord Gray's ship until the hyperlane."

Mitaka's confusion was palpable, and Kylo belatedly realized that he had forgotten to inform any of his subordinates of the change in plans—forgotten to tell anyone that he would not, in fact, be accompanying Rey back to Hapes. The lieutenant was quick to rally, however, taking out his datapad to key in a new set of instructions to the flagship that was currently waiting in the black above Coruscant. He then hesitated for a while before venturing to ask, "You are not seeing the Evenstar off, Your Majesty?"

Kylo didn't look up, but he thought about another way his life could go. He thought about running to the docks the same way he once ran up to Rey on the beach. He thought about kissing her, about apologizing, about promising that they could still figure this out. For the briefest of moments, he imagined a life where Rey would not leave him.

"No," he told Mitaka instead. "The Empress does not wish it. You are dismissed, lieutenant."

Rey sat in the private cabin of the Evenstar, watching the squadron of TIE/fo space superiority fighters that the Heresiarch had dispatched to escort them glide silently alongside the viewport. "Six days," she repeated woodenly.

Seated across from her, Aleson nodded. "The plan is to close in on Coruscant from all sides. The Resistance has amassed as many allies as they'll ever be able to, but I need to inform them if there will be more." He paused. "I need to know if Hapes will call her banners."

Rey kept staring at the TIE fighters as their black silhouettes drifted through the maze of arctic, silver stars. The decision was in her hands now, and she no longer had the luxury of thinking twice. "Yes, of course," she said. "The Royal Court will have to be convinced first, but once I tell them of the grave danger we are all facing..."

"They will see that there is no other choice," Aleson concluded. "With the laws that your husband is about to enact, it's do or die. Even those puffed-up, self-serving nobles will realize that."

A pang shot through Rey's chest upon hearing Kylo being referred to as her husband. "Oh, the ruin you will bring upon each other," the Winged Goddess had said—so long ago now, it seemed—and,
as far as prophecies went, that one was turning out to be accurate, albeit not in the manner Rey had thought. He’d broken her heart. She acknowledged this in some numb, distant way but couldn't muster the energy to react to it. At least, not yet. She was vaguely aware that she was shutting down because it was too much to try to come to terms with her father's death, her daunting new role, and the end of whatever foolish hopes she'd begun to nurture for her marriage all at once. She would have to give herself time.

But time was yet another luxury none of them could afford anymore. Aleson had already started speaking again. "I fear that it will still be all for naught as long as the First Order fleets possess the capacity to travel from one end of the galaxy to the other in the blink of an eye."

"I know how to disable the sub-hyperspace drives." Rey's tone was hollow. "Tell General Organa that I have a plan— and one condition that I am certain she will be amenable to."

She sensed the hint of wariness in Aleson's gaze but eventually saw him incline his head at the corner of her eye. "Of course, Ereneda."

"Should the odds turn in our favor, Emperor Ren's life is to be spared." Rey took a deep breath. "At all costs."

Aleson didn't respond. She finally looked at him straight on, prodding quietly, "You think I ask for too much, Lord Gray?"

"I think that you and General Organa will be in accord regarding this matter. I also think that Ren doesn't deserve the grace shown to him by the women in his life but, then again..." Aleson shrugged. "At this point, perhaps it's no longer about what anyone deserves."

This time it was Rey who didn't say anything, her gaze drifting back to the viewport as they neared the hyperlane. The TIE fighters halted their intricate dance, stood still instead, like an array of sentinels, while the Evenstar slowly plowed ahead and, soon enough, the world beyond the transparisteel panels dissolved into starlines.

Dawn broke out over the Citadel, tinting the stone and metal and glass of it in cold opalescent hues as the enormous courtyard resounded with the precise movements of stormtroopers going about their daily training routines and the clipped instructions of grizzled drill sergeants. Hux observed the proceedings from a distant balcony, hands folded behind his back, and one would have been hard-
pressed to tell whether the look on his face was satisfaction or displeasure.

He did not acknowledge Sarreti’s approach, although he inclined his head ever so slightly in the other man’s direction to show that he was listening when Sarreti began to speak. "Armitage, what is happening with the Enhanced Security Decree? Ren should have signed it by now. I thought it was a done deal."

"This may come as a shock, but I am not privy to the inner workings of Kylo Ren’s mind." Hux dryly replied. "What I can tell you is that he’s been in a state since his Empress left him three days ago. He’s locked himself in his office and will hardly see anyone. The few times that people have managed to wrangle a meeting, he’s been an absolute terror. He made one of Pellaeon’s adjutants cry yesterday."

"Good heavens," Sarreti breathed. "He’ll be out for my blood next, what with the joke Madame Lota and I played—"

"Don’t flatter yourself," Hux snorted. "Ta’a Chume is dead. That is why Her headstrong little Majesty flew back to Hapes, not because of your juvenile antics. She’s the Queen Mother now."

Sarreti colored at the insult but otherwise let it slide, choosing to focus on the more important matter at hand. "I patrol the Vaathkree Trade Corridor for a few days and I come back to the Jedi girl on the Hapan throne," he remarked. "Never a dull moment in this galaxy of ours, is there?"

"Dullness has its merits," Hux opined. "Dullness means there is order. I vastly prefer order to the alternative."

"Well, of course you would."

The two men lapsed into a heavy, drawn-out silence, during which they did nothing more than stand side by side on the balcony, watching the military exercises take place below.

"How did Ta’a Chume die, anyway?" Sarreti finally asked.

"She and Prince Isolder were killed in an explosion that wracked her flagship," said Hux. "That’s all I know."
"Is it really?" When Hux didn't respond, Sarreti continued his musings. "When I was a child, I'd hear stories about the Ice Queen who lived in a kingdom made of gold. They said she was as beautiful as she was cruel, and her people worshiped her as a living goddess. Then I grew up and served under Palpatine, and a plan to invade the Hapes Cluster would be bandied about every few months. Nothing ever came of it, though—we had our hands full with the Rebel Alliance, and we didn't want to go up against the Transitory Mists, not to mention the Battle Dragons. Now Ta'a Chume is gone. It feels like the end of an era."

"Things change. Sometimes new blood must take matters into its own hands," Hux declared. "Whoever blew up her ship obviously shares that sentiment."

"And the Consortium's new ruler just happens to be married to the Emperor." Sarreti coughed. "Funny how things work out."

"Yes." Hux allowed himself the shadow of a smile. "Funny, indeed."

On Hapes Prime, the capital city of Kira Ka Chume'Dan shone pale and still in the light of the seven moons. The Queen Mother's starcutter and its swarm of Miy'til escorts glided swiftly overhead, having just returned from Mount Krosulhah, where Ta'a Chume and Isolder had been laid to rest. There had of course been no bodies to recover from the wreckage of the Star Home, nothing to bury, and so Rey and the sixty-three lords and ladies comprising the Hapan Royal Court had looked on as two empty marble caskets were placed in the Imperial Crypt after the incense burnt out, red-cloaked sages chanting the last rites in an ethereal chorus.

As her convoy approached the towering bluffs on which the Per'Agthra rested, Rey noticed that quite a few windows glowed with soft, silvery light, awaiting her return. The palace staff had removed the gray drapes while she'd been away, then—the traditional mourning period had been shortened due to the politically fraught situation, and it was back to business as usual.

Tomorrow, she would be crowned.

It was practically a small army that accompanied Rey from the private hangar to her suite of rooms. A new crop of Chume'doro had been plucked from the ranks, and Moreem Espara and her squad now wore the red-and-gold armor of the Hapan Dragoons, the Queen Mother's elite combat force. Normally, the Dragoons left security detail to the capable hands of the Chume'doro but, with Ta'a Chume and Isolder's murderers still at large, no one wished to take any chances. For the foreseeable
future, Rey would be shadowed everywhere she went by no less than twenty of Hapes’ finest soldiers at any given time.

She drew the line, however, at having some of them stationed inside her bedroom as had been advised. "I want to be alone," she told Moreem firmly. "I have my lightsaber and I have the Force. I can take care of myself."

Her ladies were similarly dismissed, and she retreated behind the solace of closed doors. Twice the size of the room she'd had as Chume’da, the Royal Bedchamber boasted walls of polished scarlet-tinged greel wood, floors strewn with lushly woven Wrodian carpets, and chairs, desks, and a fireplace carved from opalescent iriidite. The space was dominated by the largest bed that Rey had ever seen in her life, covered by a crown-shaped canopy veiled in gold dreamsilk that was studded with ruby-eyed gemweb dragons and silver-spun fractal stars. There was a gilded door that led to the en suite, another one connecting to the Queen's Drawing Room, and a third that opened up into a smaller, empty chamber done up in snow-wood and pastels.

"The nursery," Daemora AlGray had explained when Rey moved into this wing of the palace three days ago. "When the time comes, Erenerda, your old crib shall be taken from storage and placed here."

Some sharp, unbearable sadness had gripped Rey's heart at the older woman's words.

"I could be your family."

Even now, she made sure that door was always shut. Refused to even glance at it.

She changed out of the gray robes of mourning and into a simple linen shift before collapsing onto the bed, her body all but swallowed up by the thick, impossibly soft mattress. Her coronation was in twelve hours and she needed to sleep, but all she could think about was the funeral she'd attended earlier. The plumes of smoke drifting upwards, the sages' hymns echoing through basalt halls. The caskets that held nothing save for Ta'a Chume and Isolder's ceremonial crowns, which had only ever been worn at functions of state conducted in the capital city.

Rey felt nothing when it came to the loss of her grandmother, except perhaps a lingering bitterness. Whatever grudging respect she'd harbored for Ta'a Chume had vanished the day the truth about Teneniel Djo's death came out. Isolder was a different story, though— to think that Rey would never look upon that kind face again, would never again be bolstered by his unerring support and affection, would never smile because of his gentle teasing one last time...
"Atta," she whispered to the quiet room, to the silken canopy draped above her, "I can't do this without you."

*I never thought I would have to.*

And, just like that, she wept— for the first time since returning to Hapes. The insulating veneer of shock wore off, exposing the bones of grief that had lain dormant underneath. There was no Kylo to comfort her. She was as alone in this lavish palace as she'd been in the crude hovel that she'd carved out for herself in the badlands. Force help her, there was nothing she wanted more in this moment than to still be living that former life. At least back then, through the hardness and the drought, she could cling to the notion that her family would return.

But now she knew what it was like to have a father, to have roots. To have a husband, someone to hold her at night. And it had all been taken from her in a single day.

What she *did* have, however, was her pride— the pride she'd abandoned during her week on Coruscant, waiting around and begging for Ben Solo to come back. Even as she sobbed into the pillows, even as she curled up and made herself small beneath the blankets, she was resolute. She made sure that each tear she shed was only for Isolder. She would not spare another drop for Kylo Ren.

The stylus scratched angrily across the screen, gripped so tightly in Kylo's hand that it seemed nothing short of a miracle that the reed-thin gadget didn't snap in half. He was signing memo after memo to various governors— bureaucratic matters, none of them urgent. Somewhere in the back of his mind he was aware that he was stalling. The datapads containing the decrees that everyone was waiting on sat accusingly in his *in* tray.

The communications panel in his office blinked with yet another incoming message. He ignored it, knowing that it would be from Snoke, demanding an explanation as to why the laws hadn't been ratified already. And Kylo had no explanations to give that Snoke would find acceptable.

Several more minutes passed, and then there was a muted beep as someone on the other side of the doors requested entrance. Kylo debated the merits of simply ignoring whoever it was, but decided to grant access in the end. If it was something that could wait, they would have commed him. Perhaps there was news from Hapes, or perhaps Rey had come back...
"Apologies for the interruption, Your Majesty." The adjutant was short and sturdily built, with the unmistakable air of one who had drawn the short straw. "Admiral Siralt respectfully requests an update on the Sovereign Expansion and Terraforming Decree. He— he n-n-needs—" The adjutant stumbled over his words as a thunderous expression gradually fell over the Emperor's face— "to finalize the bidding contracts—"

"Get the hell out," Kylo snarled.

The hapless adjutant blanched and hurriedly fled the room. Alone once more, Kylo picked up the terraforming dossier. There was no point in reading it— he'd already done so countless times over the past few days, always putting it back on his desk unsigned. This time, however, the stylus hovered tentatively over the dotted line as a wave of panic— a sensation of helplessness, of being trapped— overtook him.

He thought of Rey, of how passionately she had argued against the decree at his council, of how she had in private illustrated the Veins of Crul with her graceful hands. And then the memories flowed into the more recent one where she'd gone back to the Hapes Cluster on the heels of yet another row, and the blaze of resentment that had slowly but surely been coming to a boil was ignited.

Why should he have to always be the one to compromise? He'd told her once that he wasn't a doormat, but in spite of that he'd tried to accommodate her wishes as best as he could, had let her wreak havoc on his carefully ordered life and plans, had made him question everything—

And all for what?

She'd walked out on him, anyway.

Left him, like everyone always had.

The stylus trembled between his gloved fingers. Heart pounding, eyes narrowed, breath shaky and shallow and rapid, Kylo signed the Sovereign Expansion and Terraforming Decree into law.

When Rey woke up, eyes bruised and cheeks still damp, the first faint traces of a pink dawn had
leached into the air. She'd fallen asleep on her side and now she frowned, some vague awareness tugging insistently at her fogged-up brain. It took her a while to register what was amiss— there was a datastick on her nightstand. A datastick that hadn't been there when she closed her eyes several hours ago.

She bolted to her feet, wide awake all of a sudden. Given the heightened security protocols, no one was allowed to enter her bedroom without permission— how had they managed to get past all the guards? And even if it had been someone her guards trusted— one of her ladies, or Lairelosse, or Daemora— delivering something they thought she needed to see, why hadn't they woken her up? It was possible that they could have decided to let her rest, leaving the datastick there for her to find in the morning, but had she truly slept so soundly that she'd failed to register someone entering her room and walking right up to her bed during these dangerous times?

Rey squinted at the device in the half-light, extending her perception, casting it out like a net to snag on any hidden perils. There appeared to be none but still she kept a cautious several feet away and triggered the mechanism with the Force. The datastick whirred and clicked and gave up its secrets in a wash of blue holo-light, and Rey stood there, dumbfounded, not moving a single muscle as she watched the footage all the way to the end.

And then she sat back down on the bed, and pondered her next move.

"Her Majesty wishes to... what?"

Genteel horror was written all over Daemora AlGray's fine-boned features as she asked the question over breakfast in the Queen Mother's salon.

"You heard me," was Rey's calm response. "My coronation will be held on the front steps of the Fountain Palace and anyone who chooses to do so will be allowed to attend."

Daemora shot a fretful glance at Lairelosse, who, although frozen in place with a cup of tea halfway to her lips, hastened to say, "The Ceremonial Hall has already been prepared—"

"We don't need a hall," Rey interrupted. "We just need a crown and a sage. The rest is merely... pageantry." She took a generous bite of stewed sihan peach before adding, "I realize that this goes against tradition, but the people of Hapes deserve to take part in this event instead of just watching it
"But, Kira Ka Chume, the security," Daemora groaned, "those who assassinated your grandmother and your father still at large, the crowd control—"

"I have every faith that the military will rise to the occasion," Rey countered. "Plus, as I keep reminding everyone, I know how to defend myself. I will have my lightsaber on my person at all times."

"The other nobles might be uncomfortable with such arrangements," Lairelosse ventured, setting down her teacup.

Rey shrugged. "If they don't fancy the thought of rubbing elbows with the masses, they don't have to attend. No one's forcing them." Taking in the other women's scandalized expressions, she sought to explain herself. "My ladies, Prince Isolder spent his life walking among the people. He listened to their concerns and he always made sure that they knew he had their best interests at heart. This is how I choose to honor my father's legacy—by being a leader that my subjects can connect with. The coronation strikes me as the perfect place to begin."

Lairelosse sighed but obediently pulled out her datapad. "In that case, it might be better to push the ceremony back a few more hours. To give the military time to prepare, and also to get the word out to the common folk."

Rey nodded. "By all means."

"This really is most improper," Daemora burst out.

Rey struggled not to roll her eyes. "With all due respect, Ducha AlGray," she pointed out, "I spent almost eleven months of my life struggling to do what the Hapan court deemed proper, and members of said court still tried to kill me. Now they've murdered my family, too. No amount of social graces on my part will stop what remains of the Heritage Council from trying to get rid of me, so there's no more use playing by the rules." She flashed Lairelosse and Daemora a thin smile, a new sense of purpose coursing through her veins. "From now on, we're doing it my way."

Chapter End Notes
Vaathkree Trade Corridor.

Starcutter.

Royal Bedchamber.

Queen's Drawing Room.

Greel wood.

Wrodian carpet.

Iridiite.

Snow-wood.

Sihan peach.
Chapter Notes

I'm not sure when the next update will be because I'm flying to Cambodia again this Sunday, but I'll definitely try to get some writing done during my travels! Please consider dropping a line to motivate me :) Also, I can't believe that I've been writing this fic long enough that it will now span two Cambodia vacations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was late afternoon and, all throughout Kira Ka Chume'Dan, people were closing up shop, abandoning their gardening and their laundry, heading out their front doors, piling into airspeeders and hover cabs, or simply setting out on foot to join what at first glance appeared to be a mass exodus but was, in reality, more like a pilgrimage, the traffic moving with a singular purpose up the narrow paths that wound through the basalt cliffs looming at the edge of the city limits. Overhead, the skies were also bustling with activity as swarms of ships from every corner of the Hapes Cluster converged on the Fountain Palace's docks, their passengers joining the throng of aristocrats and commoners alike that had gathered to witness the coronation of the new Queen Mother.

"Excuse me, my good man." The Countess Rakshesh impatiently shouldered past her bodyguards to call the attention of one of the harried-looking soldiers directing the crowd. "Where is the VIP seating area? You may escort me and my retinue hence."

The soldier's expression shifted from harried to nervous. "There's no VIP area, my lady." His tone, while apologetic, bore the firmness of one who had been repeatedly drilled by a commanding officer to handle this very situation. "It's first come, first serve, and standing room since we don't have enough chairs to accommodate everyone." The countess turned as gray at the edges as her hair, and the soldier hastened to add, "There is, however, seating for the elderly, the pregnant, and those with disabilities. Please follow me."

"If you led me off the edge of the cliffs, I would not object," the Countess Rakshesh muttered as she trailed after him.

Similar scenes were unfolding everywhere else. Disconcerted lords and ladies in furs and fine silk and jewels found themselves shoulder-to-shoulder with merchants, laborers, and the like, all sweltering in the heat of the sun. There were some nobles who reacted to the unorthodox arrangements far less gracefully than others, but the ushering soldiers held fast.

It was, after all, the will of Kira Ka Chume.
From a tower room in the Per'Agthra— the same room where she had once watched First Order officers arrive for her and Kylo's wedding— Rey observed the veritable ocean of people waiting for her down below.

She was wearing a structured A-line gown made from stiff silk faille the color of ivory. The tailored bodice sported accents of gold— real gold, gleaming and bright, sewn to her high collar in the form of two dragons snarling at each other, emblazoned along her sternum in rich military brocade, and cinched around her waist in a thick, ornate belt to which her lightsaber was attached. There were more dragons running down the sides of her wrist-length cape sleeves, gilded wings spread in flight and serpentine tails intertwined with stars and everlilies. The skirt had been left plain, and only slightly flared.

It was markedly simple as far as coronation attire went; her dressmaker had quailed, but Rey had put her foot down. She'd also— much to her ladies' collective horror— foregone intricate braids or elegant chignons and had elected to wear her hair loose, letting it fall past her shoulders straight and sleek.

There was no one around to tell her what to do anymore. No one to tell her how to look. She felt more like herself than she had in a long, long time.

And yet there was an even bigger part of her that felt like an impostor.

In all her time as Chume'da, Rey had never truly allowed herself to think about someday ruling the Hapes Cluster. Ta'a Chume had always seemed immortal, larger than life. Like she would always be the Queen Mother and Rey would always be She Who Would Come After. And now the after had come to pass, and she was just—

— Just a scavenger, just some roughly-hewed wasteland girl who barely knew how to be a person, who certainly hadn't the slightest idea how to lead people—

Rey pushed down all her doubts, pushed down the sudden overwhelming desire to run away and never look back. She had to do this. Even if she proved successful in deactivating the subhyperspace drives, the Resistance was still greatly outnumbered. They would never win without the Consortium fleet.
"Your Majesty." Daemora had entered the room. "It's time."

Rey shot one last lingering glance out the window, at the banners waving in the breeze above hundreds of hopeful faces. She thought of Isolder— of how happy he'd been that she was accompanying him on that medical mission to Erde, of how he'd told her that, when the Chume'da ascended, she ascended to the divine.

*I'll make you proud, Father,* Rey thought, lifting her chin. *I'll never stop fighting for what's right.*

*I swear it, blood of my blood.*

---

Kylo had to hand it to Admiral Siralt— the man worked fast. It seemed to have taken only a matter of hours after the Terraforming Decree was signed for the proposals from various tech giants to start landing on Kylo's desk.

He'd then proceeded to spend a comparable amount of time going over each one's financial breakdown and authoring counteroffers that slashed the original sums almost in half. No company in their right mind would go for the new prices— Kylo knew that.

He was stalling again.

With each line of figures that he read, he saw Rey's hands tracing the path that Crul's revered currents wove throughout the planet. But that wasn't all— he saw Ithor, too, the lush, untouched green jungles spread out below the viewport as the *Millennium Falcon* soared towards the great floating cities in the sky. Han Solo was at the wheel, Chewbacca co-piloting, and he— he was still Ben Solo, wide-eyed and nine years old, and they were on their way to pick Leia up from a Republic conference.

"No one's allowed to go down there, kid," Han had grunted. "Whole jungle's sacred. The Ithorians live and die without ever setting foot on the surface of their homeworld."
"But there's so much land," Ben had breathed. "It could be used for farming, or to house the wartime di-as-po-ra." He'd sounded out the term carefully, and Han had grinned.

"Take it down a notch with the big words, little scholar. Your old man can hardly keep up," Han had quipped, in that way of his that had never failed to give Ben the uneasy feeling he was being made fun of. He'd always been a sensitive child. "Anyway, yeah, there's plenty of land to spare, but it's the Ithorians' land, you know? It means something to them."

Twenty-four years later, and Kylo had no idea how he hadn't remembered that particular line until now, or why it suddenly made so much sense. After a while, he decided that it was Rey's doing. She'd unlocked all these long-buried memories, the things that the boy named Ben Solo had once held to be true. And then she'd left and—

And what? he found himself wondering silently. Entire worlds will suffer for it?

"People are not things," Rey had insisted. "They are not instruments for my vengeance."

Kylo huffed out a breath and sent the last of the revised bids to Siralt's inbox. Let the admiral deal with the irate tech companies— in the mood Kylo was in, he'd happily order each and every single one of them dismantled.

A hush fell over the massive assembly as Kira Ka Chume emerged from the depths of the Fountain Palace and knelt before the sage at the top of the marble steps. The sage was Lasseya, who had also officiated the Emperor and the Chume'da's wedding, and she smiled kindly at Rey as Duchas Myn Eriston of Lemmi IV and Osira Varless of K'Tarri stepped forward, carrying between them a ceremonial cloak of the palest blue velvet, embellished with the fractal star in silver stitch and trimmed by fur as white as snow.

"With this cloak, you take up the mantle of protector of the realm," Lasseya announced while Myn and Osira reverently draped the garment over Rey's shoulders. "Do you swear to defend Hapes from those who would harm her and to uphold the principles on which the Consortium was founded?"

"From this day until my last day." Unlike Lasseya, who had a small megaphone disk hooked onto her lapel, Rey's voice was carried across the courtyard by the Force. It rang with an unnatural quality that sent shivers down hundreds of spines.
Lairelosse went over to Rey and, with a solemn bow, folded into the latter's hand a golden scepter studded with diamonds. It was capped off with the largest shard of the ice moon that Rey had ever seen thus far, nestled like treasure within a circle of gilded laurel leaves.

"With this scepter, you wield the Queen Mother's justice," Lasseya continued. "Do you swear to rule according to Consortium law and to use your best judgment in extending the hand of mercy?"

"From this day," Rey said, "until my last day." At the periphery of her vision she saw her own face on dozens of holoprojector screens, magnified for the benefit of the crowd. Perhaps she was just trying to make herself feel better, but she didn't look at all like a grieving daughter or an estranged wife.

She looked... strong, the light of the Hapan sun pouring down on her determined, implacable features. Tucked inside the cuff of her sleeve, the datastick pressed inexorably against the pulse point at her wrist.

Daemora AlGray was the last to come forward, holding out an open, lacquered chest in which sat Rey's crown. Each successive ceremonial crown was custom-made for the ruling Queen Mother—Ta'a Chume's had looked like it had been chiseled out of ice, flowy with jagged edges, and before her Ni'Korish's had been a massive, fearsome thing wrought from thorns of iron and dark opal.

Rey's crown was made of stars. It was designed to curve around the head like a halo and it bore on every slim, jeweled prong a six-pointed star, one for each of the seven quadrants of the Hapes Cluster.

The Ducha AlGray presented the chest to Lasseya, who carefully removed the crown and held it over Rey's head. Then the strangest thing happened. Everything went silent and still; even the sunlight glinting off the crown seemed to have been suspended in a moment that was being spun out into eternity.

Just as Rey started to panic—started to think that the Force bond had activated at this most inconvenient of times—

— There was a whisper—

It wasn't Kylo's. But it was familiar all the same, like an old song she couldn't remember the words
Like the touch of someone from her past, who loved her.

"Be careful."

Lasseya's lips were moving, but the words of the coronation oath emerged in a dull burble that Rey could hardly make out. She stared up at the crown in the sage's hands, so brilliant, so sharp, and suddenly—

— Suddenly she knew; the Force blaring alarm bells in her head in a way that left no room for doubt —

"Your Majesty?" Lasseya prompted when the final vow went unanswered. A chorus of uneasy whispers rippled through the audience. "Do you swear?"

"I will in a minute," Rey said, "but first—"

She stretched out her free hand. Lasseya started as the crown was pried loose from her grip and sent hovering several feet in the air by unseen currents. Rey gritted her teeth and narrowed her eyes, and the assembly gasped in mingled shock and horror as several long, thin, delicate-looking needles were extracted from their hiding places inside the crown, splaying out in a half-circle like glittering silver rays.

It was the nobility that gasped the loudest. After all, every Hapan lord and lady worth their salt could recognize a poison needle at first glance.

"Again? You really can't teach an old dog new tricks," Rey mused. Catching Moreem's eye, she nodded, and the Dragoons swiftly filed into position, surrounding the Fountain Palace's staircase and cutting off all avenues of escape. "I suppose I should thank my lucky stars for that, because it also means no one here can wrap their heads around how the Force works. No one understands that it can warn me." The needles gathered into a shining cloud, their lethal ends pointed towards the step where Lairelosse, Daemora, Myn, and Osira stood frozen like statues.

"Your— your Majesty!" Lasseya sputtered. "What are you doing—"
"Defending Hapes from those who would harm her," Rey said tersely, and with a flick of her wrist the needles were sent sailing towards Daemora AlGray, who let out an undignified yelp as Lairelosse, Myn, and Osira scattered, putting as much distance between themselves and the poison-tipped projectiles as they could.

"And using my best judgement," Rey continued as the razor-thin needles stopped within inches of grazing Daemora's skin, encircling her in slow, revolving coils, "in extending the hand of mercy."

The aghast throng stirred and mumbled among themselves but immediately fell into silence as Rey stood up, the crown gracefully settling onto her head. "With this crown, I carry the women who came before me." She repeated the final oath that Lasseya had asked her to swear, each syllable ringing with power, echoing off the marble and the starships and the stone. "I will carry my nation in times of peace and through whatever wars may come. I will carry you all to the height of glory, and there we shall stay, and I will want for nothing save loyalty in return. I swear it, from this day until my last day."

There. It's done.

She turned to a white-faced Daemora. "And now, my first act as the Queen Mother of the Hapes Consortium is to formally charge Lady Daemora of House AlGray, the Ducha of the Relephon Moons, with treason for spearheading the Heritage Council that conspired to overthrow the ruling Royal House, with the attempted assassination of myself and the Emperor that led to the death of Lord Jobal Feara of Wodan, with yet another attempted assassination of myself, here and now, and, lastly, with the murders of both Ta'a Chume and Prince Isolder."

One could have heard a pin drop in that moment. A thousand people were watching here on the bluffs, and thousands more over the Cluster's HoloNet. For Rey, however, there was no one in the universe but her and Daemora, the traitorous architect of her family's destruction.

"You have no proof," the ducha spat, violet eyes glinting with anger—although the effect was lessened as they fearfully tracked the revolving needles.

"I actually do," Rey said coldly. "I was saving it for later, to confront you with in private. I thought I could offer you that much dignity, at least." Her voice took on a hostile edge—while Hapan was a mellifluous, sibilant language in its own right, when uttered with fury it sounded like some ancient dragon's tongue. "But you would have had me die on the steps of the Per'Agthra, rotting from the inside, clawing for air. You have forced my hand, Ducha AlGray, so we're doing this now. Where everyone may bear witness."
Rey held the scepter out to Lasseya— who took it automatically, stunned— and then she removed the datastick from the cuff of her sleeve. She beckoned the hovercams nearer before activating the device, and there it all unfolded— the holo shivering translucent and staticky in the space above Rey’s palm, mirrored on each and every screen scattered throughout the bluffs.

It was footage from a Charubah surveillance bug, of the same make that Procyon Kantale had used to track Lord Ettagar to the Heritage Council safe house on the Drudach mountain range. Last night, Rey had trimmed the footage to show only the pertinent scenes, the first of which featured a Hapan officer hunched over a dashboard in the Fountain Palace’s control tower. Glancing up, he shot to his feet and saluted.

"Ducha AlGray." His tone was deferential, albeit slightly puzzled. "How may I be of service?"

The voice that emerged from somewhere off-camera was unmistakably Daemora's, courteous and smooth. "Just checking that all is well on the Queen Mother's grand tour. Has His Highness joined her yet?"

The man nodded. "Affirmative, my lady. We have received word from Gallinore that both Ta'a Chume and Prince Isolder arrived safely and conducted the visit with no issues. The Star Home will depart for the next planet shortly."

The holo flickered and the man and the control tower disappeared. Now Daemora was moving around what was obviously her bedroom— like Lairelosse, she had a permanent residence at court, because she was one of Ta'a Chume's most trusted allies, had always been put in charge of the Fountain Palace whenever the former Queen Mother was off-world. The audience observed with bated breath as a drawer was pulled open by fingers draped in jewels, the signet ring of House AlGray ever so conspicuous, with its intertwined snakes against a backdrop of a lightning-streaked sky.

Rey didn’t look at the holo. It had been hard enough to watch the first few times, knowing that she was seeing for herself the moment her father was killed, immortalized in the bluish glow and the static. Instead, she chose to keep a level gaze on Daemora and take a certain savage delight in the realization and the fear and the anger dawning on those normally inscrutable Hapan features as the projected hands closed around a remote detonator and pressed the button. There was a sharp click, followed by a deep, vast silence as the datastick powered down, its transmission at an end.

"You were my grandmother's confidante," Rey said to Daemora. "No one questioned your movements, no one doubted your motives. How easy it must have been for you to saunter into the
Daemora said nothing. The needles drove closer towards her and all it would take was one push, and it would be over. Isolder would be avenged, and the Consortium would learn to fear their new sovereign.

*I am not Ta'a Chume*, Rey reminded herself. That was her saving grace but it was also, in its own way, her curse.

The needles fell onto the marble step with a clatter.

"Take her away," Rey ordered the guards, her eyes never leaving Daemora's face. "She will have plenty of time to think on her sins in Eremandu."

In Kylo's office on Coruscant, the stylus hovered above the blank dotted line underneath the concluding text of the Enhanced Security Decree.

He stared down at the tableau on his desk, at the hand gripping the stylus. He thought about how it didn't feel like his hand at all.

He thought about his mother.

Leia Organa was one of the things that Kylo had been successful in pushing to the back of his mind during the various meetings that were convened during the early stages of planning this decree. But now that it was about to be ratified, it struck like a blow, the epiphany that he would be effectively signing orders to have her executed on sight.

Again, that same old rage flared through him. He wouldn't even be entertaining these doubts if he hadn't remembered his father earlier, and he wouldn't even have remembered his father had it not been for Rey. It all circled back to her—*she* had done this to him, *she* had made him weak—

"*This is not weakness,*" Rey had told him fiercely, her eyes shining in the light of the starlines. "*You*
have something Snoke can never understand. Something he couldn't take away from you.”

Kylo put down the stylus. The Enhanced Security Decree went unsigned.

After the guards escorted a handcuffed Daemora AlGray down to the hangars— to be transported to the prison moon in a heavily armed convoy— it was Lairolsse who regained her wits first, out of everyone present at the coronation now dumbfounded and reeling from what had just occurred. The Duch of Talcharaim's dark eyes met Rey's and in their canny, glittering depths was no small amount of admiration. With all the poise and aplomb in the face of the unexpected that she had been trained in since girlhood, Lairolsse swiftly lowered her head and sank into a deep curtsy.

After a beat, Myn and Osira did the same.

At the sound of shuffling feet and rustling fabric, Rey turned back to the spectators. They had all followed suit— everyone, a sea of people as far as the eye could travel, gradually dropped to their knees, the motion rippling through the crowd like a mighty wave.

They were bowing to her.

And, just for a moment, just beneath this clear blue sky, she glimpsed why someone would kill for this. She saw her own self reflected on the giant holographic screens, sunbeams floating down gently to set every bit of gold she was wearing ablaze, veiling her in radiance, her gown like shining armor, her halo of stars on fire. Something that was not of the light side of the Force spread through her veins, rich and intoxicating.

Just for a moment, Rey understood.

No more masters.

She’d said that to Kylo, before, but—

— But he wasn’t here to share in her triumph. To gaze upon her with quiet pride in what she had become. To build a new world with her, one where they wouldn’t make the same mistakes.
She missed him, all of a sudden. It hit her in a painful spasm, but also— also like a breath of air.

Somehow, that feeling made the blossoming darkness inside her recede.

Lasseya stood up first. "Well done," she said, closing her hand over the megaphone disk's mouthpiece so that only Rey could hear.

"Yes, well, let's hope I thwart the next assassination attempt just as smoothly," Rey muttered in a similarly low voice.

"I don't think there'll be another," Lasseya replied, her eyes twinkling. "As I understand it, Your Majesty, the more contrary members of court were worried that you didn't fit in. But you just exposed a fellow aristocrat— your family's murderer— in front of the entire Consortium and crowned yourself in one fell swoop. If that isn't Hapan through and through, I don't know what is."

"In a nest of vipers," Rey remembered Ta'a Chume saying, "one must be a viper, too."

Lasseya handed the scepter back to Rey with another solemn bow and then, facing the audience once more, announced— in sonorous tones that seemed to bounce off the very towers of the Fountain Palace, in a cry that was soon taken up by everyone else in a chorus that echoed until the heavens themselves rang with it—

"Long live the Queen!"

Snoke's ruined visage seemed to fill the office, his latest communiqué having finally been allowed to patch through. Kylo was on his feet, expression neutral as he retreated into the careful impassiveness that would allow him to survive this encounter unscathed.

"What do you mean," Snoke hissed, "that you won't sign?" He was livid, bigger than worlds, and yet it had never appeared to be more blatantly a charade of holo imaging than it did now.
Snoke liked to puff himself up, make himself out to be more than the withered thing that he actually was. Kylo suddenly understood that, with the sharp clarity of an adrenaline that was in turn brought about by defiance.

"I mean," Kylo said, "that I won't sign. Measures on as large a scale as the Enhanced Security Decree is proposing cannot be implemented without taking into account all of the risks involved—I have sent it back for further review."

"Review?" Snoke's tone could have chipped ice. "I ordered you to ratify it."

Kylo's hands were shaking. He clenched them into fists, so that they would not betray him. "You did," he said to Snoke, "but I am the Emperor."

Snoke stared at him with something akin to disbelief. "I made you the Emperor, you fool, because I believed in you—"

"Then believe in me now, Regent Snoke," Kylo somberly interrupted. "Believe me when I say that this decree, as it currently stands, will only cause rebellion to flourish instead of stamping it out for good."

"And who told you that?" jeered the flickering holo. "The Jedi girl? How can you bring an entire galaxy to heel if you can't even control your own wife?" He shook his head. "I have indulged your pitiful attempts for this long, but I really should have sent for her sooner. Perhaps that may be rectified yet."

"With all due respect, I must counsel against such a rash course of action." Kylo couldn't quite keep the sarcasm out of his tone but, then again, he wasn't really trying to. He didn't feel like himself—this moment truly didn't feel like it was happening to him but to someone else, someone he watched from across the room. "She has returned to Hapes. The Consortium will not give up their new Queen Mother without a fight. If you are suggesting that the Empire marshal its forces and breach Kira Ka Chume's Veil and engage the Dragon Fleet head-on—" Kylo hesitated for the most fleeting of seconds as he wondered if he could get away with what he was about to say next, but he just as quickly pushed forward, because he had his father's wit and his mother's temper and these were the things that this relic hiding in the Unknown Regions could not take from him—"well, you're going to need my signature for that, too."

Chapter End Notes
Rey's coronation gown is based on [this design by Leila Khashagulgová](https://www.instagram.com/p/CsDQx7TljnA/). Many thanks to ReyloWarrior and Suzitothefuture for helping me figure out how to describe it!

I think it was commandercrouton who was the first to guess that our mysterious hooded figure was none other than Daemora AlGray :D

*Megaphone disk.*
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

Yikes, this update took forever. Real life has been A Time (TM) but things have more or less settled and I'm aiming for a weekly-ish posting schedule from here on out (fingers crossed). Thank you for your patience, everyone, and special shout-out to kylo-babe-too for this beautiful art of Rey's coronation!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I miscalculated."

Hux raised an eyebrow at the pale figure on the black throne aboard the Supremacy. It was rare for Snoke to admit to his mistakes. Come to think of it, the First Order's regent seemed—lost in thought, for lack of a better term. He was brooding, to not put too fine of a point on it. It was almost debatable whether he was even aware that Hux had entered the room.

"I thought he would influence her, not the other way around," Snoke continued darkly. "I thought their marriage would serve as a convenient springboard to placing Hapes under the Empire's control once Ta'a Chume was out of the way."

Try as he might, Hux couldn't repress an elegant snort of disbelief. "With all due respect, Supreme Leader, it occurs to me that you put entirely too much faith in Ren's charms."

"What I put faith in was my training," Snoke growled. "I tore Ben Solo from the light, cut him off from everyone who would anchor him there, renamed him and reshaped him into the perfect weapon to carry out our glorious aims... and then that girl came along. Now it seems that my carefully ordered galaxy is slipping through my fingers."

"But it is, perhaps, not wholly out of reach," Hux countered. "As evidenced by footage from Kira Ka Djo's coronation that we were able to observe after tapping into the Consortium's public access frequency, my Hapan contact was unfortunately not successful in implementing her scheme. However, she just might have provided us with a way to salvage ours."

He held out a palm-sized holocomm to Snoke, who, with a wave of thin, withered fingers, telekinetically manipulated the controls into pulling up the recording that Daemora AlGray had transmitted not long after her arrest. The ghost of a smile flickered at the corners of Snoke's paper-thin mouth as he watched the holo unfold. "This is extremely interesting, but I require context,
His smile widened as Hux proceeded to explain.

"After receipt of this footage, I went over the one from the crowning ceremony," Hux concluded as the recording came to an end, "and our dear Ducha can be seen fiddling with her signet ring as she is being led away by the guards. It is therefore safe to assume that her last act prior to incarceration was sending this highly sensitive data to me in the hopes that it can still be used to destroy her enemies—" A note of grudging respect crept into Hux's tone—"and, with your permission, Supreme Leader, I intend to not let her down."

"Despite her invaluable contribution, Daemora AlGray's current circumstances must be taken into account," Snoke mused. "I wonder if she might have become more of a liability to us rather than an asset. For what I have in mind, General Hux, your faction's collusion with the Heritage Council absolutely cannot be brought to light."

"Then you will be pleased to hear," said Hux, "that I have already dispatched our best agent to perform a little damage control."

"Good." Snoke nodded. "Very good."

_No hard feelings, Ducha_, Hux thought. _It's only politics. I'm sure you, of all people, will understand._

The spiked orbital rings of Eremandu shifted and rippled and splayed out and twisted into new configurations, letting the armed convoy from Hapes Prime make planetfall. In accordance with standard procedure, only the prisoner transport ship coasted into the landing sequence while its escorts watched like hawks from above and the warden Damaris stood on the docks flanked by a battalion of guards, waiting to receive their newest resident.

No one noticed the cloaked shuttle materializing above the convoy it had tailed through the Lorelli Reach, or the microscopic nanotech device that shot out from it as swiftly and as soundlessly as a poison dart from a blowgun, latching onto the transport ship's hull and instantly coating it in a web of circuitry so thin and translucent that it was on par with the finest gossamer. No one could do anything to prevent the electromagnetic blast that was unleashed at the push of a button, stopping the heartbeat of every single passenger and wiping out the vessel's systems in a single blow.
As the transport ship crashed into the surface of the prison moon, Bazine Netal's shuttle leapt back into sub-hyperspace, reappearing on the other side of the Hapan Veil in the blink of an eye. She sauntered over to the communications panel to make contact with Hux, congratulating herself on a job well done.

Rey heaved a sigh of relief as she entered the Queen Mother's salon. The reception was over and done with and she had a few minutes to herself before meeting with Lairelosse and Aleson to discuss all that had happened and how to move forward. It was strange to be the one calling the shots; in all honesty, Rey didn't think it had sunk in yet that her every wish was now Hapes' command. It was as if she and this new power were locked in a cage together, sizing each other up. *Am I worthy of you? Will you help me, or are you another burden I must bear?*

*Or both?*

Halfway to the ivory settee she'd planned to collapse onto in a state of exhaustion, the tiny hairs on the back of Rey's neck stood on end. Without missing a beat, she unsheathed her saberstaff and charged at the seemingly empty space beside the marble mantelpiece, bringing one of the silvery white durindfire beams down on—

*Songsteel—*

Plasma sang against tempered metal, Rey blinking at the sight of her blade wedged between two crossed daggers gradually rippling into existence as some kind of self-camouflage field melted away and revealed their wielder. It was a svelte middle-aged woman clad in light plate armor the color of sea glass, her hair a riot of charcoal curls and her eyes like sapphires. She smiled at Rey with wine-red lips, apparently unconcerned that they were both one wrongly-timed sneeze away from inflicting grievous bodily harm on each other.

"At ease, Kira Ka Chume," the woman drawled. "My name is Astarta, and I am at your service."

In hindsight, it shouldn't have come as much of a surprise. Of course Ta'a Chume had a spy network; now that she was dead, it was only logical that their commander would report to Rey.
"Still, there was no shortage of other methods with which to announce yourself," Rey grumped, sitting down.

Astarta laughed even as she deferentially remained on her feet in front of the settee. "I was curious, Your Majesty. I've never met a Jedi before. It's nothing short of wondrous that you were able to see through my armor's self-camouflage field."

*I didn't see through it, Rey thought. I just knew you were there.* But she'd never really gotten the hang of explaining how the Force worked to those who were not similarly attuned, and so she stayed silent as Astarta got down to business, reeling off the last known locations of the surviving Heritage Council members who had escaped the wave of arrests. They had all fled far away, scattering through the Outer Rim, stripped of their lands and titles that Ta'a Chume had distributed among her allies.

"So am I right to assume that they're no longer a threat?" Rey inquired.

"For now," said Astarta. "In the future, who can tell?"

Rey mulled it over. "When Palpatine's loyalists retreated to the Unknown Regions, the Republic made no concerted effort to go after them. This was their mistake, and they paid dearly for it," she said at last, slowly. "It would be in Hapes' best interests to capture all those who would destabilize her before they have the opportunity to regroup."

"Capture, Your Majesty?" Astarta fidgeted. "My division is highly trained in covert ops and all the stealth that those entail, but four nobles are currently at large, each with their own crew of men and women who are loyal to them. Even if we manage to round all of them up, what happens next, Ereneda? They can't stay in the Iron Hells forever."

Rey's heart sank with a heavy understanding of the cold logic behind Astarta's words. Those people had been the ringleaders, along with Daemora AlGray. Guards could be bribed. Plots could be brewed in secret, in the darkness of cells. People could still rally around them.

The same way people had rallied around the hope that was Luke Skywalker. The same way that various factions from every sector were now gathering to fight for Leia Organa.

*No, Rey told herself, this is different. I'm in the right. I need to secure my reign so we can save the galaxy from the Empire. This is for the greater good.*
But hadn't she heard that argument before? She knew what Kylo would order in this situation. Wasn't that why she had left him?

"When you find them, give them the option of surrendering peacefully." Rey finally told Astarta. "If they refuse, then— then you may use whatever means are at your disposal to bring them in, and I would not hold any undesirable results against you or your troops."

It almost felt cheap. Almost like she was delegating the dirty work without even having the guts to cosign it entirely.

But she was giving people a choice, and surely that was what mattered. Surely that, too, was its own kind of justice.

"One last thing, Your Majesty," Astarta said before Rey could dismiss her. "Forgive my impudence, but I must know— how were you able to retrieve the footage from the surveillance bug?"

Rey frowned. "You weren't the one who left the datastick on my nightstand?"

Astarta's brow wrinkled in confusion, and then she shook her head. "I planted the bug on Daemora AlGray as Ta'a Chume commanded, but I confess myself puzzled as to how you acquired its feed."

"Another mystery— how wonderful." It paled in the grand scheme of things, however, so Rey shelved it for now. "But why did Ta'a Chume order you to bug her closest advisor? It's almost like she knew this would happen."

"I've been thinking about that," Astarta replied. "I think, Ereneda, that she started suspecting Daemora's treachery a long time ago. I think that, after the events on Wodan blew the lid on the Heritage Council conspiracy wide open, Ta'a Chume counted on Daemora resorting to drastic measures, on striking as soon as she was vulnerable. I think that, when she ordered me to plant the bug right before leaving on her annual tour of the Cluster, she knew Daemora would assassination her — and, in doing so, give you the incontrovertible proof you needed to arrest one of the most powerful women in Hapes."

"You will forgive me, Commander Astarta, for not quite believing that my grandmother would be so noble," Rey said coolly.
"Oh, I wouldn't go as far as to believe that, either. But—" Astarta hesitated, as if gauging how much Rey knew, or was ready to hear— "she was dying, Kira Ka Chume. This is another well-kept secret, but she fell ill a little over a year ago— before you were returned to us— and she never fully recovered from it. Perhaps she wanted to ensure that she would not die in vain, or without having the last laugh."

"Well, she could have left my father out of it! If she knew something was going to happen, why didn't she—" Rey caught herself before she could launch into a tirade. Despite the bitterness engendered by this new revelation, it wasn't Astarta's fault, and it wouldn't do to lose composure in front of her.

The salon doors slid open. Astarta bowed as Lairelosse and Aleson entered the room, but the two nobles wasted no time with pleasantries.

"Daemora AlGray's ship crashed on Eremandu," Lairelosse grimly announced. "There were no survivors. The warden suspects foul play."

* *

Rey instructed Astarta to drop by the prison moon and learn all that she could before she and her troops made their way to the Outer Rim. Once the commander had exited, Rey motioned for Lairelosse and Aleson to sit down.

The latter did so with less grace than usual, and Rey couldn't blame him in the slightest. He'd had to deal with his aunt's treason, arrest, and death in the span of a mere few hours. "Lord Gray, if you need some time..."

"We don't have time, Ereneda." Aleson gave his head a little shake as if to clear it. "Whoever killed my aunt obviously didn't want her interrogated. Which means that this plot runs deeper than we thought, which means that it would not yet be wise for Her Majesty to speak to the court about our forces joining Leia Organa's offensive the day after tomorrow."

It was Lairelosse's turn to look winded. "I beg your pardon?"

As Rey and Aleson filled her in, the Ducha of Talcharain walked over to the sideboard and brewed herself a cup of tea— something strong and medicinal, its dark, herbaceous scent filling the room.
She didn't breathe a word until she had settled into her armchair once more and knocked back the cup's contents in one gulp.

"Very well," she said. "I agree with Lord Gray. The Royal Court should not be informed of Her Majesty's plans until the last possible second, to minimize the risk of sabotage at the hands of whoever ensured Daemora's silence."

"If we don't find out who it is before then," Rey agreed with a nod. "My primary task is to destroy the energy reactor powering the First Order's sub-hyperspace drives. I can do that, then return to Hapes to talk to the court. The war will have begun in earnest by then, so hopefully the majority won't take too much convincing to let the Dragon Fleet enter the fray."

"I fear that many will take issue with the Dragon Fleet entering the fray on the side of the Resistance," Lairelosse stressed. "We have a mutual defense pact with the Empire. Breaking that will not be without its repercussions."

"What repercussions?" countered Aleson. "Once their sub-hyperspace drives are disabled, the First Order cannot breach the Transitory Mists en masse. And with the Resistance attacking from every corner, they'll have far more pressing matters to deal with."

Lairelosse pursed her lips but didn't argue, which was as good an acknowledgement of Aleson's point as any.

"I need you to start talking to the lords and ladies," Rey told her. "Find out which ones are likely to support my decision and plant the seeds in those who aren't, without actually giving anything away."

"That won't be a problem," Lairelosse said. "What concerns me, Ereneda, is how you're going to destroy the sub-hyperspace drives' energy reactor. Where is it, exactly?"

"It's housed in a space station in the Colonies, less than a quarter of a parsec south of Carida's Blade," said Rey. "We're going to sneak in and shut it down for good. Should be simple enough—I tore the blueprints from Nartano Rourke's mind."

Lairelosse gave a genteel little shudder at this mention of Force ability, but she persevered. "And who is we?"
Rey looked at Aleson, who said, "According to what General Organa told me at our meeting yesterday, she will send a strike team to rendezvous with you on Bedara. It's a desolate, uninhabited planet, so the First Order shouldn't have any eyes on it. Still, be careful."

"Always," Rey quipped. "Well, I guess that's all for now—"

Lairelosse and Aleson exchanged glances. The former cleared her throat. "Actually..."

"Yes, Ducha Yliri?" Rey prompted.

"I realize that all of this has to be done, but I wonder if you are okay with it. On a personal level," Lairelosse clarified. "Setting aside what duty dictates."

Rey stiffened. "I don't really have a choice, do I?" He left me no choice."

"I suppose not," Lairelosse conceded. "I merely wish to let you know that, in the event some part of you finds this difficult, well... there is someone who understands why, and if you ever need to talk about it—"

"Her Majesty can talk to me and I'll set the record straight right now," Aleson interrupted, earning him a sharp glare from Lairelosse. "I have some people monitoring the HoloNet and Ren has apparently signed the terraforming act. The bidding deliberations have begun."

"What about the Enhanced Security Decree?" Rey asked.

"It's only a matter of time, isn't it?" said Aleson.

A lump coalesced in Rey's throat but she suppressed the urge to cry. She'd shed enough tears for her distant dream of Ben Solo. There was no point in holding out for a miracle. Not when so many lives hung in the balance.

After dismissing Lairelosse and Aleson, she retreated behind the private door that led to her quarters and got ready for bed. She refused to dwell on thoughts of her estranged husband and so, instead, she focused on visualizing the reactor core that she'd seen in Nartano Rourke's mind, mentally
rehearsing the sequence needed to shut it down. When she eventually fell into a fitful slumber, curled up on her side at the edge of a too-big mattress, it was to the images that drifted behind her closed eyelids, the maze of buttons and slender wires.

Two days later, she was on Bedara.

Located in the Carida system, it was a world of thin air and rust-colored earth. The Miy'til-class vessel Kalessin gleamed like a pale white star against the burnt sky and the cracked, lifeless plains. Standing in the shade provided by one curved, opalescent wing, Rey kept her gaze on the heavens until she saw a drop of light fall from a scattering of clouds the color of a bruise; she sent up a signal flare and the distant glimmer veered towards her, eventually taking the blocky shape of a Resistance transport pod, with its left-hand viewport and thrust vectrals and stabilizer fin.

Once the shuttle had landed in the dirt beside Rey's starfighter, its two passengers disembarked and, suddenly quivering in the face of a joy she had not known in so long, Rey all but threw herself at Finn and Rose.

"You guys ready?" she asked them once they'd hurried through that initial moment of reunion with hugs and glad cries.

"As we'll ever be," Finn replied. "Everyone's waiting for our cue to launch the attack. Remember, we have to time it exactly right— after transmitting the signal to Poe's fleet and tripping the communication nets in the Outer Rim, we have fifteen minutes to disable the reactor core—"

"Yes," Rey began, "I know—"

"If we take longer than fifteen minutes, the Outer Rim will be swarming with First Order troops and we'll be shit out of luck. We need to catch as many as we can while they're still in sub-hyperspace —"

"I know," Rey said in a louder tone of voice, not caring to be rattled any more than she already was. "Who's handling the Core Worlds offensive?"

"General Organa, Admiral Ackbar, and General Rieekan," said Rose. "Master Skywalker headed up to the Mid Rim several days ago to help with the attack there. We haven't heard from him since, but
that's to be expected given the considerable First Order presence in the area. He'll be watching for our signal, too."

"All right." Rey darted a mischievous glance at Finn. "So we transmit a signal to the Core Worlds and the Mid Rim before we disable the reactor—"

"Rey!" Finn groaned. "After! We signal the Outer Rim before and all other regions after!"

"I was kidding," Rey deadpanned, and Rose burst out snickering.

Finn scowled at the two of them. "How can you even joke around at a time like this?"

"Life's short," Rose said with a shrug. "You take your laughs where you can get them."

*

Abandoning the transport pod on Bedara, they made the jump on Kalessin and materialized above the gigantic fiery sphere of Caridan, the system's primary star from which Nova Station siphoned power for the reactor core it zealously guarded.

"The core is basically a complex static hyperspace field generator enveloping arrays of databanks and computers and accelerating their processing speeds to unimaginable rates, allowing for the calculation of the safest path through sub-hyperspace in the blink of an eye," Rey explained as she cloaked the ship. "The calculations are then transmitted to the corresponding sub-hyperspace drive via a neutralized form of phantom energy. It would be so much easier to blow up the station, but it's plated with quantum-crystalline armor. Even a turbolaser would just bounce off."

"Can't be a very big station, then," Rose commented. "Quantum armor is expensive."

"It's not big at all," said Rey. And, indeed, the space station that rose up to meet them as they curved around the sun was only about twice the size of an EF76 Nebulon-B escort frigate, a spired, circular structure the color of faded brass. What it lacked in size, however, it more than made up for in security complement, a swarm of wedge-shaped Maxima-A class heavy cruisers patrolling the celestial wastes that surrounded it.
"No dreadnoughts," Finn observed. "I guess you don't need any when you're made of virtually indestructible layered molecular material. In terms of layout, though, it looks pretty similar to other military bases I've been posted on."

"Getting to the core shouldn't be a problem, then," Rey pushed the throttle forward. "Now let's see if Hapan cloaking can hold up against First Order anti-stealth."

Finn gaped at her. "You mean you don't know?"

Rey shushed him. It was the longest ten minutes of her life, that slow, steady approach on the ring of heavy cruisers while the molten red-gold pools of Caridan blazed and shimmered in the background. Although she was very nearly almost certain of the outcome, Rey still held her breath as Kalessin eased between two of the Maxima-A classes...

And nothing happened. No laser cannons were fired, no TIE squadrons were spewed out to engage them. The relief that poured into the seating compartment was so thick that it was almost a living thing.

"Thank the stars for tech variance imbued by regional isolationism," Finn said fervently.

"I don't know if it's so much tech variance as it is the Consortium having perfected the art of deception," Rey muttered. At his instruction, she then steered Kalessin towards the external hangar bay on Nova Station's aft end.

"Ah, yes, the perfect place to dock," said Rose. "Perfect place for someone to run right smack into our invisible ship."

Finn rolled his eyes. "We're not docking! Those external hangars typically connect to the supply rooms. Rey and I can nip up there while you circle around."

"Oh." Rose flashed him a sheepish yet somehow also unrepentant grin. "Right."

"Why do I put up with you?" he groused.
"I don't know— why do you put up with me?" she shot back.

"If we can please return to the matter at hand," Rey huffed. Something about the way Finn and Rose were looking at each other with exasperated fondness made her feel *antsy* for some reason.

And more than a little sad.

There weren't a lot of stormtroopers assigned to Nova Station. Confident in the quantum-crystalline armor plating, the remote location, and the plethora of heavy cruisers, the Empire had chosen to expend their limited infantry elsewhere. As a result of that—and also of Rey timing their arrival to coincide with the mechanics' shift change—the hangar bay was practically deserted. Leaving the controls to Rose, Finn and Rey barreled out of the starfighter and into the repulsortube that whisked them off to the supply rooms, where Finn wasted no time in grabbing a freshly-pressed officer's uniform from the racks once the S0-1P autovalet droid had trundled off.

He made to retrieve another one for Rey, then paused. "Okay, this isn't going to work, Your Empressness. Literally everyone knows what you look like at this point."

"Right. Get changed and wait here." Rey went over to the door and poked her head out into the hallway. After a few minutes, two stormtroopers appeared from around the corner, conversing desultorily among themselves with mechanical steps.

Rey strode directly into their path, planting herself in front of them and clearing her throat in what she hoped was a suitably imperious manner.

They did a double take. "Your— your Majesty!" sputtered the one on the left. "Is this an official visit— we weren't informed—"

His companion elbowed him in the ribs, and they both saluted. "How may we be of service, Empress Djo?" asked the one on the right.

Rey smirked.
"Hey!" Mephala Ren snapped at the officer who had stumbled into her side as they were passing each other in the courtyard of the Citadel. "Watch where you're going!"

"I apologize." Nartano Rourke's speech was the slightest bit slurred, his expression vaguely dazed. He scurried away, pinching the bridge of his nose as Mephala stared after his retreating back.

"Rourke's been looking a bit green 'round the gills lately," Meridia remarked. "His adjutants say he keeps tripping over his own feet and staring off into space and forgetting stuff."

"Maybe he's coming down with something," Jyggalag ventured.

"Or something came down on him," Mephala growled, her eyes narrowing in suspicion behind her mask.

Plastoid composite armor was heavy, constricting, and much too warm. Rey kept up a silent but ceaseless litany of complaints as she clunked down the brass-hued hallways of Nova Station, Finn a few steps ahead of her. They were both more tense now that they had left the mostly deserted supply rooms—the two unconscious stormtroopers bound and gagged in a closet—and were marching through the areas of the station that bustled with activity, security cameras on every corner.

Thankfully, their disguises held, and they arrived at the sealed entrance of the reactor chamber with no issue. Rey used the same trick on the security cameras that she had on Coruscant and then, as Finn kept watch, she punched Rourke's access code into the electronic lock.

The doors slid open. Finn and Rey looked at each other. This was it.

"Fifteen minutes," he whispered.

"I know," she repeated, this time without rancor.

He nodded solemnly, then pressed a button on the comlink attached to his wrist, sending the signal that would begin the war anew.
Alarms blared throughout the Citadel, their shrill tones underscored by thousands of thundering footsteps as pilots and stormtroopers and officers alike raced to their ships and stations to await the Emperor's command. No one knew what was going on exactly, but there was a palpable mixture of apprehension and excitement in the air. The Resistance was finally making its move.

Amidst the whirl of ordered chaos, Kylo Ren made his way to the main command center in long strides, his knights and highest-ranking officers who were planet-bound gathering around him one by one.

"Your Majesty, I must caution prudence!" Captain Edrison Peavey insisted. "Millions of messages are transmitted to the Outer Rim every day. The signal could have originated from a completely benign source—"

"You're getting daft in your old age, Peavey," scoffed Admiral Natasi Daala. "Our surveillance nets were unable to determine where the signal came from, which means it is cloaked. Now, who would be going around sending cloaked transmissions, if not—" She broke off abruptly as a familiar flash of red hair emerged from the communications bay and joined their brisk march.

"Do we have confirmation?" Kylo demanded.

"Affirmative, Your Majesty," said Hux. "The Lusankya has been sighted, and more reports of other rebel destroyers are coming in but we have yet to ascertain which ones—"

"I don't require a roll call," Kylo snarled. The doors to the command center slid open and he and his retinue quickly assembled around the central holotable where a real-time map of the Outer Rim was gradually taking shape in splinters of turquoise and ruby light. "Send in two fleets each from the other regions. Only two each. The others will remain on guard along the nearest hyperlanes in case the Resistance manages to push further inward."

"They won't," Sarreti confidently declared. "They are vastly outnumbered. This will be a very short fight."

"Do you see General Organa's ship anywhere?" Kylo retorted, gesturing at the map. "What about Ackbar's? Statura's? This is clearly just the tip of the iceberg, so—" The lingering rage from Sarreti's stunt with Madame Lota bled over into Kylo's tone— "for once in your life, shut your incompetent..."
mouth and do what I say."

Sarreti ducked his head, duly and publicly chastened. "Yes, Emperor Ren."

After all the deployment orders had been issued, Kylo turned to Rourke. "Can your team run a comprehensive analysis on the signal to pinpoint its source location?"

Rourke hesitated, paler than usual in the bluish glow of holographic light. "I... I think so..."

Kylo frowned. Before he could ask Rourke what the *kriffing* matter was, Hux spoke up. "I may have an inkling as to *who* sent it, Your Majesty. Considering that I have recently garnered proof that the Resistance still has allies in the Inner Rim."

*

Daala couldn't help but wonder what Hux was playing at as he fiddled with the controls. The battle map vanished, replaced by a burst of static. Did the kid think now was the right time to watch a *holovid*? He obviously had a death wish— Kylo Ren certainly looked seconds away from committing murder.

The static cleared up, revealing a squadron of Hapan starfighters tangled in combat with several submersibles. Spliced together from the feeds of various astromech droids, the footage was grainy, but Daala only had to watch for a few seconds.

*I understand*, she thought.

And, judging from the stunned silence, so did all the other Imperial veterans in the room.

"I apologize for my presumption in going behind His Majesty's back on this matter," Hux announced. "I will accept whatever punishment is deemed fitting. But I could *not* stand idly by after the attempt on the Emperor's life in Consortium territory; duty demanded that I had our own intelligence network investigate. It's taken a while, but today I finally obtained footage from the battle at the Reef Fortress that night. And I think it speaks for itself."
The tiny *Miy'til-* class starfighters glided over the sea, spreading out and swirling together and attacking the submersibles in formations that Daala knew all too well. These were Rebel Alliance sequences—tentatively executed in comparison to the aces who had given her no small amount of headaches in the past, but unmistakable. The lead ship that the others seemed to be taking their cues from barrel-rolled its way through a wave of artillery fire and then, with lightning speed, as effortlessly as breathing, launched a concussion missile at one of the few remaining submersibles, and there was no doubt in Daala's mind as to who the pilot was.

Her gaze flickered to Kylo Ren. Of course he would recognize his uncle's maneuvers. Everyone else was still watching the holovid and that, Daala thought, was a small mercy; at least she was the only one who noticed the look on the young emperor's face. Despite a veritable lifetime of war, she had never seen that expression on anyone before.

He looked like his world had ended.

It was not an expression that lasted long. By the time the holovid disintegrated into static and the map of the Outer Rim was reforged from its pieces, Kylo had regained his composure, retreating behind a wooden blankness that was as good as any mask.

"The Hapes Consortium has been playing us for fools." Hux was the picture of icy, disdainful fury. "They have been in league with the Resistance all this time. Our *empress*—" He all but spat out the word—"is a traitor."

All eyes swiveled to Kylo.

"Get me that signal analysis, Rourke," he said quietly. There was a rough edge to his voice, so faint that it was only perceptible to those listening for it.

Rourke blinked. "Signal... signal analysis..." he echoed.

The Knights of Ren had been hanging back thus far, their only duty being to guard their master and obey his commands; now, though, Mephala descended upon Rourke like an enraged viper, grabbing him by the collar with one gauntleted hand and bringing his face inches from hers.

"I knew it." She turned the helpless Rourke to face Kylo. "Lord Ren, this one's brain is fried all to hell. *Somebody,*" Mephala hissed, "has been rooting around in his mind."
Nestled in the center of ten oscillating quantum-crystalline rings, the reactor core was roughly the size and shape of a river stone. Although phantom energy emanated from it in translucent whorls of amethyst smoke, it was primarily the color of midnight, silver streaks racing across its surface every once in a while like starlines.

_They are starlines_, Rey corrected herself as she pored over the dashboard at the base of the reactor, the rings moving with every button that she pushed and every lever that she pulled. _This is a hyperspace field._

It was a marvel of engineering, she'd have to give the First Order that.

"Eight minutes!" Finn called from the front of the room, where he'd placed himself by the closed doors, blaster in hand.

"I've almost got it." Rey finally completed the sequence that popped open the circuitry panel. She had to cut the wires in just the right order, or the alarm would sound.

She managed four wires before the telltale blaring noise pierced the air.

"What the hell?" Finn glanced back at her in panic.

"That wasn't—" Rey double-checked. No, she'd done it perfectly so far. There was only one possible explanation, and a ball of cold dread formed in the pit of her stomach. "They know."

"In that case, we have less than eight minutes." Finn shuddered. "Way, way less than eight minutes."

As he commed Rose to prepare for a quick escape, Rey resumed her task with a heightened sense of urgency. The moments were lasting forever but the seconds were flying past, her fingers unbearably clumsy, made of lead. She wished she'd had the foresight to at the very least take off the unwieldy stormtrooper helmet that was obscuring her vision, but it was too late for that now. The rings spun and spun as the alarm shrieked and from afar came the sound of rushing footsteps, muffled through the heavy doors but drawing nearer...
"Rey." Finn's voice cracked, but there was none of the desperation that she was expecting to hear. His panic was gone, replaced by nerves of pure steel as he tried to be strong, tried to be an anchor. It was only then that it truly hit her how much he had changed. "You can do it. Come on."

_and then she—_

The last wire snapped cleanly in two. The rings creaked and groaned their way into their final configuration. The lights in the chamber dimmed, and the reactor core winked out of existence.

The doors slid open.

All throughout the galaxy, phantom energy retracted its claws and calculations failed. Thousands of the First Order's finest, proudest warships en route to the Outer Rim were brutally yanked from their sub-hyperspace tunnels. Hundreds of these ships materialized back into realspace in bits and pieces that scattered every which way in the weightlessness of zero gravity; hundreds more were simply lost, doomed to wander forever, adrift, in those strange dimensions that no living thing had ever been meant to tread.

As stormtroopers came pouring into the reactor chamber, Finn and Rey bolted for the emergency exit that led out to another hangar bay, where Rose was waiting. The stormtroopers gave chase, firing indiscriminately down the narrow white corridor. Although she retaliated a few times, Rey focused mostly on running, as did Finn, the two of them ducking and weaving as blaster bolts clipped the floor inches from their heels.

The laser gate went up when they were only a handful of meters away from the hangar doors. Bars of radiant crimson energy crackled to life in front of them; Finn skidded to a halt, holding out one arm to stop Rey before she could make contact with the barrier. The abrupt motion left him temporarily unbalanced and the hand that was holding his blaster lurched forward. The instant the tip of the weapon touched the gate, it was vaporized, and Finn snatched his now-empty hand back with a yelp.

"These types of electron walls use up too much power. They have to cycle every five minutes once they're booted up," Rey said, studying the black emitters that ran down each wall. "After five minutes, we'll get a ten-second window—"
"Somehow—" Finn said as they both turned to face the oncoming stormtroopers— "I don't think these guys are willing to wait."

Rey swallowed. There had to be a way out of this. She counted the stormtroopers that were now barricading the narrow corridor in rows of three. There were twelve of them, surely she and Finn could handle twelve—

But their odds were severely lowered once a tall, familiar figure dressed in chromium-polished armor pushed her way to the front of the blockade, wielding a customized, heavy-duty F-11D blaster rifle.

"FN-2187. How good of you and your friend to drop by my new base. Coruscant warned us that there might be intruders skulking around, but this is a pleasant surprise," pronounced the cool, clipped voice of Captain Phasma as she stared at Finn in his stolen officer's uniform. "Did we promote you? I wasn't aware."

"Get bent," Finn retorted.

"Charming as always." Phasma nodded at her men and several rushed forward to cuff Finn and Rey and force them to their knees.

There was no hope in fighting back, not when there was no room to maneuver, not when there were so many blasters taking aim. Rey decided that their best bet would be to wait until the laser gate cycled, and Finn seemed to have arrived at the same conclusion.

If only they wouldn't get executed until then.

As her captors patted her down, Rey was suddenly, incredibly relieved that she'd anticipated the need for disguises and had left her telltale lightsaber back on Kalessin. But it was a relief that was short-lived, because she heard more footsteps coming from up ahead just as one stormtrooper alerted Phasma in hurried tones, "Captain, the Emperor is here."

No.

Rey's heart stopped cold. Every single thing that she had been refusing to let herself feel over the past
several days came crashing down on her all at once as the stormtroopers parted to make way for Kylo, who strode into view with a thunderous expression and lightsaber hilt clutched in one gloved fist, ready to be ignited.

Jedi and soldier that she was, scavenger that she had been, Rey had never before fought quite as hard as she did in that moment— fought to get to her feet, fought to avoid being unmasked, fought to stop this from happening. It was, however, a lost cause. Her hands were bound behind her back and there were three stormtroopers holding her down, their grips like iron.

And, in any case, there was nowhere to go.

Rey couldn't hear what Phasma ordered over the blood pounding in her ears, but she did hear the click of her helmet's release. It was a burst of adrenaline that caused her to surge upwards, and it was a booted foot to her back that had her sinking to her knees again as the stormtrooper finished wrestling the helmet off her head.

Kylo was standing in front of her. Staring down at her.

Their eyes met as her helmet fell away.

When Finn and Rose showed up at the Reef Fortress on the night of the masquerade, Rey had panicked, had been utterly convinced it would kill her if Kylo learned of her deception. That was nothing compared to what she felt here and now amidst the white walls and the screeching alarms as she gazed up at his pale face.

As she watched the stern line of his mouth tremble.

As she saw the lone tear that rolled down his scarred cheek.

As she bore witness to what she had done to him.

Before anyone else in the hallway could react to Rey's unmasking, Kylo's free hand moved, raising an upturned palm towards the ceiling, the crimson glow of the laser gate reflected in his wild eyes. Every single stormtrooper, including Phasma, was lifted off their feet, their hands flying to their throats to scrabble pitifully, their weapons clattering to the floor along with Finn and Rey's restraints.
Rey didn’t even notice she’d been freed. There was only Kylo, and the darkness that emanated from him in an explosion of Force power so strong that the air shivered and the metal walls warped and creaked.


Suffering.

*I'm sorry,* was all Rey could think, with the tiny part of her that could still think. *I'm sorry.*

Kylo brought his hand down in an abrupt slashing motion. Phasma and her stormtroopers fell to the floor, dead.

The laser gate cycled, vanishing.

Finn scrambled to his feet and hurled himself at the hangar doors, standing on the threshold to keep them open. "Rey!" he yelled. "Rey, we have to go!"

Rey stood up. Instead of turning around, she stepped forward, hand outstretched. "Ben," she whispered in a haze of shock and this horrible, mind-numbing grief, "Ben, I—"

Kylo shoved her backwards with the Force. She stumbled but managed to regain her balance, only to find that he’d pushed her past the black emitters and the ten-second window had closed and she was separated from him by searing bars of red light.

Strong fingers clamped around her arm— Finn was now bodily dragging her into the hangar, repeating over and over again that they had to go. Her eyes searched Kylo's from across the distance as she hoped against hope that he would say something— *anything*—

But he didn't. He turned around and walked away, leaving the corpses of his troops scattered along the corridor. Leaving her and Finn to their escape.
I have repurposed Nova Station and the character of Astarta (who wears the armor of Her Majesty's Select Commandos) to suit the plot of this 'verse.
Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to everyone for the feedback on the last chapter! Y’all really motivated me to write 6,078 words in, like, a week. You guys are the real MVPs. ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Where the karking hell is Rogriss?" Colonel Barrut's arctic blue eyes narrowed at an unnervingly blank communications screen from where she stood on the bridge of the Maxima-A class heavy cruiser *Fortitude*. "He was supposed to arrive three minutes ago!"

"The *Agonizer* is not responding, Colonel," a petty officer nervously replied as his fingers flew over various buttons and elicited only radio silence. "Nor are any of the other ships in Admiral Rogriss' division."

"I need those reinforcements," Barrut snarled, watching as, beyond the viewport, another TIE squadron was obliterated in a matter of seconds by X-wings fighting alongside the Lutrillian CF9 Crossfires that had come whirling out of the Kiax Nebula.

Starfighters weren't the only thing Barrut had to contend with. An explosion rocked the *Fortitude*, its shields shrieking in protest at a well-aimed blast from one of the five *Bantha*-class assault shuttles that had managed to surround the cruiser.

"Colonel!" another petty officer called out in alarm, his gaze fixed on the message flashing across the screen that he'd been assigned to monitor. "There's been some kind of malfunction with the sub-hyperspace drives. Several ships were destroyed while tunneling, with more reports coming in..."

Barrut cursed under her breath. Hands folded behind her back, she surveyed the field of battle. Watched the Resistance's assault shuttles gradually closing in.

"Fight to the last man," she finally declared.

---

*I made a mistake.*
The thought took root as Rey followed Finn in a mad dash across the Nova Station hangar, and it refused to diminish even as she hopped into *Kalessin* and Rose ceded the cockpit to her.

*I made a mistake.*

"Um, Rey?"

She blinked at the note of confusion in Rose's voice. Only then did she realize that she'd made the jump to Bedara instead of the Zug system.

"We're leaving the transport pod behind, remember?" Rose was saying. "We're supposed to go straight to General Organa."

"No," Rey mumbled. "I made a mistake."

"A mistake?" Finn echoed. "What are you talking about?"

Instead of answering, Rey steered *Kalessin* onwards until they dove into planetfall.

* By the time they landed on the arid surface beside the transport pod, Rey's friends were thoroughly mystified.

"Rey." Rose squeezed in beside the pilot seat to peer down at her face after the hatch slid open. "What's going on? Are you all right?"

When Rey once again failed to answer, Finn grabbed her wrist, pulling off the stormtrooper glove to check her pulse. His gaze wandered to her dilated pupils, her slightly parted mouth. "I think she's in shock."
"In shock? Why?" Rose demanded. "What happened back there on Nova Station?"

"I don't know— I think—" Finn hesitated. "I think it has something to do with Kylo Ren. He was there, he killed Phasma and the rest so we could escape—"

"Ren helped you escape?"

"After he saw that it was Rey," Finn confirmed. "And when he saw that it was her, he— Rose, he cried—"

Rey could barely understand what Finn and Rose were saying. She barely even registered that they were there as she stared out at the desolate wasteland beyond the starfighter. But, when Rose bent her head and drifted into her field of vision, it occurred to Rey that she'd seen this expression before. She distantly recalled the other woman scrutinizing her like this in the ballroom of Alqualonde, when she had been falling to pieces because Kylo could not— could not— find out...

"Oh, Rey," Rose murmured, her tone gentle and infinitely sad. "Why didn't you say anything?"

_I had no choice, _ Rey wanted to tell her. _Or I thought I had no choice. _But she couldn't muster the strength to speak. The look on Kylo's face when her mask came off— his own troops dying all around him— how he'd pushed her past the laser gate emitters before they could shut her in once more...

There was _always_ a choice, and he'd chosen to save her and Finn. She should have moved heaven and earth to make it so that she could have chosen not to betray him.

And now it was too late.

"Rey." Finn's hand dropped onto her shoulder. In any other situation, it would have been a comforting weight; instead, here and now, she merely felt empty. "I'm sorry, but we have to go. The war's begun."

"Go." She didn't recognize the thin, thread-like croak that was her own voice. "Take the transport pod back to General Organa."
His grip tightened. "What about you?"

"I don't know." She blinked, rapidly. Her mouth tasted like bile and salt. "I don't..."

"Rey, you're in shock," Rose argued. "You're in no condition to fly anywhere by yourself."

"The war's begun," Rey echoed Finn's words without fully realizing what she was doing or, indeed, what she said next. "It's bigger than any one person. So, do your duty—" Her face crumpled— "as I did mine." And lost him for it. "I will... I'll follow. I will try to follow. Go."

She didn't remember leaving Bedara. She didn't remember if she watched the transport pod fly off or if Finn and Rose watched her go first or if they all left at the same time. She knew only that she blinked and she was back in the black, and trembling fingers that moved of their own accord were punching in coordinates that her brain refused to parse. She saw only the tear leaking from the corner of Kylo's eye and how he'd bared his teeth in a snarl as he called on the dark like a wounded predator. She remembered only the way he'd looked at her through the crimson gate with such hollow despair, and how he had said nothing as he turned and walked away.

"Come back," Rey muttered as her ship leapt into hyperspace, even though she knew he wouldn't, knew that there was no changing what had just happened. Knew that she would have to live with the weight of this until her last breath. She said it, anyway— to him, to the starlines. "Come back." In her mind he was running towards her on the beach and sweeping her into his arms, he was covered in gold and gazing tenderly up at her in a world of mirrors, he was saying her name as the chime-paintings sang, he was drinking hot chocolate with her on the balcony, he was kissing her good night, he was walking away. "Come back, come back," she chanted over and over again, until her voice was scraped raw from it, until those two words took on the form of some hopeless prayer. Until the starlines were eaten away by a wash of light and she had flown out the other side and the red planet was waiting to catch her.

She fell into it, Kalessin soaring like one of those legendary dragons over forests of bent trees and boiling swamplands and deep canyons and mist-laced waterfalls, slowing only as it approached a tall, verdant mountain etched in the molten rays of a sun like fire. The landing was rough— she lurched forward, and then out of the cockpit, falling to her hands and knees on the grass. She wasn't herself. She didn't know what to do. She tried to stand up, to walk, but it wasn't long before she stumbled, lightheaded and weak from one of the longest hyperspace journeys she'd ever taken without food, without water, without sleep. She couldn't get back up and so she crawled, over earth, beneath red sun. It didn't matter how she moved forward, only that she moved forward. There was no one left who would carry her.
Through the blood-colored haze shed by Dathomir's primary star, Rey saw a host of gigantic silhouettes emerge from the dense, towering undergrowth. Rancors—seven in all, as big as shuttlecraft, grunting and snuffling with every lumbering step, their massive jaws snapping at empty air. Perched astride each one was a lithe, leanly muscled figure clad in reptile-scale armor, wielding a spear. One wore a pale silver cloak, as well as a jagged iron crown atop her mane of flowing white hair; it was this figure who jumped down from her mount with a catlike grace that belied her years and walked over to where Rey was huddled on the ground.

"Kira." Her voice was dry and weathered and familiar. Her eyes were the same eyes that Rey had once seen in a dream, and the eyes that she saw whenever she looked into a mirror. "We've been waiting for you."

"Please," Rey gasped out, "please, I made a mistake, I need to fix it—"

"Of course." Augwynne Djo extended a hand to help her granddaughter to her feet. "But first you must rise."

While Admiral Willham Burke of the Resistance did not particularly consider himself an optimistic person, it was impossible not to feel a sense of impending triumph as his forces closed in on the First Order ships above the blue-green world of Kattada. If he managed to seize this leg of the Commenor Run, that would clear the path for the various rebel fleets scattered throughout the Colonies to join General Organa's assault on the Core Worlds. And, with their overall defense strategy in pieces after the disabling of the sub-hyperspace drives, the First Order division guarding the hyperlane was already outnumbered three to one.

As the rebels fanned out into position, led by Burke's MC80 Liberty Type Star Cruiser Justice, the Empire's reinforcements arrived in the form of a dagger-shaped Acclamator-class assault ship materializing into realspace.

"Only one?" Burke queried, watching through the transparisteel panels. "And a transport vessel, at that."

"Perhaps it's all they could spare, sir," suggested his lieutenant.

Burke opened his mouth to respond, but the words died in his throat as the new arrival discharged its
TIE squadrons at the same time that it hurtled towards the Resistance flanks, cannons ablaze. *I guess whoever's commanding that ship is in a hurry to die,* Burke thought as he gave the order to return fire.

Mitaka tried not to flinch as lasers pelted the *Acclamator*-class transport that the *Heresiarch* had ejected into the Commenor Run upon receiving Captain Essenton's distress call. *Why didn't we just take the Heresiarch itself?* he wondered, his despairing gaze flickering to Kylo Ren, who stood unmoving on the bridge. It was true that the assault ship's neutronium-impregnated hull could withstand heavy barrage longer than most, but it was not indestructible. The Emperor of the First Order was going to get blown up leading a suicidal charge in a relatively minor skirmish in the kriффing *Colonies*—

"Captain Essenton." The quiet yet commanding tones somehow managed to fill the bridge even amidst all the chaos, piping into the communications line connecting the *Acclamator*-class to the nearby Star Destroyer *Defiant*, "follow my lead. Single file."

Mitaka watched Essenton's holo blink. She was one of the older officers, an Imperial veteran and, by all accounts, a rather cranky old thing. *"Single file, Your Majesty?"*

"Yes," the Emperor confirmed. "Right down the middle at full speed."

And, much to Mitaka's surprise, Essenton's stern face slowly broke out into the closest to a smile he'd ever witnessed from her.

Perhaps if Burke had been less confident, he would have been able to see it coming.

As it was, he didn't realize what the First Order was up to until their small assortment of capital ships had already driven a battle line through the middle of the Resistance formation as the vessels under Burke's command scrambled to avoid colliding with them. The rebel ships at the outer edges couldn't fire without hitting their own comrades closer to the center, and these comrades soon fell prey to the broadsides that the First Order's attacking line delivered without mercy.
It was the Slash, a Rebel Alliance tactic devised by none other than Gial Ackbar.

"All X-wings, concentrate fire on the lead ship!" Burke yelled. "All units on the periphery, pull up, pull up!"

But it was useless. The Acclamator-class assault transport had been designed to plow through orbital blockades, and the Resistance ships that tried to rise above the field of combat in a bid for optimum firing position were quickly and savagely met by the TIE squadrons that the First Order's battle line released from their hangars.

By the time it was over, there was nothing left of the Justice and all the other Resistance cruisers and frigates. They had turned into mountains of debris, slowly dispersing throughout the black.

"I can't believe we pulled that off," mumbled Essenton's second-in-command as joyful cheers filled the bridge of the Defiant.

"Kylo Ren is crazy." Grizzled old Captain Essenton sounded oddly proud. "Just like his grandfather."

After the defenses in the Colonies had been successfully shored up, Kylo returned to the Heresiarch, stalking into a conference room where several holograms were already waiting—the commanders of every surviving First Order fleet, transmitting from their respective star destroyers. One by one they gave the status reports for their sectors, signing off as soon as they were done to focus on the battle at hand. A bleak picture soon began to emerge; the Outer Rim and the Expansion Region were all but lost and the Mid Rim front was faltering. All within the space of two days.

"I hate to even suggest this, Your Majesty, but I think our remaining ships in the Outer Rim and the Expansion Region should fall back," said Daala. "Perhaps they can reinforce the Mid Rim."

Kylo nodded. "We also have to keep our remaining territory secure. Place as many Immobilizer 418 cruisers as you can spare along all the Inner Rim hyperlanes. Open fire on every non-First Order vessel that the gravity well projectors pull into realspace."
"Affirmative," Daala paused. And then, with the expression of someone about to walk out in front of a firing squad, continued, "As for the Hapes Cluster, Your Majesty?"

It seemed that every holographic projection in the room held their breath as they looked at Kylo and waited for his response.

His jaw clenched. "Send out patrols to the Transitory Mists. I am to be alerted if there is any fleet movement, but I doubt the Consortium will join the fray this early."

There was another brief silence as the other officers turned to look at Daala—some almost beseechingly.

Daala exhaled slowly through her nose. "What makes you say that, Emperor Ren?"

"The Queen Mother needs her court's approval to mobilize their forces. It'll take her a while to pull that off, so soon into her reign," said Kylo. "For now, we watch the Mists."

More officers signed off as the minutes passed, and soon only Hux's holo remained in the dark conference room. Refusing to so much as spare him a glance, Kylo kept his eyes fixed on the battle map shimmering above the table. "Now that the coreward leg of the Commenor Run has been sealed up, that removes some of the pressure from your fleet. Focus on driving Organa and Ackbar back to the Corellian Trade Spine—if you can maintain a tight offensive, they'll have no choice but to make the jump. Daala's Immobilizers should be able to catch several of them as they pass through the Inner Rim. Coordinate with her."

"And what of General Rieekan's forces, Your Majesty?" Hux asked.

"I'll handle Rieekan," said Kylo. "Judging from his movements, he's expecting me to stay put in the Corusca sector. I'll take the Metellos Route and hit him from Aradia."

"Copy that. There is one more thing I wish to bring up with you, Emperor Ren."

Kylo waited.
"I think it would be in our best interests to put a warrant out for Kira Ka Djo's arrest. Although we have no proof that she personally infiltrated Nova Station and destroyed the reactor core, it is clear that she was at the very least responsible for stealing top-secret information and leaking it to the Resistance. Now, while we may lack the manpower to actually storm Hapes and arrest her, a warrant would, I feel, serve as an effective statement that we mean business—"

"Hux," Kylo interrupted, "shut up."

He cut the feed before Hux could get another word in edgewise. Now that he was alone, he allowed his dispassionate facade to slip for a few brief moments, the deep breath that he took a shattered rasp of sound as he went over the events of the past forty-eight hours.

After refusing to sign the Enhanced Security Decree into law, Kylo had similarly junked the proposal to lower the age of criminal liability and then continued chipping away at other backlog while communiques from disgruntled officers hounded at his heels. It had felt strangely liberating, to not give a shit. When he resurfaced from his self-imposed isolation, it had been with a newfound sense of purpose, a burden lifted, a determination to finally start doing things his way.

He had planned to contact his estranged wife. To try and work things out. To apologize for not being upfront from the very beginning and to go into detail about what he was willing to compromise on and the many ways in which they could still build a new era together. But, before he could even finish thinking of what to say— how best to approach things— the alert had gone up and the war had started.

And now here he was, sitting alone in the dark, his navy decimated, his empire on the brink of destruction, the aftershocks of Rey's betrayal crashing through him in endless waves.

Yet, as far as pain went, it was more hollow than piercing. An ache that went all the way to the bone but did not, when all was said and done, particularly come as a surprise.

Of course she had stayed in contact with the Resistance. Of course she had chosen them over him. In hindsight, he'd been a naive fool to ever think otherwise.

Kylo peeled off his glove and stared at the wedding band on his ring finger, the ice moon catching the few shards of light that emanated from the now dormant communications panel. "It's a bit ridiculous, isn't it?" Rey had scoffed, lacing their fingers together as they lay on the narrow bunk in his cabin on the Heresiarch, after he had siphoned the poison from her veins. "It's only a rock that's
shinier than other rocks." At the time, he had been too relieved that she was alive and well— too awed by the hardened, pragmatic core that still existed beneath the veneer of Chume'da—to do anything more than kiss her hand and let her wrap herself around him. But he had wanted to tell her that the ice moon meant something, that it was the stone that bound his heart to hers.

It was a good thing that he hadn't. Else she would be laughing even harder at him than she obviously was now.

The communications panel flared to life and Snoke's visage filled the room. Kylo looked up, flushed with humiliation upon remembering how he had thought himself so very clever when he defended Rey to his master only four days ago.

Snoke didn't gloat. Instead, there was a solemn pity on his features that made Kylo wish he were gloat. "My poor boy." The voice that crooned softly from the Unknown Regions was uncharacteristically gentle. "First your parents, then your uncle, now your wife. It does rather seem to be your lot in life, doesn't it? To be betrayed by everyone you love."

Kylo tried not to flinch, but it was in vain.

"You've failed to guard against that heart of yours far too many times," Snoke rumbled. "I hope this is the lesson that sticks. Surely now you must realize that I am your only constant." Pale eyes searched Kylo's face, appearing to gleam with satisfaction at whatever they found there. "You're angry. That's good. Anger gets things done."

As if a bolt of electricity had shot up his spine, Lieutenant Mitaka immediately snapped to attention as he encountered Kylo Ren upon the latter's exit from the conference room. Mitaka blinked, perplexed, as the other man pressed something into his hand.

"Dispose of that," was the terse command. "I do not require it any longer."

"At once, sir," came Mitaka's automatic reply. It was only when he was left alone in the hallway that he looked at the object in his palm.

It was the Emperor's wedding ring.
Augwynne Djo's clan lived on the Singing Mountain, in a tricopper fortress integrated with the extensive cave system to form a labyrinth of metalwork and stone. Rey was shepherded to her grandmother's private chambers, where she ate by a fire that had been built to ward off the chill that gradually descended on the heights as red daylight gave way to longer shadows. It was simple fare—hunks of flatbread and blue-milk cheese, a bowl of runyip stew—but she gulped it all down ravenously, a woolen blanket thrown over her shoulders.

Augwynne sat across from her, sizing her up with contemplative eyes that reminded Rey of Luke. They were ancient eyes that held something of the universe in their depths. They were the eyes of one who had spent most of their life walking with the Force.

"It was you I saw that day, wasn't it?" Augwynne spoke once Rey had eaten her fill. "In the caves."

Rey nodded, remembering the dream she'd had while she was unconscious and at Cynthisa Varless' mercy. It hadn't been a dream at all; she realized that now. "You called me Teneniel."

"You look so much like her." For a moment Augwynne seemed even older than her many years, wracked by a quiet sorrow. "My poor, headstrong daughter. When she left with the Hapan prince—as soon as their ship vanished into the sky—I knew that I would never see her again. Not in life, at least."

The empty bowl trembled in Rey's grasp as she placed it back on the table. "Ta'a Chume killed her," she blurted out, and then she was telling her maternal grandmother everything. From Kalen's rebellion that had led to Aletra Creel abandoning Rey on Jakku, from meeting Finn and BB-8 and Kylo Ren to training under Luke Skywalker, from seeing the Winged Goddess manifest on Stalsinek IV to finding out her birth identity, from the deal the Resistance had struck with the Hapes Consortium to the marriage treaty that the Hapes Consortium had in turn struck with the Empire of the First Order, from the Heritage Council's machinations that had eventually unearthed Ta'a Chume's involvement in her daughter-in-law's death. Everything, everything, up to how Rey had disabled the sub-hyperspace drives and to how Kylo had let her go.

She talked for what seemed like hours. The fire had burned low by the time she was done. And yet, upon closer inspection, Rey noticed that the flames flickered and shifted in unnatural patterns, in the absence of a breeze. It didn't take long for her to figure out that all of this was in response to Augwynne Djo's temper as the witch processed that her daughter had been murdered and her granddaughter had been abandoned to the ravages of a scrapyard planet for fourteen years and her son-in-law had been killed in a premeditated explosion.
Rey was no stranger to fury. She had seen it in Kylo and how he gave himself to it utterly, destroying everyone and everything in his path. She had seen how Luke shied away from it, afraid of the darkness it would bring. But Augwynne's rage was nothing like Rey had ever seen before—it rippled through the fiery currents but never blazed out of control. It didn't promise retribution, only justice, whatever justice could still be exacted. If unleashed, it wouldn't scorch the earth but, rather, clear away the dead and rotten things so that new roots would have space to grow.

"You carry your anger," Rey said out loud. "You don't let it carry you."

Augwynne didn't smile, but the fire in the hearth settled. "That, Kira, is lesson one."

"Teach me more," Rey begged. "Teach me all of it. I need to know how to fix it—"

"Fix what?" prompted Augwynne. "The sub-hyperspace drives are gone. The Resistance stands more than a fair chance of winning the war. You are the Queen Mother of the Hapes Consortium. What else do you want?"

"It just feels wrong," was all Rey could manage at first. She ought to have been more clearheaded now that some time had passed and she'd gotten nourishment into her system, but her mind was still jumbled up. There was still a raw ache in her chest. In her very soul.

"Are you saying you came all this way on a whim? That you abandoned your friends and your people at a time when they need you most, and you don't even know what for?"

"No, of course not," Rey snapped, stung.

"Then what," Augwynne repeated, the fire rising higher in its banks for a few brief seconds, "do you want?"

Rey thought about defeating Snoke. About being reunited with her friends. About learning how to use the Force the way her mother's people used it—finding the ocean in her mind that the Winged Goddess had told her about so long ago. Perhaps these were nobler aims, but she couldn't deny that the first thought that had sprung to mind—the one that eclipsed all the others—was the look on Kylo's face in the emergency exit on Nova Station. And the last time things had been all right between them, when he held her after her father died, how he had promised so gruffly against her skin, "I can be your family."
Her grandmother was right. She hadn't run all the way to Dathomir just to run away from the truth.

"I want my husband back," Rey said.

Augwynne didn't look surprised at all. However, there was an exasperated sort of resignation to the upward tilt of her lips. "Well, I can't pretend I wasn't expecting that. No one would flee to the other end of the galaxy after breaking somebody's heart if they themselves weren't in love."

Rey couldn't even deny it anymore. She hung her head, awaiting judgment.

"The war is so much bigger than one person, child," her grandmother continued, in an echo of what Rey had told Finn and Rose on Bedara. "It's bigger than any two people, in fact—and you and Kylo Ren are on opposite sides of it. I don't know if the Force will give you the answers you seek, but I do believe that it brought you here for a reason. So, tonight, you will sleep under my roof, and tomorrow..." Augwynne reached out to touch Rey's cheek. Her thin fingers burned with the Force, as if it roared like a furnace within her, and perhaps it did. "Tomorrow, your training begins."

Rey nodded. Something else tugged at her memory and she blurted out, "My father said that my mother is buried here. That, after she died, he brought her body back. Could I..." She trailed off, unsure as to how to put it into words. Visit her suggested that Teneniel Djo existed as nothing more than bones beneath the earth, when Rey knew for a fact that she had become one with the Force.

But Augwynne understood what she meant right away. "In due time. For now, you must rest."

Later that night, Rey dreamed of Alqualonde.

She was on the beach, looking out over the black ocean as high tide lapped at the tips of her boots. It was raining—a light drizzle descending almost as finely as mist, streaming in rivulets down her bare arms that prickled from the cold. She wasn't alone for long; the roar of the waves and the patter of raindrops vanished, giving way to a familiar pulsing, a silence that was not silence.

At the corner of her eye, the edges of a dark cloak rippled in the wind, just beyond arm's reach.
She cried when she saw him. The night before her coronation on Hapes Prime, she had promised herself she would never shed another tear for his sake. But they were falling, unbidden, mingling with the rain that streamed down her face. She could not even begin to figure out whether she hated the Force or was grateful to it for opening the bond. For letting them walk into each other's dreams again, after all that had happened.

He was dressed in the clothes he'd been wearing the last time they stood on this beach. They both were. He'd kissed her then, and she wanted so badly to kiss him now. But she stayed rooted to the spot, devouring the sight of him, the part of her that hadn't wanted to leave Jakku in case her family came back hoping against hope that he would say he understood why she did it, that all was forgiven, that he loved her, too.

Kylo's dark eyes flickered over her face, then to the horizon. "Save your tears," he said curtly. "We both know you don't mean them."

A memory filtered in, from his mind to hers through the strange pathways of the bond. He was thinking about the night he had asked her point-blank if she knew where the Resistance was, if she was still in contact with them. He had listened to her sob herself to sleep and wondered if he was doomed to make his father's mistakes.

He now believed that it had all been an act on her end.

"I— I cried that night because— because—" She was stammering. Actually stammering. Her voice whittled down to the smallest splinter. She swallowed and tried again. "Because it was horrible, lying to you. Before the wedding I assumed it would be easy but our marriage was— you were— different than I thought. That night was real, I felt guilty—"

"Apparently not guilty enough to come clean."

"I wasn't— I couldn't be sure how you'd react if I told the truth. I had to keep everyone safe—"

"Then why sleep with me in the first place, Ereneda?" he countered acidly. "Why spend all that time telling me we could work together, that we had no more masters, when you and I could have continued loathing each other and it wouldn't have altered your plans in the slightest?" He wasn't looking at her as he said any of this. He didn't even sound all that furious. And that, somehow, made things worse. "What is real is the truth, and the truth is that you sought to lower my guard. So that I wouldn't suspect your duplicity." His mouth twisted into a cruel slash. "So that I would be easier to
"I wanted to tell you," Rey insisted fiercely. "I was going to tell you. But, after we arrived on Coruscant and I learned about the policies that you and your officers were about to enact—and when you told me that you were going to sign the Enhanced Security Decree—"

"I didn't sign it."

The world dropped out from under her. The moment, the beach, the silent waves, the ceaseless rain— it all went as thin as glass.

"What?" Rey whispered.

"I didn't sign it," Kylo repeated. The salt-stained breeze tangled in his soft hair beneath a cloudy gray sky. "It wasn't just because of you," he added, almost sullenly.

"Ben," she started to say, and that was when his gaze darted back to her.

"Does that make me worthy now?" he spat, all clenched fists and narrowed eyes. "Has my character been sufficiently elevated in your opinion? Do you now respect me enough to stop pretending that you ever gave a damn?"

"I'm not pretending. I never was. Not about that." Rey took a step towards him but he immediately inched away, widening the distance between them once more. The grief that assailed her was so crushing that she almost couldn't breathe. Even here, even in dreams. "The moment you let Finn and me go, I knew I'd made a mistake. And even before that—I told the Resistance that they were to spare your life—" She stopped the moment the words left her mouth, realizing at once that she'd committed another grievous error in bringing up her dealings with the Resistance.

"How considerate of you," Kylo sneered. "Whatever shall I do without such a good little wife, always looking out for my best interests—"

"Please." She squeezed her eyes shut, his vitriol like a lance to the heart. He fell silent and, when she opened her eyes, he had abruptly turned back to the silvery horizon, and she wasn't the only one in tears.
At her wit's end, Rey attempted a more proactive use of the bond, pushing into it all that she was unable to express in words. They couldn't lie to each other, not in this place that existed only between the two of them. Kylo's defenses faltered but, just as she started to believe that there was a chance— even just this small, slim chance, like a match being struck in a lightless room— he suddenly retaliated, shoving into their link the full horror of what she had done. Nartano Rourke and his scrambled mind, the ships— all those ships— ripped apart or simply vanishing.

A million voices crying out in terror, suddenly silenced.

Rey hadn't been able to sense it at the time due to the adrenaline that blocked out everything else, but she sensed the reverberations of it now. It left her reeling.

"I thought it would just pull them back into realspace." The excuse sounded weak even to her own ears.

Kylo saw through it right away. "Disabling the reactor core wasn't anything like activating an interdiction field, and I know you know that. Part of you was aware that something could go terribly wrong, yet you locked that part away. Because that's what you do, Rey— you lie to yourself. You allow yourself to be blinded by what you deem a nobler purpose. Even when you do the things that you accuse me of doing." His voice caught in his throat, and his next words were softer and quieter and more defeated. "The things that you left me for."

"Ben," she said again, because she didn't know what else to say. There was only his name, a strangled plea on her lips.

He shook his head. The bond snapped shut as unceremoniously as it always had; he vanished, leaving her alone on the windswept shoreline.

"It's not looking too good," the Dornean general Etahn A'baht told Luke Skywalker as they pored over battle maps in the command center of the Intrepid, the Endurance-class fleet carrier floating above the newly liberated planet of Ord Mantell along with an armada of Ranger-class gunships and EF76 Nebulon-B escort frigates. "We started out strong, but we have less allies here in the Mid Rim than we'd counted on. And I'm getting reports from the other sectors that First Order ships previously stationed in the Outer Rim and Expansion Region are amassing along the Anturi Reach and the Lesser Lantillian Route."
"The Anturi Reach?" Luke queried. "How is that possible? I thought Wedge had the Dolla system on lock."

A’baht slanted Luke an enigmatic glance from between quill-studded eyefolds. "We think the First Order went up the Ninth Quadrant. Into the Belsavis Run."

"That's a smuggler's lane, how could they have—" Luke caught himself as the realization dawned. "Ah."

"Han Solo taught his son many things," said A’baht. "I'm sure he's kicking himself right now in the afterlife."

"Possibly." Luke frowned at the maps. "We can't lose Ord Mantell. If our other Mid Rim fleets are routed, we should tell them to regroup here."

"I suppose that's as solid a plan as any," A’baht conceded.

Luke had his back to the command center's doors. He heard them hiss open and, despite the gravity of the situation, a smile tugged at his lips as he sensed who had just entered. "Well, well," he said, turning around, "looks like our illustrious patient is finally awake."

Chapter End Notes

Teren Rogriss.
Barrut.
The Fortitude.
The Agonizer.
Lutrillian.
CP9 Crossfire starfighter.
Kiax Nebula.
Bantha-class assault shuttle.
Zug system.
Willham Burke.
Kattada.
The Commenor Run.
MC80 Liberty type Star Cruiser.
The Justice.
Acclamator-class assault ship.
Neutronium.
Essenton.
The Defiant.
The Ackbar Slash.
Immobilizer 418 cruiser.
Gravity well projector.
The Corellian Trade Spine.
The Metellos Trade Route.
The Aradia system.
The Singing Mountain.
Tricopper.
Flatbread.
Blue-milk cheese.
Runyip stew.
Dornean.
Etahn A’baht.
The Intrepid.
Endurance-class fleet carrier.
Ord Mantell.
Ranger-class gunship.
The Anturi Reach.
The Lesser Lantillian Route.
The Ninth Quadrant.

The Belsavis Run.
Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the comments on the last chapter! I apologize for not being able to respond to everyone, as it's been such a busy week, but all the discussion has been so thought-provoking and it will definitely help me enrich the last few installments of this story. Hope you guys enjoy this latest update! There's some conversation on lore that I pulled from *Book of Sith: Secrets from the Dark Side* by Daniel Wallace, and I will link accordingly in the footnotes. Also, because I've seen some concerns about this, the projected total chapter count is still at 65 for now but, as those who've read my other works know, there's always a possibility that it will be extended depending on how much ground I can cover with each successive installment. So, don't worry, I'm not going to rush Kylo and Rey's reconciliation and I will do my best to deliver as satisfying an ending as possible no matter how many chapters it takes <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

38 ABY

*Day Six of Organa's Rebellion*

The First Order dropship lumbered over the grassy plains of Twith, where Major Taslin Brance's Resistance soldiers under the overall command of General Carlist Rieekan were mounting a desperate last stand. Of course, the moment the fighting reached the ground, it was always as good as game over for the retreating party, and in Boethiah's not-so-humble opinion they could have simply continued pursuing Rieekan up the Namadii Corridor instead of hitting pause to mop up Brance's division planetside. It would have saved more time.

But Kylo Ren was out for blood. And, in all honesty, Boethiah could hardly begrudge him for it.

On their feet as they were, she and the other knights swayed with every lurch of the dropship. Unlike the stormtroopers packed into the compartment with them, though, they had no need for handholds to stay upright. Not even with all the sudden twists and turns and the hull rattling from the artillery barrage of the remaining X-wings.

Indeed, the knights treated these as little more than mere annoyances as they discussed what had happened on Nova Station.

"I still don't understand why Lord Ren told us to stay behind on the *Heresiarch,*" Clavicus grumbled.
"We could probably have caught that treasonous bitch."

"Maybe that's why he told us to stay behind," Mephala opined.

"What are you saying, Mephala?" Hircine asked sharply, a hint of warning in his tone.

"I'm saying that—"

"— Lord Ren's gone soft," Meridia finished for her twin. "And Phasma and her men paid the price for it."

"How did little miss empress even manage to kill all of them, anyway?" Jyggalag wondered. "Perhaps she was with Skywalker?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Clavicus spat. The weakened hull beside his head shook with the blow of a proton torpedo and he slammed an irate, gauntleted fist against the wall in retaliation. There was the muffled sound of an explosion from outside as the attacking Resistance starfighter was ripped apart by the Force and sent crashing to the ground.

"Anyway," said Hircine, "we'll probably never know for sure. Not with all the surveillance cameras wiped out."

"That's another thing," Jyggalag said. "When we inspected the station afterwards, I noticed that the cameras seemed to have all been wiped at the same time. Obviously by some kind of unchecked conflagration of Force energy. I thought the Jedi were all about control."

"Tell you what, shortstuff," snapped Boethiah, "when we finally get around to meeting Rey and Skywalker in combat, how about you slap them with the repair bill? How does that sound?"

"You're literally half an inch taller than me," Jyggalag huffed.

"Still taller than you."
"Now, children," Hircine started to say, but the dropship chose that moment to skid to a halt. There was no more time for idle chatter as the doors glided open with a hydraulic hiss, the world beyond it a cacophony of smoke and screaming and laser fire.

It wasn't hard to figure out where Kylo Ren was. Red light flashed in the distance, and seemed to be at the center of most of the screaming.

Grinning behind their obsidian helms, the knights readied their weapons and disembarked to join their master on the field of battle.

Amidst the glittering stars that surrounded the opalescent world of Reecee, the MC85 Star Cruiser Raddus and a hundred other Resistance capital ships blinked into existence, battered and scorched from their run-in with Hux's fleet in the Gandeal system.

"Report?" Leia asked Commander Larma D'Acy.

D'Acy quickly perused the beacons scattered all over the communications screen that served as a naval roll call. "We've lost fifty ships to the Immobilizers' gravity wells. Admiral Ackbar's fleet didn't fare much better, but he made it to Borleias."

"Good," said Leia. "Tell General Antilles to start sending his ships to Borleias. Tell Commander Dameron to join me here in the Reecee system."

"Copy that."

Leaving D'Acy to her work, Leia walked over to another holoprojector and accessed Rieekan's frequency. He answered at once, his image sputtering and flickering in bursts of threadbare light, which meant that his flagship was undergoing heavy bombardment.

"General."

"Why aren't you at Borleias?" Leia asked, although there was a part of her that already knew why. "We agreed you would meet Gial there if things went south."
Rieekan flashed a wry smile. "We also agreed that the First Order must be defeated at all costs. I'll buy you and Gial time to fortify your respective staging areas."

Leia would not do her comrade the disservice of weeping, but she wished so badly that she could reach out and touch his face. They had been through so much together and, when she started putting together the Resistance, he'd left a well-earned retirement with no questions asked. "You don't have to do this, old friend."

"Old friend," Rieekan said gently, "it is my honor. May the Force be with you."

His holo vanished before Leia could muster a reply. She only had a few seconds to collect herself before Lieutenant Kaydel Ko Connix called her attention. "General, the Hapes Cluster is finally responding."

There were reverent gasps from some of the younger officers as an impossibly beautiful face filled the screen. Wholly human in appearance, save for the unnervingly perfect symmetry of the features and the irises that glowed like jewels in the staticky light. The woman introduced herself as Lairelosse Yliri, the Duchia of Talcharaim, then apologized ever so prettily to Leia but the Queen Mother absolutely could not attend to her communique at the moment.

"Ducha Yliri," sighed Leia, "I don't know if you're aware, but the war has been raging for six standard days now. As the leader of the Resistance, I need to know if we can expect the Consortium's help. I need to speak to Rey."

"Oh, we are very much aware that the war has started, General Organa," Lairelosse said smoothly. "But it is not Hapes' war yet. For the moment we have closed our borders and the Dragon Fleet is staying put until Her Imperial Majesty Kira Ka Djo says otherwise. But please do rest assured that I will pass your message on to her."

With that, she signed off, and a grim-faced Leia shook her head. "Well, at least now we know that Rey didn't go back to Hapes after leaving Bedara."

Kaydel raised an eyebrow. "But Yliri just said—"

"Communication lines can be tapped. The Hapans won't risk revealing that they're essentially
leaderless, not when there's a war on." Leia stared morosely out the viewport of the *Raddus*. "It's been six days since Finn and Rose returned to the fleet without Rey. Where *is* she?"

The quarterstaff in Aidu's bronzed fists swung forward, slamming into Rey's side with a sickening crack. It was made of rancor bone, durable enough to withstand a lightsaber, and Rey sucked in a sharp breath as she fell to the ground.

She was quick to press one hand over her fractured ribcage, willing the Force to mend her at the same time that her other hand raised her saberstaff just in time to block what would have been a lethal slash from Jhuryx's scimitar, also made of rancor bone. She used the blade-lock to haul herself to her feet, sending Jhuryx sprawling face-first into the earth with the momentum. Her ribs were as good as new once she was upright.

Although healing in the middle of combat never used to be Rey's strong suit, it was a skill she'd had no choice but to learn here on Dathomir. Her mother's people did *not* play around.

Case in point— the way the next wave of opponents converged on her from all sides, weapons flashing under the red sun.

Rey spun on her heel, thrusting one end of her staff into the ground to create an explosion of Force energy that blew Tannath, Ferra, Shen, and Ooya backwards. Her grandmother charged into the fray, rancor-teeth daggers at the ready, and Rey pulled her staff apart into two separate blades and met Augwynne strike for strike in a deadly dance.

They seemed evenly matched at first, but Rey eventually leaned too hard into one of her blows and Augwynne was able to sidestep neatly around her, smashing her elbow into the middle of Rey's spine with enough strength to knock her into the nearest tree trunk. Splinters of white-hot pain burst beneath her eyelids as blood from a broken nose gushed into her mouth. She yelped, then turned around to ward off Augwynne's next attack, only to find the tip of one dagger pressed close enough to her sternum that she would have ended up impaling herself on it if she took more than a shallow breath.

"That's another lesson." Augwynne stepped back, lowering the dagger to her side. "Don't stop. Never stop. Not until your foe is down."

Holding her grandmother's gaze, Rey spat out the mouthful of blood and dirt— garnished with a
sliver of tree bark— that had pooled on her tongue. She rubbed her nose, the healing energy that seeped through her fingertips restoring it to its proper shape with more care than she had shown any of her other injuries.

This did not go unnoticed; Augwynne snorted. "The Hapans have taught you vanity, I see. Child, your silly emperor killed his own troops to let you escape after you destroyed almost half of his navy in a single blow. I highly doubt a crooked nose will make him love you any less."

"He's not silly," Rey mumbled.

"He's a man," said Augwynne. "They're all silly. Now—" She slipped into fighting stance once more, the other witches clustering behind her and adopting similar positions—"again."

The fiery orb named Domir was high in the sky by the time Augwynne called for a break. They'd trekked to this clearing in the forest at dawn and had been sparring nonstop since; it was only pride that stopped Rey from just flat-out crawling into the shade of the snowbark where the witches had gathered, stretching out their overworked limbs and opening ration packs and scrubbing blood and grime away with water from the adjacent stream.

"It's not that I don't appreciate all these new fighting techniques," Rey told Augwynne as they ate, "but I don't understand how they're going to help me find the answers I seek."

"The summit of the Singing Mountain has those answers," Augwynne replied. "The path is rife with deadly beasts and apparitions. We're teaching you how to make it to the top in one piece." She paused, chewing thoughtfully as she cast a glance at Tannath, whose left eye was covered up by a black patch. "Or, well, mostly in one piece."

"But it's been three days since I made planetfall," Rey argued. "The war has been going on for more than a standard week—"

"And the women of our clan train from childhood to survive the coming-of-age ritual that is the ascent," Augwynne countered. "We are giving you a very condensed tutorial out of respect for the limited time that you have."
"It's a pity that patience cannot be included in the curriculum," Ooya remarked, smirking at Rey over Augwynne's shoulder. "That's the most important lesson you can learn, little queen."

Rey sighed. "Very well, then. What's on the summit?"

The witches darted enigmatic looks at one another.


"It really depends on the individual pilgrim," Shen clarified. "It's an extremely personal thing, the song the mountain weaves for you."

"If you are worthy," Jhuryx added, prompting nods from all around.

"Kira is worthy," Augwynne declared in a tone that brooked no argument. "Not because she is of my blood, but because she is herself. That makes her worthy."

And it was so, so different from what Rey had grown accustomed to hearing in the Hapan court, or even among the ranks of the Resistance where she was prized for her affinity with the Force, that her throat closed up with bittersweet gratitude. "Thank you, grandmother," she said thickly.

"Don't thank me yet," Augwynne scolded her, gesturing at the far-off peak that loomed over the treetops. "It's not me you're going to have to convince."

"Right," Rey said, duly chastened.

"We'll rest for a couple of hours and then continue your training. You need to tighten up your footwork."

"Of course."

"Oh, but I am excited!" said Tannath, her single green eye sparkling with anticipation. "You really
have improved by a mile since you got here. That means we can stop going easy on you now."

Rey stifled a groan.

Leaving Twith in smoldering ruins, the Heresiarch eased out of the planet's orbit and made the jump into the Namadii Corridor to join the rest of the fleet that had boxed Rieekan into a corner at Pantolomin.

Kylo stormed into his private chambers with every intention of meditating for the rest of the journey through hyperspace. He had barely slept since the war began but, if he gave in to exhaustion now, it would linger, and he couldn't afford to face as cunning a strategist as Carlist Rieekan with anything less than all of his mental faculties intact. Meditation would have to do for now.

Unfortunately, that plan was quickly nipped in the bud only a few minutes after he had assumed the correct pose on the floor and closed his eyes. He heard it first, that strangely weighty hum, and then he felt it, Rey's presence suffusing the air. Like radiance. Like sunlight.

Kylo refused to open his eyes. "Leave."

"You know that we don't have any control over this," she said from somewhere off to his right.

"Neither do we have anything left to say to each other."

"That's where you're wrong." Rey sounded closer now, as if she were approaching him. "I have so many things to say to you, Ben."

"Unless you'd care to divulge the Resistance's battle plans, I'm not interested. In any case, I'm sure you've already hit your monthly quota of people to betray."

She was in front of him now. He guessed that she'd gotten down on the floor as well, the weight of her beseeching gaze nearly a tangible thing against his closed lids. "If you won't listen to me, then let me show you. Please."
There was that word again. *Please.* His lip curled. "Begging suits you so much better in the bedroom than out of it, *Ereneda.*"

She flinched at that. He felt it in the bond. Heard her swift intake of breath. Knew without having to look that she'd started silently crying at the harshness with which he'd exhumed such a vulnerable aspect of their past relationship.

And, because he was a fool who had failed to guard his heart, a glimmer of self-loathing sparked within him for having hurled those words at her. Three days ago, when she'd pushed her emotions into the bond while they stood on the beach— in his dream or hers, he was not certain— he'd realized that her tears were genuine. That they had always been genuine. He was always making her cry. Perhaps that was why it had been so easy for her to—

"No." She cradled his face in her hands. Startled by the touch, his eyes flew open. "It wasn't easy. After I left Coruscant, I shut down so I could pretend it was easy. You were right, I lie to myself, it's how I survived on Jakku and it's how I navigated being married to you while still working with the Resistance." Her damp eyes were the color of a rain-slicked forest, her skin pale beneath her freckles, and all he could think about was how beautiful she was, and how that beauty had treacherously proved to be his undoing. "But I'm *done* lying, Ben. About how I feel, about what I want, so just— just try to see—"

And she pulled him deeper into their connection, letting it all wash over him, the tangled mess of emotions and memories that had built up in the past few months since their engagement.

First, he saw her despair at being used as a pawn, trapped between marrying a loathed enemy and allowing her friends to be hunted down like rats. It was... *something,* to know that it hadn't been her idea in the first place, that she'd been strong-armed into it by Ta'a Chume. Kylo didn't know if it made him feel better about the whole affair, but it made him feel *something.* That wasn't anger, or wounded pride.

Before Kylo could examine this feeling too closely, Rey skipped forward. She showed him her bewilderment at his gentle side, the desire that their furious kiss had elicited on their wedding night, her compassion that had arisen when he staggered into his chambers covered in blood from Snoke's brand of teaching. He saw in her mind's eye those days in Alqualonde, the guilt and growing attraction that she wrestled with on a regular basis. The way his touches made her blood sing and how his awkward sweetness never failed to make her heart skip a beat. Her stark pain and panic when Finn, Rose, and Luke showed up at the masquerade. How relieved she'd been that he had survived the assassination attempt— that she hadn't lost him— and how that relief had eclipsed everything else.
There was more, but the threads of the bond began to fray.

"It's too late," Kylo rasped. He'd said that to someone else before, hadn't he? Someone who'd also touched his face like this, someone who had also been looking into his eyes. "I asked you once if you would ever be able to separate me from the war, from the ruin of the past. I asked you who you would choose, when it finally came down to it. You made your choice, Rey. And I—" His voice broke as he watched her features crumple, as her tears flowed in a more torrential stream—"will never be able to separate you from that moment. It will always hang over us."

Rey opened her mouth but, before she could speak, the Force tore them apart, and she was gone. Kylo stared at the empty air where she had been until the starlines beyond the viewport faded back into realspace.

The next day, Rey woke up from a fitful slumber and knew that it was time.

She couldn't have explained to anyone not attuned to the Force how she knew. It was all just there, written into the waxen sunbeams etched faintly along the tricopper walls of her temporary chambers in the Singing Mountain fortress. She went through her morning ablutions in a nearly trance-like state and donned the white tunic and matching leggings that Augwynne had given her with slow deliberateness. Even the act of putting on her arm-wraps seemed imbued with purpose.

Of course, it was entirely possible that she was giving these tasks more focus than they required so that she would not have to think about what had happened last night, when Kylo had appeared on the floor of this very room and their conversation had hurt so much that she'd thought she would die from it. Not an easy thing, having her heart shattered over and over again.

*When did I give you the power to hurt me so?* She'd wondered that about him, the morning after their first time. Now she was all too keenly aware that he'd given her this power as well.

Still, when she joined the witches in their mess hall, the expression on her grandmother's face confirmed her initial premonitions. "Today you go up the mountain," Augwynne said. "From here, it's a day's hike to the summit. You'll spend the night there, then make your way back down at sunrise. You may not use your lightsaber, only a ritual weapon that I will select for you. And, whatever you do, don't look back. The path will distort if you look back. The whole point of this exercise is to keep moving forward."
After a hearty breakfast, the witches escorted Rey to the fortress' eastern gate, from which a narrow
dirt path snaked upwards and disappeared into the treeline. Ooya handed Rey a pack full of survival
gear, dry rations, and bottles of water, and Aidu and Shen brought forth a spear that Augwynne
presented to Rey. An intricate pattern of runes had been carefully carved into the brylark-wood
handle, and the blade was a gleaming, wickedly sharp rancor tooth that had been serrated along the
edges.

Lastly, Jhuryx gave Rey a comlink, urging her to signal the fortress if she needed help.

Augwynne smiled at her granddaughter's visible surprise. "This is another lesson— no one walks
alone. When your strength gives out and you fall to your knees, you still have to keep moving
forward, even if you crawl. And when you can no longer crawl, you have to trust in the connection
that binds all of us together. There is goodness there, amidst the suffering. You have to believe that
there will always be someone to carry you."

Half an hour into her trek— half an hour after she bade farewell to her grandmother and the other
witches and disappeared into the forest— Rey heard the mountain sing to her.

It was a wild, distant hum, threaded through the lilt of birdsong and the chatter of insects and the roar
of nearby waterfalls like an undercurrent. It reminded her of the call of the Force nexus on Stalsinek
IV. There had to be a similar energy source up on the peak— or perhaps the entire mountain itself
was a nexus. This forest was certainly unlike any other that she'd previously traversed. The red-gold
light filtering in through the treetops had an ethereal, glassy quality to it that rubbed off on everything
it touched. Leaves and branches, wings that fluttered and tails that flicked at the corner of Rey's eye
— all of it was paper-thin at the edges, there but not quite. It was like walking through a dream.

The first beast fell upon her not long after she started hearing the mountain's song. A boar— all thick,
bristly hide and glowing red eyes and curved tusks the length of Rey's forearms— burst from the
undergrowth with frightening speed. Rey waited until it lunged and then thrust her spear forward,
driving the rancor's tooth through its skull.

It had been easy enough, but more kept coming. As Rey went further up the path that wound
through the trees, more and more of Dathomir's gigantic, flesh-eating boars charged at her,
sometimes attacking in groups. They weren't— normal, for lack of a better word. She sensed the
dark side flowing through their veins and wasn't sure if they were even real, suppressing the
temptation to look back to see if their bodies were still there. Somehow, she knew they wouldn't be.
She fought her way through them for what seemed like hours, sustaining more than her fair share of
scrapes and bruises.
And then it happened.

"You fight like a Jedi," a deep, echoing, feminine voice sneered behind her. "That won't help you here."

Rey pulled her spear out from the steaming guts of her latest kill. "I think I'm doing all right." She knew better than to turn around, and so she kept walking.

"If you wish to conquer the mountain, you must forget about what is Jedi and what is Sith."

"And what would that leave me with, then?"

"The Force. Just the Force— which is all that matters. Good and evil, these are strange, cold terms. Our abilities were bestowed by the spirits that animate every creature and allow each to draw breath. Is it evil to kill? Would those who answer yes be satisfied if predators starved so grazers could strip the land unopposed only to die amid famine?"

"That's a false equivalence," Rey said dully, echoing sentiments that Luke had shared a long time ago, back when they were on his island. "There is death in nature, but there is balance, too."

"Exactly." The mysterious woman sounded triumphant. "Balance doesn't mean one type of energy holding sway over the other, does it? The Jedi Code says there is no emotion, there is peace, and the Sith say that peace is a lie, there is only passion. But the writings of Allya teach us that those who suffer emotion will never enjoy peace, that those who yield to passion will fail to dominate, and that those who fear death will never know their own power. So, do not suffer, do not yield, but—"

"Carry them," Rey realized out loud, her steps slowing as she turned the words over in her mind. "Don't let them carry you."

"And you are quick to understand this," said the voice behind her, "because you are not Jedi and you are not Sith. Your mother was a witch of Dathomir. Would you choose to deny yourself? Would you limit your scope by obeying artificial rules?"

The hulking silhouette of the largest, meanest-looking boar yet emerged from the bushes further up
the slope. Rey managed to dodge its first charge but it tossed its head to the side as if it had anticipated she would do so, the lethal end of one tusk goring her hip before the beast kicked off the ground and slammed its whole weight into her. Rey's spear slid from her grasp and she had no other option but to wrestle her foe with bare hands, its tusks cutting into her palms, the froth from its open mouth dripping onto her as she lay pinned underneath it. Desperate, she cast out the net of her senses for some sort of leverage, some weakness she could turn to her advantage—

"Do not concern yourself with the light side and the dark side," the unknown woman's voice murmured serenely in her ear. "That is the language of outsiders. You are descended from Allya, who left the Jedi Order and forged a new path for herself and for all those who would come after. Use the Force."

And Rey gritted her teeth and wrapped coils of energy around the boar's pulsating heart and—

— Stopped it—

The creature went limp and collapsed, a musky, slobber-coated dead-weight that Rey threw off with a grunt. She retrieved her spear and, once she had righted herself, the source of the voice was standing in front of her on the pilgrim's road. Her skin and her eyes were as pale as moonlit snow and her headdress and robes the color of fresh arterial blood. Rey took one look at the black markings on her face and knew her immediately for who and what she was— from the old stories, from Augwynne's own recounting of Dathomir's past.

She recoiled. "You're a Nightsister."

"And yet the Winged Goddess chose me to be your guide," said Talzin, the Zabrak who had been shaman and clan mother at the time of the Clone Wars. The eerie light of other worlds danced in the depths of her silvery eyes. "I wonder what that says about you."

Oddly enough, Kylo felt no sense of victory as Rieekan's flagship disintegrated at the combined onslaught of dozens of First Order cannons, the wreckage that was all that remained spreading out like a fine mist over the eggshell-blue world of Pantolomin. While it signaled the end of the Resistance's encroachment into the Core, he was preoccupied with the fate of Leia Organa's ship. Hux had pushed her back and there had been no report thus far of any of the Immobilizers catching the Raddus.
Was she on her way to the outer territories, or would she join the fighting in the Inner or Mid Rim?

The line of Kylo's mouth hardened in frustration as he left the bridge. He shouldn't even be concerning himself with his mother now. She'd made her choice. They had all made their choices, including him. This was the fallout, and there was no more going back.

"Your Majesty." Mitaka appeared at his elbow. "Captains Rook and Canady have engaged the Resistance at Ord Mantell. They're requesting backup. The enemy has a fleet carrier."

"Any sign of the Raddus?" Kylo asked before he could think better of it.

"No, sir," Mitaka carefully replied. "But we have received confirmation that one of the ships is under the command of Luke Skywalker."

Kylo's fists clenched at his sides. "Set course for Ord Mantell."

Mitaka saluted and hurried off. Deciding that he was going to need caf—and lots of it—Kylo stalked into the salon with the wall-sized viewport, and only once he was through the doors did his error register. This was the same room where he and Rey had held each other on the way to the Citadel, where he had wept and admitted to her and to himself that Han Solo's death had affected him deeply. This was the same room where Rey had gone down on her knees for him and put stars in his eyes.

It was painful to remember now, in light of what she had done.

Kylo turned to leave, but the Force bond chose that moment to hum into existence and she appeared against the panorama of the celestial wastes and—

— And almost gave him a kriffing heart attack—

Rey was dressed in white and covered in blood, her hair pulled back into three buns but several loose strands hanging wildly around her face. She stared at him with wide hazel eyes, looking for all the world like the vengeful phantom of someone who had been the victim of a grisly murder. It was only when Kylo noticed the spear clutched in her hands that he conceded that she might have been the one doing the murdering.
"Where are you?" he snapped. He rather doubted that the Consortium would let their Queen Mother walk around like this.

Rey cast her spear aside. It faded away into the rest of her surroundings that were hidden from him. "I can't tell you that, Ben," she said sadly.

He sat down on the couch and pressed a button embedded into the leather armrest, summoning a droid that trundled inside and brewed a pot of caf, blissfully unaware that there was another person in the salon. "Rieekan is dead," Kylo told Rey once the droid had left. "You've lost the Core. Not that you ever had it in the first place."

"And you've lost the Outer Rim."

He realized that she'd skimmed that particular bit of information from the surface of his thoughts. His mental shields slammed up, automatically, angrily—or what semblance of shielding could exist within the bond, at least. "I see you're still taking orders to fish."

Rey quickly shook her head. "No. I haven't spoken to anyone in the Resistance since Nova Station."

"Lies."

"I can't lie. Not here. You know that."

He took a sip of caf. "That must be killing you."

Rey bit her lip and said nothing. He couldn't stand the sight of her like this, so mournful, so exhausted. There was a part of him that wished he could gather her into his arms, but he banished that yearning as soon as the glimmer of it sparked in his consciousness.

"You should probably get around to talking to the Resistance soon." There was a rough edge to his nonchalant tone that, try as he might, he couldn't suppress. "You've squandered your initial advantage. I would advise surrender."
"Followed by mass execution?"

Kylo shrugged. "I would not be above granting... clemency to a select few."

He hadn't really thought those bold words through and they were both aware of it. Rey lifted her chin. "Snoke and First Order High Command would never allow that," she said.

He glared at her. "I can handle them."

The declaration was hollow even to his own ears. Rey's gaze dropped to the floor.

"Ben," she finally said, "if you had told me that you wouldn't sign the Enhanced Security Decree after all, I wouldn't have— I'd have found some other way—"

He slammed his half-empty mug down on the table. "If you had waited—"

"There was no more time! I left your office that day with the impression that your mind was made up, and then a few days later I learned that you'd already signed the terraforming law. What was I supposed to think? What was I supposed to do— hold my breath and stake the fate of an entire galaxy on the hope for a last-minute change of heart?"

It hurt when she put it like that. It reminded him that he wasn't entirely blameless in all of this, and right now his indignant rage was the only thing anchoring him. "I was so lost when I arrived at your court," Rey continued. "I had just found out that my grandmother killed my mother and I was thrown for a loop by the harshness of First Order policy— by how much your ideals differed from mine. It was easy to forget that in Alqualonde, where it was just the two of us, but once we were at the Citadel it was no longer something I could ignore. I'm not going to say it wasn't something we couldn't have eventually worked through, but then my father died and you told me you were going to sign all those decrees. I was grieving and conflicted and you weren't acting like the man I'd come to know at the Reef Fortress—"

"You mean I wasn't acting like Ben Solo," he all but spat. "That's who you want to see when you look at me, that is where your affections lie." He got to his feet, staring her down, his voice rising a little as he warmed to his topic. But he didn't yell at her. He had promised himself that he would never yell— not at Rey. "Ben Solo wasn't good enough for my parents or for my uncle. Kylo Ren isn't good enough for you. I've been pulled every which way, and in the end— in the end I have been left with nothing." His shoulders slumped in abject defeat. "Not even you."
And you were all I wanted.

The bond started to falter, as if collapsing at the weight of his confession, but Rey stubbornly dug in her heels, trying to stay with him. "On our way to Coruscant, I told you that you had me—"

I meant it then and I meant it now," Rey insisted. "I'll fix this, I promise—"

"What if there's no way you can fix it?" Kylo asked. "What if it's over?"

"It's not— don't say that—"

"I," he declared with a stern finality, "am done taking orders from you, Ereneda."

He turned and left the room just as their temporary connection snapped in half, like a string that had been stretched too far, for too long.

For all that Talzin styled herself Rey's guide, she came and went with the wind. Sometimes she was there, coaching Rey through battles with various monsters that the mountain conjured, but sometimes she wasn't and Rey hiked for miles with nothing but the song in her head.

Rey decided that she vastly preferred the latter.

Talzin was annoying.

"You know," the Nightsister said conversationally after the last disastrous Force bond with Kylo, "I think you should just kill him."
Rey categorically refused to dignify that with a response. She concentrated on eating her meager rations as she leaned against the moss-coated boulder where she'd stopped for a late lunch.

Talzin was sitting cross-legged in front of her, all at once real and not quite real against a backdrop of redweed and grave thorn. "How do you see this playing out? The Resistance wins and either he dies in battle or you and his mother advocate for his life, and if you succeed— well, a restored Republic would never be content with anything less than his exile. Perhaps you'll give up your throne and join him? Or will you sequester him in the Hapes Cluster, where he'll spend the rest of his days? Do you think he'll ever be able to forgive you for that?"

"It will always hang over us," Kylo had said. Rey blinked back tears. She was so sick and tired of crying. So she ate her rations instead.

"Or, the First Order wins," Talzin said, "and if you don't die in battle, then will you give yourself up? Will he even be able to take you prisoner, considering that Snoke and the rest will be crying out for your blood? Or will you and the surviving Resistance members flee and continue trying to topple his empire from the shadows? Either way, there is no happy ending to this story. Not for you and him."

"I'll cross that bridge when I get there," Rey started to say, but Talzin suddenly leaned forward, white eyes narrowed.

"No," she growled. "That is how you got into this mess. Compartmentalizing, succumbing to your impulses, not thinking things through. And look at where you are now— in the woods talking to ghosts while your friends and your husband engage in a dick-measuring contest to see who can blow the other up first!"

"It's not a dick-measuring contest," Rey said, appalled. "It's the fate of the galaxy—"

"A fate determined by who has the largest warships, the strongest cannons, the most soldiers." Talzin waved a dismissive hand. "Like I said, dick-measuring contest. The afterlife has given me a broader perspective on things."

Rey washed down the last of her lunch with a generous swig of water. Talzin hovered over her as she packed up. "There is no other way this story can end but at the point of a blade," the Nightsister warned. "Yours or his."
"Or ours," Rey burst out. "There's still a chance. We can still defeat Snoke together, me and him."

Instead of arguing with her, a satisfied smile graced Talzin's blackened lips. "There," she said smugly. "That's what you want to happen. That's the way out that you see. But do you really think he'll choose you over his master, when you've already chosen the Resistance over him?"

"If I'd chosen them over him, I wouldn't be here now, would I?"

"Somehow, I don't think he sees it that way," Talzin said dryly.

"I'll trust him." Rey shouldered her pack and began walking the path again. "That's what I failed to do before. Things didn't go the way I expected and I let that blind me, and I ran once it got difficult. But I know better now. Augwynne Djo said that there is goodness amidst the suffering. I'll trust in that, and in him."

"There you go again, with good and evil," Talzin mocked. "I knew someone once. You could say she was like a daughter to me. She died to turn a man towards redemption. Will that be your fate as well?"

"I have no fate but my own," Rey countered. "And, anyway, you were the one who said that those who fear death will never know their own power."

"Allya said that, not me."

It wasn't long before Rey realized that Talzin had vanished and that she was alone once more beneath the trees. It took a few more minutes of walking for Kylo's voice to materialize behind her.

"Rey." He said her name so tenderly, like nothing had changed between them.

Don't look back, Augwynne had told her. The path will distort if you look back.

It wasn't him. The Force bond hadn't activated and he would never say her name like that, the way
they were now.

Perhaps he would never say her name like that ever again.

*Could I live with that?* she wondered.

The apparition repeated her name. It sounded so much like him. Fighting every instinct that was screaming at her to turn around, Rey shielded her eyes from the sun and continued her ascent.

Chapter End Notes

Twith.
Taslin Brance.
Carlist Rieekan.
Namadii Corridor.
Reecce.
The Gandeal system.
Borleias.
Duala Aidu.
Jhuryx.
Tannath.
Ferra.
Shen.
Ooya.
Domir.
Snowbark tree.
Pantolomin.
Brylark tree.
Dathomiri boar.
Nightsisters.
Book of Law.

“Wild Power” by Mother Talzin.

This will come as no surprise to fans of the *Clone Wars* animated series but Talzin was, of course, talking about *Asajj Ventress*.

*Redweed*.

*Grave thorn*. 
Chapter 62

Chapter Notes

Thank you to mwykhuis for this lovely playlist!

Please note that there is a trigger warning in this chapter for casual talk about women potentially being forced into slavery. The remark is made in the paragraph between the lines "The collective visual effect was unsettling..." and "We have a deal, then?"

As always, feedback on this installment would be much appreciated!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"General, we need to talk."

It was Finn's first day back on the Raddus after a retreat during a planet-side skirmish in the Core had forced him to hop onto one of the Ninka's dropships. There was a touch of furtiveness to his solemn demeanor that made it clear this was a conversation best held in private; Leia dismissed the last of the controllers filing out of the boardroom after a logistics meeting and turned an expectant face to him once they were alone.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"You might want to sit down for this."

"Good news, then," Leia quipped to cover up a tiny flicker of anxiety even as she complied.

"It... it's not bad news. Not really. I don't know yet."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense." She leaned forward, arms crossed, elbows resting on the table, and inclined her head. "Proceed."

"Okay, so—" Finn swallowed nervously. "First of all, I'd like to apologize for not telling you right away, but you'd already launched the offensive by the time Rose and I got back from the Carida system and there was no more opportunity to speak with you. This is what happened there, on Nova
Leia didn't say anything or otherwise react in any discernible way all throughout Finn's summary of the events in the Carida system. Her politician's mask— her general's mask— was firmly in place, to conceal her inner turmoil. There had been no time to fully debrief Finn and Rose upon their return to the fleet, aside from a hurried communique during which they'd informed Leia that Rey wasn't with them. The attack had begun once the sub-hyperspace drives were deactivated— and it wouldn't have changed things, in any case. Rey was gone and Kylo's Sovereign-class Super Star Destroyer had come out swinging.

Still, Leia wished that she'd known sooner.

"I haven't spoken to Rose yet," said Finn. "Came to you as soon as we docked—"

"Rose was part of the maintenance crew transferred to the Vigil after it sustained heavy damage in the first wave," Leia interrupted. "That's probably why she wasn't able to tell me, either. I have to admit, Lieutenant, of all the reasons for Rey going AWOL, this wouldn't have been my first guess. Luke did something similar after the Battle of Hoth, so I assumed it was one of those— Force things—"

"Those Force things."

"Oh, don't look at me like that, I'm not a Jedi," Leia huffed, before returning to the matter at hand. "When they got married I'd hoped that Rey could find the light in my son, but it was a hope that steadily waned as the months passed. I never imagined that this would happen— that she would grow to have feelings for him and that it would be mutual. I wouldn't have asked her to do this, if only I'd known."

Finn cocked his head. "You really think there could have been some other way, General?"

Leia paused. "I'm not sure if I think that," she finally admitted. "And we're not just fighting my son, but the entire First Order and all that they stand for. So perhaps that means that disabling the sub-hyperspace drives was the right thing to do, even if the effects were graver than we expected. But I do think that we asked too much of Rey, and maybe I would have searched for other options. Then again, this conflict is bigger than two people..." She trailed off. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. I'm rambling. It's over and done with, and too late, now."
"So what do we do?" Finn asked gently.

"We keep moving forward," said Leia Organa, who had spent most of her life walking in the footsteps of martyrs and living with the results of her choices— both the good and the bad. "We learn from our mistakes. We fight, and we see what can still be saved."

The ssurian— the eighth of its kind to attack in the span of three hours— rose up from out of the bruise-colored twilight, scaled hide gleaming and fangs snapping at the air as it unleashed a thrumming hunting call. Rey shoved it away with the Force; it staggered but managed to wind a spiny, powerful tail around her ankle in the process, dragging her forward and into the dirt. Before her spear could once again slip from her fingers as she lost her balance, she threw it at her opponent, piercing one yellow eye. The ssurian shrieked in agony, rolling on top of her and tearing into her flesh with its razor-sharp claws.

Exhausted, injured, aching, Rey dug deep into herself, into the veins of her ancestors, into the bones of the land that her mother had called home. A tangle of nearby vines stretched out, wrapping around the beast's limbs, ensnaring it long enough for Rey to grip the handle of the spear and push, further in, until the lethal end sank into the brain. The ssurian emitted one last shrill scream and then dissolved into a flock of—

— Steelpeckers, Rey realized numbly. The carrion birds of Jakku. The vines fell away and she was enveloped in a whirl of oil-slicked feathers, beaks as hard as iron smashing new wounds into her skin. Instead of finishing her off, though, the steelpeckers simply flew past her and vanished, their rusty caws fading into nothingness, and suddenly—

— Suddenly she was in the Graveyard of Giants and, looming a few feet away, like an obsidian tower blocking out the stars, was the wreckage of the Executor-class Star Dreadnought called Ravager, half-submerged in the silvery sands.

The years came rushing back. All those years of hunger and loneliness and drought. Almost two decades' worth of misery.

Rey stumbled forward as clumsily as a child taking their first steps. She'd forgotten how to walk amidst the treacherous dunes, how to balance her weight just right. How could she have forgotten?

Her hair was in her eyes, dislodged from their updo by hours of physical exertion. Before she could
make any move to fix it, she froze in her tracks as a pair of hands that weren't her own raked through the rumpled tresses, gathering them into sections, arranging them into the three-bun style with the practiced ease of one who had done it hundreds of times in the past.

"It's harder to do this now that you're taller than I am."

Rey had heard that voice before. The walls that her mind had built around her childhood trauma disintegrated and a host of memories came flooding back. She knew that, if she turned around, the woman standing behind her would have gray eyes and wavy hair like dark gold.

But she couldn't turn around. That was the point.

She had to keep going.

"You sold me," she whispered. There was Unkar Plutt's meaty hand clamping down on her skinny arm, there was a ship flying away as she screamed and begged for its pilot to return to her. "The crash knocked me out. I didn't see you kill the guard who'd survived. When I came to, you marched me across the sands until we reached Niima Outpost, where you bartered with Plutt for another ship. I didn't understand what was going on. You told me you'd be back."

"I regretted it, you know," said Aletra Creel. "Towards the end of my life, I started thinking about you more and more. Wondered how you were, if you were still alive. But I remained convinced that I'd done the right thing. The monarchy was evil. It could not be allowed to go on."

"Sure," Rey said bitterly. "Like I destroyed all those ships. Like Luke raised his blade over his sleeping nephew. Like the First Order wiped the Hosnian system from the galactic map. The other side is evil, and so they cannot be allowed to go on."

"You do realize—"Aletra carefully worked the last hair tie around the third bun— "that the fleets you obliterated were on their way to kill the Resistance? It's not like they were defenseless civilians dragged from their houses and rounded up and executed at point-blank range. No, little empress, your husband is the one guilty of sanctioning that particular genocide."

Rey's breath hitched in her throat. The Tuanul massacre had been buried underneath all the horrors of the ensuing years, the deaths of those humble villagers a mere footnote in pages upon pages of casualties. But there was no denying the reality of it now— not while she was standing on the same blood-soaked sand.
"We've all done terrible things," Aletra continued. "The difference in character comes down to whether or not we lose sight of why we did them. If you allow yourself to forget what you were fighting for in the first place, it will all have been for nothing. I regret what I did to you, Kira Ka Djo, but I own that choice. I will not apologize."

"Good," Rey said. "Because I wouldn't have forgiven you, anyway."

And, with that, she took the next step, and the next, leaving Aletra Creel in the past.

Once she was at the base of the *Ravager*, Rey detached her fibercord from the utility belt around her waist. She tossed up the grappling hook and it sailed through desert air and moonlight, lodging with unerring accuracy into a blown-out viewport. The cord stretched taut as she hauled herself up the length of the ship, scrambling from one familiar foothold to the next. She'd neglected to heal her wounds and hadn't rested since the early afternoon; every muscle cried out in protest, centimeters of skin splitting anew with each stretch.

But she didn't stop. *I must rise,* she told herself. *At the summit I will find revelation.* This old wreck was her mountain now, rising over the barren land where she had suffered and held on to goodness, held on to hope. And she was halfway to the top when she felt that someone was there with her.

The beating of mighty wings was as loud as thunder in the desert silence.

*You're late.*

Rey had come too far to lie. "I wanted to stay with him," she told the Winged Goddess, who was behind her, keeping pace with her as she scaled the long-dead starship. "I knew the day would come when I would have to fulfill my duties to the Resistance. I wanted to make the most out of every moment. I wanted to keep living in the dream of us."

*You knew that day would come, and yet you fell in love, anyway.*

"I was so alone." Stars, it was painful to admit this out loud. Painful and freeing, all at once. "When I
was with him, everything else ceased to matter. He made me feel things no one ever had before—"

The surrounding air currents seemed to warp as the Goddess' amused exasperation wove through the Force. *You really are twenty-two years old, Kira Ka Djo. But this is not the first time the galaxy will burn due to a youthful romance.*

"It won't," Rey vowed. She remembered confronting Ta'a Chume, remembered stopping the shards of broken glass before they could kill her mother's murderer. She remembered doing the same with Daemora AlGray, poison needles suspended in slow time, her heart still raw from her father's death. "I'll break the cycle. I've done so before."

*Onward and upward, then,* said the Goddess.

The blazing scarlet edge of a crossguard lightsaber stopped mere centimeters away from Clavicus' neck as he lay on his back on the floor of the training room aboard the *Heresiarch,* surrounded by the similarly prone bodies of his fellow knights.

"That will be all." Kylo extinguished his blade with a curt nod. "I expect better form tomorrow. Dismissed."

A collective groan rose up from the knights as they struggled to get to their feet.

Jyggalag winced as the movement jarred his fractured collarbone. "Can't make it to Ord Mantell fast enough."

"We have two standard days' worth of hyperspace travel left to go, and then some. I suspect that Lord Ren will have killed all of us by the time we get there," Mephala grumbled, limping out of the room aided by her twin sister.

Hircine bowed to Kylo. "You have grown stronger, my lord."

"Have I." It wasn't a question. It was nothing more than a noncommittal, deadpan, and surefire way to end any and all attempts at chatter. Hircine quickly exited the training room, leaving the Emperor
Kylo had only just tapped his lightsaber hilt to his utility belt when the telltale sound of the bond opening up encompassed his senses. Rey was sitting down, leaning against the wall and sucking in a sharp breath as she poured healing energy into a gash along her forearm. Concern flickered through him; he brutally stamped it out, covering it up with how much he wanted to accuse her of having lied to him again— she was obviously fighting somewhere, sustaining what couldn't be anything other than battle wounds—

"You know I'm not with the Resistance." She sounded tired and defeated.

"I don't know anything at all when it comes to you," Kylo said bluntly. "Perhaps I never did."

Rey turned her head slightly away from him, blinking in rapid beats. He felt another stab of guilt— she was crying again because she was still unused to this new harshness, and she was trying not to make it too obvious because she was afraid he'd accuse her of manipulating him with tears again. "You know me better than anyone else does," she said softly. "There are parts of myself that I've only ever given to you."

The junk droid. The loneliness. Her face when she came. Her grief at her father's death.

And before that— before they were married, before this whole mess— the waiting, the ocean. The island. She hadn't given these willingly; he'd taken them from her, the same way she took his fear, the same way she plucked Vader from his mind.

In hindsight, it had been naive of him to assume that they could ever move past such contentious beginnings.

"For so long I thought you were a monster," Rey continued, echoing his bleak thoughts. "I couldn't stand the idea of being married to you, of having to tolerate your presence. But, before the wedding, your mother and your uncle finally told me everything that had happened, how Snoke had targeted you since even before you were born and how their own mistakes contributed to you becoming Kylo Ren. It didn't completely absolve you in my mind but it was a start. And then..."

"And then what?" Kylo snapped, eager to have this conversation over and done with while at the same time curious to know what other pathetic excuses she had up her sleeve.
"And then you happened," Rey told him, one hand moving in a gesture of helplessness. "You were obnoxious and rude but then you were also so— so gentle with me, and I saw for myself how Snoke was treating you and how you had genuinely good ideas about governance and how to meet people's needs, but you were constrained by what your master and your officers wanted. Still, I thought there could be a chance, that if I could just get through to you, we'd be able to break free from all of them, and you'd turn back to the light like your mother and your uncle hoped you would—"

"They did?" Kylo asked despite himself.

Rey nodded. "Yes," she said, and she showed him her memories of Luke and Leia on Stalsinek IV. For the first time, Kylo was confronted with tangible evidence of Leia's sorrow and Luke's regret.

The people he failed, who— he now realized— thought they'd failed him as well.

The people who still wanted him back, even after he'd killed Han Solo.

"Maybe I was wrong— maybe we all were." Rey spoke in hushed tones that nevertheless suddenly seemed to carry a certain urgency, even if she wouldn't quite look at him just yet. "Maybe it's not which aspect of the Force calls to you but how and why you use it that determines the kind of person you are. And the thing is, when it comes to you, I've seen that person. I know that person. He held me when I cried, he cracked down on the Hutts and their slavery rings, he wanted to ensure a fairer distribution of wealth, he switched to water when he saw that alcohol was making me uncomfortable, he listened to me when he saw that alcohol was making me uncomfortable, he listened to me when I explained about Crul and Ithor, he read the book of poetry I gave him, he promised me we wouldn't make the previous generation's mistakes. And he— he saved me and my friend, he let us escape even after I betrayed him." She turned her head towards him and there they were, those amazing eyes, those beseeching eyes, startlingly luminescent in what was not the artificial light of the trailing room but must have been some kind of moonlight, somewhere. They were still damp, but no longer wet with tears, as if she'd managed to get herself under control. "That's who you are without Snoke, without First Order High Command, without your family's legacy. It's not a matter of Ben Solo versus Kylo Ren, and it was unfair of me to think that before. It's just— it's you. Whatever name you wish to call yourself."

She disappeared before he could muster a response. Which was just as well, because he had no idea what to say, anyway. He couldn't find the words.

Rey exhaled a shaky breath as she left the bond— or the bond left her, she had never really been able to tell. She was perched at the edge of one of the Ravager's many hollowed-out nooks where a cannon had once been lodged, long since taken apart and exchanged for rations by the scavengers.
that patrolled the dunes. By her estimate, there was a good fifty feet of climbing left to go, but she'd decided to take a quick break and heal since there was no use getting this far only to plunge to her death.

What she hadn't bargained on was Kylo materializing further down the nook; then again, since when had the Force bond ever been predictable? The conversation had left her reeling as always, but she had to keep going. It was almost midnight.

In spite of her determination— in spite of the fact that she'd just mended her various cuts and bruises and poured relief into her aching muscles— Rey somehow felt more exhausted than ever as she hauled herself along the length of fibercord once more. It was her heart that was weighing her down, heavy with the sheer hopelessness that had risen anew, the doubts that had started creeping in.

What if he's right and it's too late?

What if he never forgives me?

What if Snoke wins?

She faltered, her grip slacking as she slid down the cord by several inches, the friction burning through the gauze she'd wrapped around her palms. She couldn't find the strength to pull herself up again. Whatever inner reservoir she maintained just wasn't there anymore—

Poor child. Always having to fight so hard for everything, all your life.

"I'm so tired." It was a ragged confession, to the badlands, to the Goddess.

I know. There is no help I can offer but this.

The next time Rey blinked, she was no longer dangling in the air off the hull of a sunken starship. Instead, she was back in the hazy in-between place that she'd first stepped into while communing with the Force at the temple on Stalsinek IV several months ago, standing in front of a white throne that was suspended in currents of both light and darkness. She saw the three figures again; the man and woman on either side of the throne remained cloaked in shadow but, as the small figure seated on the throne raised its head, the beams of ghostly radiance fell across its face in flickering veils.
You didn't see clearly last time because you weren't ready yet, the Goddess said in Rey's ear, in a voice that sounded like wings. Are you ready now? Do you see it?

"Yes," Rey croaked.

She saw it.

She saw the future.

The child sitting on the throne couldn't have been older than eleven. She had Rey's eyes and freckles, but the rest— the ivory skin, the hair flowing in thick, dark waves beneath a silver crown, the ears that stuck out slightly, the full mouth, and the intense, studious expression— they were all—

This is one of many possible futures, explained the Goddess, and I truly do not know if it is still within your reach. But this is what you are seeing now because it's the future you want. The future you must fight for.

"Just like I fought for everything else." Rey echoed the Goddess' words almost absentmindedly as she stared at her daughter, who looked back at her with all the imperiousness of the Hapes Consortium through eyes that burned with the solemn might of Skywalker blood. "All my life."

Even the greatest wars must someday come to an end, the Goddess said as the vision began to fade. Make the right choices in the days to come, and perhaps that will be your last battlefield.

The world between worlds splintered away, each strand of silvery light gradually reforging into the wasteland that was Jakku. But not before Rey saw one last thing— a scene so fragile and dreamlike, caught amidst the wisps of shifting dimensions, as faint as a holo degraded by time and space.

A much, much younger version of the girl who had been sitting on the throne was now running down a marble hallway overgrown with flowers of every color and shape, as fast as her little toddler's legs could carry her. Her arms opened wide as she all but flew into the embrace of the man who had bent down to pick her up. Although his back was turned to Rey, she would know that tall frame and those broad shoulders anywhere, clad in high-collared black silk. His hair was cut a little shorter, shot through with streaks of gray here and there, and he scooped the child up as her chubby fingers tugged at his ears and she babbled at him in an endless, nonsensical stream of Hapan, his own
responses a low, deep rumble that Rey couldn't make out.

Rey wanted to call his name, wanted to stay forever in the in-between with him and the child that they would someday, maybe have, but the vision was so horribly quick to slip from her grasp that, even before she'd finished processing what she was seeing, she was already on Jakku again, alone with the desert wind and the starlight and the single thought that resounded through the chambers of her being and blotted out all else.

_I have a family._

It was with a newfound determination that Rey resumed the climb once more, ignoring the weariness, ignoring the ache, higher up and further in until—

— With lungs bursting from exertion and head swimming with adrenaline and sweat dripping into her eyes—

— She hauled herself over the last ledge, scrambling to plant her feet on top of the _Ravager_, which was no longer the _Ravager_ but the summit of the Singing Mountain, a lush forest coated silver and black by the humid Dathomiri night—

_Rest now_, murmured the Winged Goddess as Rey collapsed onto the soft, grassy earth, breath emerging in ragged gasps. _Rest now, scavenger, warrior, child of witches, dragon queen. Rest, and wake with the sunrise._

Within the metallic confines of the Hollow Moon in the Si’Klaata Cluster, Jubilee Wheels spun and holographic figures marched across Denebian chessboards and gold-and-silver dice rattled inside rolling cups beneath the same array of burnished chandeliers that shed an opulent radiance over glittering robes and flutes of candied ice wine while a live band played jazzy Wroonian blues.

_You would think_, Hux mused to himself as several Nikto enforcers guided him through the crowd, a sardonic half-smile creeping along the corners of his lips, _that the war was a distant dream_. And perhaps it was for many of the casino world's patrons, deep into their cups and eyes glassy with spice as credits slipped from their fingers with each pull of a lever and new hand that was played. No one here possessed the slightest inclination or was even in any state to care about the war, save for a scattering of weapons industry magnates— and, even then, their concern stretched only as far as to which side offered the most lucrative deal.
Hux's reptilian escorts led him to one of the back rooms, where he was patted down by more Nikto guards that were stationed outside. Only once they were satisfied that he posed no threat was he granted admittance.

In contrast to the rest of the Hollow Moon that Hux had seen thus far, this room was dimly lit, the air thick with the distinctive odor of Marcan herb. Twelve pairs of large feline eyes peered at him through the smoke, some yellow, some red, others green, protruding from bulbous heads set atop immense, slug-like bodies dripping with leathery folds of skin coated in mucus and slime.

"A skinny thing, this ootmian," Durga Besadii Tai remarked to his colleagues. "I could use him for a toothpick."

Hux maintained an impassive expression as the rest of the Hutt Cartel burst into a cacophony of booming, guttural laughter. "Your lordships," he said in competent Huttese once they'd settled, "I've arranged for this meeting because I believe that we can come to a very mutually beneficial arrangement. Although the Cartel and the First Order have had our differences in the past—"

"Yes," interrupted Vedo Anjiliac Atirue, "your emperor chased us out of many of our footholds and halted slavery operations for a while. It will take years to recoup our losses, thanks to him."

"The young Solo," spat Narbuj Desilijic Preor, who hailed from the same clan as Jabba. There was another chorus, this time one of angry muttering. The Hutts had long memories.

"Tell us, General," Soergg Vosadii Bezhin growled, "why should we make any kind of deal with the likes of you?"

"Because I am not here on behalf of Kylo Ren," Hux calmly replied. "Quite the opposite, in fact."

The Hutts fell silent as abruptly as if a velvet curtain had dropped. For all their affectations, the kajidii were gangsters, first and foremost. They could smell a promising enterprise a mile away.

"Now that I have your attention, I'll get straight to the point," said Hux. "After we stamp out the Resistance, I plan to overthrow Kylo Ren. I will need more ships in order to do so, as he is not
without supporters in our ranks and most of the fleets I was counting on were destroyed along with the sub-hyperspace drives' energy reactor. I am well aware that the Cartel has amassed a considerable navy of its own over the centuries; thusly, I propose an alliance between my faction and your esteemed organization."

Tooga Jallisi Gral removed the hookah pipe from his lips. "And what do we get in return?" he asked through a puff of smoke.

"Freedom," Hux said. "Under my rule, the First Order won't encroach on Hutt Space or interfere with your activities as long as they pose no direct threat to my authority elsewhere in the galaxy. I'll also need muscle to get the more uncooperative worlds in line—perhaps we might even be able to work out a retainer fee for your services in that regard."

The Hutts conferred among themselves in low voices. Hux waited.

"It sounds like a good bargain," Vedo finally said. "Almost too good to be true. There are many risks to consider. For example, Kylo Ren is married to the Hapan Kwee-Kunee, is he not? We do not wish to engage the Consortium fleet. Those dragon ships can bite."

"You won't be engaging the full brunt of it," countered Hux. "The Queen Mother has allied with the Resistance and it's only a matter of time before her ships enter the fray. You will be swooping in afterwards, to pick the bones clean. In addition, we have estimated that it will take a few months to get the sub-hyperspace drives up and running again. When that time comes, the Hapes Cluster will be brought to heel and I would be more than happy to grant the Cartel a cut of the spoils."

The Hutts grinned.

The collective visual effect was unsettling, akin to a school of sharks scenting blood in the water.

"I think I would rather like a Hapan dancer or two," Narbuj mused in wistful tones. "Most beautiful women in the galaxy."

"We have a deal, then?" Hux prompted.

Durga the Hutt looked around at his compatriots, all of whom inclined their heads infinitesimally. "Oh, yes," he chortled. "Yes, we do, General Hux."
Sunrise on Dathomir was far from slow and subtle; like the witches who called this planet home, it didn't do anything halfway. The black curtains of night were pulled apart and dawn veined the sky in rivers of fire, bright enough to jolt Rey awake even before the crimson orb of Domir had sailed above the horizon.

She hadn't even bothered to set up camp last night, having fallen asleep in the grass practically the moment she reached the summit. Rey shook her head to clear it as she took stock of her surroundings; she understood now that she'd fallen into some kind of trance yesterday, the mountain's song and the constant uphill battles serving to lull her into a state akin to moving meditation. That was why she hadn't batted an eyelash when each new beast charged seemingly from out of thin air and when Dathomir morphed into Jakku and back again. It had all felt... _destined_. Like every single bit of it had been meant to happen, like she'd always been meant to come here.

The song was louder now, a wild hymn that resounded in her ears as red-gold light drenched the rolling green landscape. Rey's feet were moving even before she realized it, taking her through the profusion of snowbark trees and dagger-shaped rinor and woody ongmuel with leaves like dangling spiders that crowned the summit, and into a vast clearing where, as Domir finally rose in all its burning splendor, its rays spilled over the concentric arrangement of small cairns that had been built to mark the graves of the witches of the Singing Mountain Clan who had become one with the Force.

Rey knew immediately which cairn she was looking for. It was made of river stone and lava rock and, at its base, untouched by the elements even after all these years, was a Hapan wedding band embellished with shards of the ice moon.

She sank to her knees before the cairn. The hum of the Force was almost deafening now, reaching a crescendo along with all the other forest noices as the last of night's shadows were banished. She closed her eyes and then—

— _Silence._

It wasn't the sudden quiet of the bond. No, this was a pure silence, the total absence of sound.

A pair of callused hands cradled her face. Warm lips pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. She smelled the scent of berries.
Rey smiled even as tears streamed down her face. It was a strange thing, to cry not from sorrow but from joy. "Mom."

"Dearest one," said Teneniel Djo, in the same voice that had told Rey to be careful during her coronation. "At last the Force has brought you back to me."

Ord Mantell was located along the Celanon Spur forty light years away from Qiilura, making it an invaluably strategic halfway point between the Expansion Region and the Outer Rim Territories. It was no wonder, then, that the Resistance was fighting so hard to maintain their foothold—and that the First Order was pushing just as fiercely to reclaim it. Resurgent-class Star Destroyers exchanged broadsides with Nebulon-B frigates as TIE and X-wing squadrons obliterated one another in a messy, soaring tangle of dogfights amidst the roar of gunships and heavy cruisers squaring off. It was obvious to the more seasoned officers on both sides that there would be no true victory here. Whoever was left standing would have to live with the cost.

But it was too late to back down.

Several First Order vessels launched by Kylo Ren's Heresiarch had managed to board the Resistance's fleet carrier, a pirate's tactic that General A'baht had been ill-prepared for. Waves of stormtroopers led by Kylo and his knights swept through the Intrepid from all sides, mowing down the crew and soldiers stationed aboard in a relentless onslaught. It wasn't long before the Resistance started lobbing grenades back at them in desperation, the explosions wracking the beleaguered ship.

It was one of these explosions that caused Boethiah to relinquish her mask twenty minutes into the siege. Some particularly enterprising foe had calculated their pitch just right; the grenade rolled to a stop before she could deflect it and went off inches away, catching her in its ferocious blast.

As fire and smoke filled the hallway, Clavicus stretched out one hand and telekinetically plucked the offender from the flurry of retreating soldiers and slammed his barbed mace into the screaming man's head.

"You all right?" Clavicus called out to Boethiah after the crack of bone and the spatter of blood and the last dying gasp.

"Positively incandescent," Boethiah muttered as she scrambled to her feet. Her mask had cracked
almost in half; she yanked it off and resumed trailing Clavicus down the labyrinth of corridors that wove through the *Intrepid*’s starboard deck. It was all trench warfare here in such close quarters, the glow-panels having long since been dimmed when the fleet carrier diverted power to its shields, the smoke from the various explosions and the rush of bodies so thick that it was nearly impossible to tell who was First Order and who was Resistance despite the stormtroopers’ distinctive armor.

The plan was to drive the *Intrepid*’s soldiers further inwards, herding them all to the middle of the ship where there could be no escape. According to the comlink rattling off in Boethiah’s ear, the twins had their assigned section covered while Jyggalag and his men needed backup.

"Not it," Clavicus grunted, beating her to the punch.

Boethiah rolled her eyes. "Fine."

She embarked on the arduous task of leading a division of stormtroopers through heavy fire, the route to Jyggalag’s position snaking between two long rows of Resistance-occupied balconies. It was a slow crawl forward, having to contend with enemies on the ground and sniper fire from above. Her men started dropping like flies and Boethiah eventually had to resort to using the Force to sweep as many Resistance fighters off the upper decks as she could. They plummeted to their deaths all around her amidst a never-ending stream of lasers and sparks.

By the time Boethiah made it out, she was down to thirty stormtroopers. And supremely pissed off.

"You owe me, newbie," she grumbled into her comlink. She wasn't sure if Jyggalag could hear her over the commotion on his end, but it was the principle of the thing.

She was now in the wide, open space between cargo bays, an intersection that branched out into four sets of open doors large enough for an AT-AT to lumber through. The unmistakable sounds of combat echoed from east and west, drawing nearer, and to reach Jyggalag she and her men needed to go through the doorway directly north of their current position.

But someone was standing there, blocking their path. A sturdy figure dressed in Jedi robes.

Boethiah's eyes narrowed into slits.

"Enara. You changed your hair." Luke Skywalker’s tone was deceptively casual. He made no move
to reach for the lightsaber attached to his utility belt. "Your mother would be disappointed. Enfys was always so proud that you took after her in that regard."

" Didn't stop her from dumping me at your backwater temple," Boethiah snarled, before charging at her former master.

"My lady, there is an unidentified ship approaching the palace."

Lairelosse Yliri whipped her head around to gape at Moreem Espara, wondering if the new commander of the Royal Guard had taken leave of her senses. "And why, may I ask, is it not being shot down on sight?"

"The pilot transmitted a Per'Agthra security code to the control tower."

"In that case, it's not an unidentified ship," Lairelosse countered archly.

"The vessel was marked as unidentified when it made planetfall because it is not of Hapan design," said Moreem, "and, given the circumstances, we had every reason to believe that this particular security code was defunct."

There was a strange expression on Moreem's face. Indeed, she looked deep in the throes of some existential crisis. But Lairelosse had been holding down the fort since Rey's mysterious disappearance more than a standard week ago, and she was a far cry from being in the most patient of moods. "What are you talking about, Commander Espara?"

"I'm not certain I could rightfully tell you at the moment, Ducha Yliri. It is too impossible." Moreem fidgeted, seemingly reluctant to elaborate. "We had better go and see for ourselves."

Lairelosse and Moreem entered the hangar bay along with a small contingent of palace guards to find that the battered Resistance shuttle had already docked. Alighting from it was someone Lairelosse had thought she would never see again in this life and, for the first time in her two decades of existence, the Duchah of Talcharain forgot to observe the correct protocol; instead of curtsying, she froze in her tracks and watched, mouth hanging open, as the prince of the Hapes Consortium staggered towards her and the similarly dumbstruck guards, his blue eyes still carrying the slight daze of someone who had spent several days in a bacta tank.
"Yes, yes, hello, I'm not dead," Isolder said gruffly. "Now—where in blazes is my daughter?"

Chapter End Notes

The Vigil.

Ssurian.

The Hollow Moon.

The Si'Klaata Cluster.

Jubilee Wheel.

Denebian holo-chess.

Hazard Toss.

Candied ice wine.

Wroonian blues.

Nikto.

Marcan herb.

Ootmian is Huttese for "outworlder" while Kwee-Kune means "queen."

Durga Besadii Tai.

Vedo Anjiliac Atirue.

Narbuj Desiliijc Preor.

Soergg Vosadii Bezhin.

Tooga Jallissi Gral.

Rinor.

Ongmuel plant.

Qilura.
AN ATTEMPT WAS MADE to respond to all the comments on the last chapter but then I hit my monthly data cap. Whoops. In any case, I'm so glad that everyone enjoyed Isolder's "surprise, bitch" moment and the Boethiah reveal, both of which I've been sitting on for the longest time and am so happy that I was finally able to share it with you all. We actually have StarWarshipper to thank for ENARA MOTHERFUCKING NEST, because she sent me a Tumblr ask way, way back that planted the idea in my head :) Thank you also to kritastrophe for drawing Rey's pilgrimage and dragonsbruja for bringing her vision of the future to life and, last but definitely not least, to the amazing Smut Hutt Podcast for their Diasterisms Super Episode that features this story and some of my other works!

Will do my best to update again next week. Motivation in the form of comments would be much appreciated >;)

Dathomir's sunrise had achieved the height of its splendor. The sky was like molten gold over the boiling surface of the Frenzied River, the grassy expanse of the Infinity Plain, the bronzed ridges of the Great Canyon, the emerald sprawl of the world-spanning jungles, and the towering summit of the Singing Mountain, where Rey knelt in a graveyard of witches with her mother's ghost.

Although— it didn't seem right to think of Teneniel as a ghost when she was as solid as flesh and bone. One hand stroked Rey's hair while the other cradled her cheek with aching tenderness. And, the thing was, Rey knew she resembled her mother from the holos and all the old stories, but she hadn't been prepared for how keenly the similarities would hit home once Teneniel was right in front of her, the closest thing to alive in the sunlight. She had Rey's build, her features, everything— the only noticeable difference being age lines and the reddish undertones of her brown locks whereas Rey's shaded more to gold.

It was like looking, not at a mirror, but at a map for her future self, she realized as she leaned into her mother's gentle touch. Perhaps someday I will have your grace.

"I was not able to come to you before because you didn't remember me," Teneniel murmured with a hint of regret. "The walls that you constructed around your past— they would not let me in. Fortunately, things will be different now that you have healed. Now that you have heard the mountain's song."

"But that was you at my coronation," Rey said. "You told me to be careful. To watch the crown."
Teneniel nodded. "The Force found a way to let me help you when you needed me most, and it also led you to Dathomir when you had nowhere else to turn. I know you've been so lonely, my child." Her thumb traced the tear-dampened contour of Rey's cheek. "But you have never been alone—not once. The Force has always watched over you."

"I just—it's been so hard." Rey clutched at her mother's wrist, suddenly desperate for comfort. "My life has been hard." How strange it was, to finally give voice to that thought. She'd never complained to anyone before. Not really. Self-pity wasn't a survival skill. But stating the fact out loud—it felt like a step towards something. Acceptance, perhaps. Or letting go.

Teneniel drew her into an embrace. A mother's embrace that she'd been robbed of for so many years. "It's all right to be angry at the way things went. It may not be the Jedi way, but you've earned it. What matters is that you use your anger to build a better future for yourself and for those you hold in your heart."

And of course Rey thought about her friends, not only in the Resistance but also the ones she'd made in the Hapes Cluster. And yet there was another who came to mind, with his wounded eyes and the fists clenching at his sides as he turned away from her. "But what if I'm no longer in his heart?"

"Then I have an idiot for a son-in-law."

Teneniel's acid declaration startled a laugh out of Rey, a sound that she muffled into the older woman's hair.

"You tried to do the right thing," Teneniel continued. "Never forget that. You were forced into an impossible situation and you acted with the information that was available to you at the time. No matter what anyone says, what you felt was real. And now it's time for you to go and join the fight—and for Kylo Ren to pick his side once and for all."

"I'm afraid," Rey admitted, because there were some things that could be confessed only in the silence of sunrise, only in the arms of someone whose love was unconditional and true. "I said I would trust him, but what if—what if he chooses Snoke?"

"Then you know what you have to do," Teneniel said firmly. "After all that has happened—and given all that you mean to each other—I do not believe your trust will be misplaced. But if it is, you must be strong enough to do the right thing one more time."
Rey's shoulders slumped. "I'm so tired, Amilye." She all but whispered it, the Hapan word for mother, the word she'd never gotten to say until now, at twenty-two years of age. "I'm so tired of being strong." She'd said as much to the Winged Goddess and, somehow, the mere act of acknowledging her exhaustion seemed to lessen its power over her.

"And yet you will continue to be strong, anyway. Because you are my daughter. Because you know no other way to live." Teneniel hugged her tighter, and there was a certain finality to it. "One last burden to bear, Rey. One last battlefield."

Rey closed her eyes, savoring these moments with her mother before she had to go down from the mountain, before she had to go back to reality. But there was one last thing nagging at her mind. "Is — is my father—" She broke off, unable to put her question into words. Dreading the answer even as she ached to find out.

Teneniel pulled away, a slight smile on her face. "Isolder isn't with me," she replied. "I have come to you from the Netherworld of the Force, where the dead are, and he is not there."

That had been two standard days ago. Now Rey was flying back to the Hapes Cluster on Kalessin, taking unmapped hyperspace routes to avoid the skirmishes currently dotting the galactic terrain. She made contact with Leia in between jumps; the General had been none too pleased with her absence, but there were more important matters at hand.

"We've managed to push Daala's forces out of the Inner Rim. The bulk of the Empire's navy is now amassing at Coruscant," said Leia's flickering bluish holo. "Right now, the Battle of Ord Mantell is drawing to a close and it's not looking good for us, but we can't send reinforcements because all of our remaining ships must prepare for the final siege. Once the First Order has recalled its fleet from Ord Mantell, we'll converge on Coruscant from both Borleias and Reecee."

"A pincer move," Rey concluded.

"Yes. It's the soundest plan we've got, but more ships wouldn't go amiss."

There was a question in Leia's eyes. Rey fired up the thrusters as she sped towards the next hyperlane. "I'll be there, General. With the Dragon Fleet," she promised. "See you at Coruscant."
How could a handful of seconds contain so many years between them? This was the question Luke Skywalker asked himself as Boethiah Ren charged towards him through the cargo bays of the Intrepid. Almost three decades fell away and there was Enfys Nest, standing at the threshold of the Jedi temple's main entrance with her sullen six-year-old daughter, the Cloud-Riders' flagship idling on the landing grid behind them.

"What I'm doing, she can't be a part of," Enfys had told Luke. "It's no life for a child— particularly one with her abilities. In my line of work, it would be too easy to turn a child like this into a weapon. Han said you could help."

As he watched that child close the distance between them— now grown up, now spitting fury, red lightsaber ablaze— Luke was struck by how severely he had broken Enfys' trust. Ben Solo, Enara Nest— it was a case of the old generation failing the new. A cycle of violence that had restarted the night he succumbed to his fear of the darkness.

He came to a decision. His hand went, not to the blade at his side, but to the button that would close the door to the hallway he was standing in.

There was a volley of blaster fire from the east. Boethiah stopped in her tracks and froze the lasers in mid-air for a brief, heart-stopping moment before redirecting them onto the Resistance soldiers, many of whom dropped like flies, victims of their own ammunition. Her stormtroopers waded into the fray and, satisfied that they would take care of things, she resumed her charge on Luke.

But it was too late. He heard her enraged, frustrated scream as the heavy durasteel door clanged shut, separating them before she could reach him. He felt the weight of the useless strike she leveled at the door's cold, unyielding metal— felt it as keenly as if she had succeeded in slashing him across the chest.

*I'll make things right. I'll find a way,* he promised her silently, before retreating further down the corridor.

Soon he was in the thick of battle again. The Resistance had managed to push back Jyggalag Ren's troops, but a new wave of opponents had broken through from another direction. Luke walked amidst the fighting, refusing to engage even as blaster bolts slid off of him like raindrops, scouring the floors instead while he focused his mind on the words that turned and turned within the chambers of his soul, shedding light as they always had through the slow shifting of the years. *There is no*
emotion, there is peace, an eternal mantra, and perhaps it had been the wrong thing to try and drill into a boy like his nephew’s head, but it was all that Luke had ever known.

Another explosion wracked the hallways— an erstwhile grenade hurled by a panicked, sobbing rebel soldier, right in the middle of the mass of flailing bodies, too close to his own allies. Luke held up a hand, casting a Force barrier to shield Resistance and First Order alike from the blast. He couldn’t shield them all, but—

— But there would be peace. Someday. One day. There would be children who wouldn’t grow like defiant, sullen weeds in the shadow of the war.

It was a good dream, Luke decided. And he would help make it come true.

There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.

He found A’baht at the end of his walk. The Dornean and his crew had barricaded an entire wing, and the look on their faces— again, time rolled backwards, and Luke was gazing upon the resignation and resolve of Red Squadron, right before they shipped out to launch that final attack on the first Death Star. Dreis, Biggs, Theron, Quersey and all of them— Luke knew, he just knew— that they’d all looked like this right before they burned up in their X-wings. Perhaps they walked with him now.

There is no passion, there is serenity.

"Master Skywalker, quick!" One of the lieutenants tore away from the defensive line to usher Luke into it. The stormtroopers were advancing slowly but surely through the outer perimeters; they would swarm the barricade in minutes.

"General," Luke said to A’baht when the Resistance had once again closed its ranks after letting him through, "we have to evacuate our people."

A’baht blinked at him in disbelief before shaking his head. "We can't lose the Intrepid!"

"She's already lost," Luke countered implacably. "The First Order is closing in from all sides. It won't take them long to surmount the last of our defenses. We're sitting ducks in here."
A’baht puffed up his chest. "There is not a single soldier of mine who wouldn't gladly die for the cause—"

"But is it worth it?" Although Luke didn't shout, it seemed for a moment that his voice drowned out the roar of battle. "The Intrepid is a ship. Is she worth it? You're a good man, General, and if you looked every one of your troops in the eye right now I believe you will realize that the answer is no. Even one life is too much, and we've already lost so many. Now, give the order to retreat." From somewhere in the distance behind him, Luke heard the shriek of an unstable kyber crystal and felt a familiar presence in the Force. He closed his eyes briefly and, when he opened them again, they bored into A'baht's with calm purpose.

There is no chaos, there is harmony.

"Give the order," Luke repeated. "I'll buy you some time."

There is no death, there is the Force.

* 

Once Kylo had finished carving his way through to the wing where the Resistance had holed up, his quarries were already trickling away towards the hangars. All save for one.

Luke Skywalker stood in the middle of a cavernous hallway littered with dead bodies, standing tall and proud despite the fact that he was confronting an entire First Order division by himself. The last time Kylo had seen his uncle in person was at the fall of Coruscant; he appeared to have aged a decade since then, thinner and more stooped, his hair a wash of gray. But his blue eyes were just as bright and piercing as ever, the same eyes that had measured Ben Solo's worth and found him too late to save.

"Stand back," Kylo growled at his troops, who obeyed without question although they kept their blasters aimed and ready to fire. It was he alone who advanced on Luke in deliberate strides, coming to a stop just slightly out of striking distance. There were skirmishes occurring all throughout the fleet carrier, the muffled echoes reverberating through the metal partitions. There were shouts and footsteps as the Resistance soldiers in this wing hightailed it to the escape pods. But he heard only the guttural warble of the blade at his side and the blood pounding in his ears as he and his uncle faced each other amidst a sea of sprawled corpses, the lights flickering, the smoke hanging thick.
Kylo assumed an opening stance, his heart drumming within his chest. No matter how much time had passed since then, the fear he had felt on that night still lingered, as did the heart-wrenching ache. For months afterwards, he had been unable to fall into a true, deep slumber, afraid that this would be the night he woke up too late, that this would be the night the blade struck home as he lay there defenseless. It had gotten better as time wore on, but the truth was that he had only started sleeping well again when Rey was in his bed, in his arms.

And now he didn't have even that.

"I failed you, Ben," Luke said. He didn't reach for his own weapon; it lay dormant, cinched to his utility belt. "I'm sorry."

And the thing was— Kylo knew that Luke was sorry, Rey's memories having become his own via the bond. He'd seen how his uncle had told Rey everything and he'd spent the rest of the voyage to Ord Mantell forcing himself not to dwell on it. He couldn't afford to get distracted, not when the First Order actually had a chance to recuperate from the catastrophe with the sub-hyperspace drives and foil the Resistance's invasion. But still there was that sliver of... it felt like hope, or something close to it, feeble and tarnished but there, being held on to by a boy who had doubted, who had in secret moments during the early period of Snoke's tutelage wished for nothing more than to go home.

"You've seen it," Luke realized out loud. He was assessing his nephew carefully, gazing searchingly into his eyes. "You've seen my regret."

"And did you put her up to showing me that, as well?" Kylo snarled. His opponent was one man against a hundred— why, then, was he the one feeling trapped, backed into a corner, no option left to him but to lash out?

"I have not spoken to her in months. Besides, your wife never listens to me," Luke replied with a touch of dry humor that was incongruous enough to the situation to be— annoying. Leave it to Skywalker to be a pain in the ass, even at the final hour. "But if I were to guess, she showed you my confession because she wanted you to know the truth. And the truth is that Leia and I love you and there is something for you to come back to."

"You're wrong," Kylo said through gritted teeth, hating that his uncle and former master could still read his mind even after all these years. Could still see every nuance on his face. "There's nothing left."
"Then why isn't Rey here, Ben? Why isn't she fighting at the Resistance's side?" Luke asked. "And why aren't you and I crossing blades at this very moment?"

Another memory stabbed at Kylo as if in response to Luke's questions. A memory of Rey in the dining room at the Citadel, telling him that people weren't instruments for her vengeance.

Rey in Alqualonde, saying that it was up to them as individuals whether to continue the cycle of violence or put an end to it.

Rey showing him her conversation with Luke on Stalsinek IV, his head hung low in sorrow and self-loathing. "It will always be my greatest shame."

Rey on the Heresiarch, weeping after learning the truth of Teneniel Djo's death. "I just want someone to be sorry, I just want one single thing to not have been done in cold blood," she'd cried into Kylo's tunic, that heart of hers too big for a universe full of people's failings, too good for all that it had been subjected to.

And now Luke was here and he was sorry, and it was too much for Kylo to bear. "I will deal with Hapes in due time," he spat. He raised his lightsaber, the tip of the crackling scarlet beam pointed towards his uncle. "After I destroy you."

"No, you won't." There was a vague, gentle smile on Luke's weathered face, almost beatific even as he squared his shoulders like a man preparing to meet his fate. "No one's ever really gone. I know you know that— I can see it in your eyes. Strike me down in anger and I will always be with you." The line of his mouth softened further, and in that slight movement was an entire lifetime of love and grief. And forgiveness, even here at the end of all things. "Just like your father."

"I used to be so steadfast, so certain in my purpose," Kylo distantly remembered telling Rey, "but then I watched him fall and I was no longer so sure. And now I carry him with me, everywhere I go."

Red light filled Kylo's eyes. He was looking at Luke but he was seeing Han Solo, spiraling down into the mists of Starkiller Base. He was seeing Rey, gazing up at him wide-eyed in the cozy glow of the fire in her bedroom at the Per'Agthra. He was seeing his mother's holo in the last communiqué she'd ever sent, sad and worried and flickering against the stone walls of the Jedi temple. Every muscle in his body trembled beneath the weight of an impossible choice, a clash of light and dark threatening to rip him apart at the seams.
"There is something for you to come back to."

"Come home. We miss you."

"It's you. Whatever name you wish to call yourself."

"Because I love you."

Kylo extinguished his lightsaber, lowering his hand to his side. "Have it your way, then," he said curtly, before addressing the stormtroopers at his back. "Arrest him."


It was very nearly comical, how his uncle visibly deflated, jaw dropping in surprise, and Kylo really was seized by the wild, hysterical urge to laugh. He fought it down, and it burned in his chest.

"You heard me." He managed to keep his voice steady as he held Luke's gaze, unflinching. "By the authority vested in me as Emperor of the First Order, I am placing you under arrest on charges of sedition." He nodded at the stormtroopers. "Take him away."

Kylo's men rushed forward to divest Luke of his lightsaber and clap him in handcuffs. Luke didn't put up a fight, his mouth opening and closing and opening and closing again as if this turn of events had rendered him speechless.

At least that shut you up, Kylo fumed.

He should have known better than to believe that this blessed state of affairs would last, though. "This is so undignified," Luke remarked as he was marched past his nephew. "But I guess I had it coming." The man had the audacity to shoot Kylo one last wink. "See you around, kid."

Amidst the stately, gleaming walls of the Queen Mother's private hangar, Kalessin screeched to a halt and Rey bounded out of the cockpit and into the arms of the man at the head of the small crowd that
had assembled to receive her. Tears of joy streamed down both their faces as they clung to each other tightly and Rey felt as if there was someone else with them, too, someone who smelled like wild berries and who would watch over them always, gathering them both in her embrace.

Isolder drew back to study his daughter's expression. His own features lit up with a tender smile despite the pallor he'd acquired from his time floating in bacta. "You already knew," he said, bemused.

Rey nodded before hugging him again. She never wanted to let go. "Mom told me," she sniffled into his collar.

And everything was all right again, for a while.

* *

They retreated to the salon, where they could speak freely without anyone to overhear. Rey was famished—after three days in hyperspace, subsisting on rations of dried meat and pickled fruit that the Singing Mountain Clan had packed for her, she was grateful to shove rich Hapan cooking down her gullet, barely remembering to chew.

Isolder watched fondly, as if he had missed her atrocious table manners. He didn't say anything until she slowed down, the edge of her hunger dulled. "I thought I would never see you again, my dear. When the blasts hit..." He trailed off, shuddering the way someone only could after their life had flashed before their eyes. "She called my name and I turned around, and the world fell apart," he continued in a tone haunted by memory as he stared off into the distance. "She was holding out her hand and in it was a datastick that she pressed into my palm when I reached her. I said that we had to go, we were right next to the hangars so it was still possible to escape, but she shook her head..."

The scene played out in Rey's mind as her father spoke, unfurling like a disastrous holo in slow motion. A conflagration blazed through the luxurious, gilded halls of the Star Home, destroying everything in its path. As it bore down upon them, Isolder tried to pull Ta'a Chume towards the emergency stairs that led to the hangar bay, but she would have none of it.

"I'll only slow you down," Ta'a Chume had said, pushing him away. "Make sure Kira gets that datastick."

"But—" Isolder had tried to protest, but she interrupted him with jade eyes that burned brighter than
"No son of mine will die this useless death," Ta'a Chume had hissed, in that moment looking every inch the Dragon Queen. "Even your traitorous brother fell in battle. Go, Isolder. Your daughter needs you."

And Isolder had had no choice but to turn and flee.

"The explosion reached the hangars just as I was climbing into the escape pod. I was grievously injured," Isolder was explaining to Rey now. "Shrapnel in my skull, burns all over my body... I don't know how it happened, how I even managed to steer my way to the Resistance fleet in Ord Mantell — or why I went there— but I did. I managed to hand the datastick to Luke and tell him it was for you before passing out."

"That makes sense," Rey muttered. Only a Force user like Luke could have infiltrated her suite without alerting the Chume'doro or waking her up. "I've spoken with Astarta, the commander of the spy legions. She thinks that Ta'a Chume knew she wouldn't recover from her illness and she wanted to ensure that her death would expose Daemora AlGray and secure my reign."

"That sounds like Ta'a Chume. Always scheming to get the last laugh." Isolder fell silent for a while, his gaze troubled. "Am I a terrible person? Am I a fool?" he suddenly asked. "For trying to save her even after what she did?"

Rey reached across the table to place her hand over his. "You're the best man I know, Atta," she told him quietly. "We parted on such horrible terms and I regretted so badly never having had the chance to say goodbye. To tell you that—" She switched to Hapan, because she knew it would mean more to him. "Ai armiel telere maenen hir."

You hold my heart forever.

Isolder squeezed her hand, his blue eyes suspiciously misty. Stars, she really had inherited the crybaby gene from him. "I love you very much, Rey," he said, "and I am sorry that I failed to protect you when you were younger and that I couldn't be there for you when you ascended and had to make the hard choices. But I'm here now. I'll always be here."

Predictably, both father and daughter required a few minutes to get their emotions under control. It wasn't until Rey had helped herself to another serving— she had a meeting with the Royal Court in a
while and she needed all the energy she could get— that Isolder spoke again.

"It was the strangest thing, my dear. As I sat bleeding in that escape pod, I could almost swear someone was guiding me. It was another hand that held mine as I punched in the Resistance fleet's coordinates that I shouldn't have known. Perhaps I was merely delirious and it was nothing more than a rare stroke of luck, but... it felt like your mother." Isolder sighed wistfully. "It felt like Teneniel."

"It was, Atta," Rey assured him with a smile. "It was."

* 

Quite a few of the lords and ladies of the Hapes Consortium were in an uncharitable mood, and Rey couldn't blame them. Their Queen Mother had disappeared two days after her coronation, leaving them in the lurch while a galactic civil war raged outside their borders.

She attempted not to fidget as she sat on the throne— not only was it uncomfortable despite being nice to look at, with its winged frame of pale silver and rose-hued gold spun like seafoam and its bejeweled inlay— but she was also facing an entire court of disgruntled nobles. It was enough to wrack anyone's nerves.

But she wasn't just anyone, was she?

The starry crown heavy on her head, Rey sat up a little straighter as she surveyed the glittering throng arguing among themselves. In her absence, Lairelosse had done a more than adequate job of ushering the nobles who'd been on the fence onto Rey's side, and those who had been granted new lands and titles in the wake of the Heritage Council arrests were eager to show their support for the Royal House. But there was still some opposition, and they were loud.

"Let the First Order and the Resistance tear each other apart!" roared the Margrave Taurendil. He had previously been in favor of the marriage treaty but, seeing that that was now in shambles— "Why should we care? Hapes has survived for so long precisely because we didn't stick our nose into all the foolhardy business that the rest of the galaxy gets itself into!"

"This is everyone's business, my lord," countered Aleson. "If the First Order wins, do you think they'll be content to allow a sovereign state to exist within their borders?"
"Seems to me we wouldn't be having that problem if we'd just stuck with the terms of the alliance," grumbled Viscountess Barizaan.

"That alliance was broken before it was even forged." The lords and ladies fell into a hushed silence as their Queen Mother spoke up, her voice echoing through the throne room. "Early last year, Ta'a Chume granted the Resistance sanctuary within the Veil. They spent more than eight months hiding from the First Order in Consortium space, while at the same time gathering intelligence and allies. The First Order has now been made well aware of this, so trust me when I say that a victory for them would *not* be in Hapes' best interests."

Rey's proclamation was met with a stunned silence from those who hadn't been in the loop, while the nobles of the Corsair Outback whom Ta'a Chume had secretly recruited into allowing Leia's forces to lay low within their respective territories busily avoided making eye contact with their flabbergasted neighbors. Soon the speechless shock wore off and the cries of outrage burbled up, and another rash of arguing quickly broke out. Rey suppressed the urge to massage her aching temples; she had to maintain the illusion of being calm and unflappable while at the same time not offending the members of court who might otherwise stand in the way of her plan.

"This is not a choice I wish to make lightly," Rey said over the hubbub, which died down more begrudgingly this time. "It is, however, the only choice that we have. If the First Order wins, they are guaranteed to exact vengeance on the Hapes Cluster. If the Resistance wins, the new government that they form won't soon forget that the Consortium didn't stand with them when it mattered most. Either way, if we do *nothing*, then we don't get to complain about the outcome. I must ask you now, my lords and ladies, that we put this to a vote."

*!

Voting in the Royal Court was, as expected, a slow and arduous process. One by one the nobles postured at the foot of the dais on which Rey's throne rested and faced their peers and gave a speech to justify their decision. Some were mercifully brief, but others...

Rey gritted her teeth. Stars, but Hapans really loved hearing themselves talk. It was an old grievance of hers, but there was nothing she could do about it. She had to be patient, she had to follow protocol so that the Consortium would be mollified.

She had to start working from *within* the system if she wanted to change it.

In that moment Rey felt a twinge of sympathy for her estranged husband. As well as shame that it had taken her so long to understand the difficult position that he was in.
"I'll make it up to you," she promised Kylo, wherever he was. *Wait for me.*

After a while, it became apparent that the vote on whether or not to mobilize the Consortium navy was distressingly split. It seemed that everyone in the room held their breath as the last noble took center stage—Lania Jien, the Duch of Olanji. It was up to her to break the tie.

The opposition relaxed. Lania had a reputation for being shrewd and careful, for never taking anything except the most calculated of risks.

She didn't speak right away. Instead, she looked at Rey over her shoulder. The two women's eyes met as they both remembered a deal that had been struck weeks ago, at the Olanji Breakwater.

"*I will see it done,*" Rey had told Lania and Dechen then. *"In Ta'a Chume's time or in mine."*

Lania turned back to the crowd. "I vote that it is time the Hapes Cluster fights for something. I vote that it is time we let the galaxy know who we are," she announced. "I vote yes."

In the early hours of the next standard day, a First Order cruiser patrolling the borders of the Corusca system suddenly veered from its intended path as dozens of Resistance capital ships and swarms of X-wing starfighters materialized from out of the hyperlane. The patrol ship was immediately shot down by a number of well-aimed cannons, but not before it was able to send a distress signal to the Empire's main fleet amassed at Coruscant.

The *Heresiarch* had just returned from Ord Mantell and its crew was thrown into that First Order brand of controlled chaos as they raced against the ticking clock to patch over damages that had been sustained in battle. The only chamber that wasn't a whirlwind of frantic activity was the conference room where Kylo stood at the head of a table alight with the holos of all the commanders of the surviving dreadnoughts.

"There's another Resistance fleet sailing in from Borleias," said Daala. "They're surrounding us, Your Majesty."

"Can we send some divisions up the Perlemian Trade Route or the Corellian Run, attack them from
behind?” Kylo asked.

"Negative," said Pellaeon. "They're blocking all hyperlanes in the Corusca system save for the Metellos Route. Our ships would have to junction. It would be too late."

Kylo swore under his breath. There was nothing for it, then. "We'll meet them head-on," he decided. "You all have an hour to get your ships into a defensive formation. The objective is to not let them through. No matter what."

A half-assed idea borne out of some quiet, burgeoning desperation occurred to Kylo after his officers had signed off, leaving him alone in the darkened chamber. His uncle was in the brig. Perhaps if he offered to spare Luke's life if the Resistance backed off or otherwise surrendered—

No. That was something Hux would do. And it wouldn't work, anyway— Leia Organa would never put anything, anyone, above her cause. Kylo himself was living proof of that.

He stalked out of the room to begin the preparations for what would undoubtedly be a last stand—whether it would be the First Order or the Resistance's, only time would tell.

"It could go either way at this point, General," Poe Dameron's holo murmured as the Raddus approached the Empire's blockade. "And, honestly, it looks like whoever wins won't have much left to brag about."

Leia opened her mouth to respond, her gaze fixed on the sleek, towering, dagger-shaped structure that was her son's ship, poised at the head of his fleet in front of the metallic orb that was Coruscant. Before she could say anything, though, the beginnings of a certain... shimmering caught her attention, warping the dozens of kilometers that separated the two sides' navies. It almost looked like —

In the cockpit of his starfighter, Poe's eyes widened as huge silhouettes like distorted hourglasses began to form in that patchy, gradual way that characterized exit from a rough, uncharted hyperlane. "Holy shit," he breathed once he realized exactly what he was staring at.

On the Lusankya, General Wedge Antilles let out a slow whistle that was soon drowned out by a
chorus of resounding cheers from his troops as the silhouettes anchored themselves in sublight, each one five hundred meters long, coils upon coils of deadly armaments rippling into existence.

The reactions among the commanders of the First Order ships were vastly different. Gilad Pellaeon was cursing. Natasi Daala had gone pale. Kosimo Westermal bore the expression of someone who was taking desertion into serious consideration.

On the bridge of the Heresiarch, Kylo Ren stood unmoving except for a slight tightening to the set of his jaw as the fabled Battle Dragons of the Hapes Consortium materialized between the First Order and Resistance fleets in a blaze of fiery colors and emblems.

There had to be more than a thousand, arranging themselves into a formation of rows and columns that neatly boxed the First Order in. Their hulls gleamed like reptilian scales, their turrets jutted out like spikes and fangs. The largest of them all was perched above the topmost row like an icy crown of silver and blue and gold, bearing a painted design of massive wings unfurled in flight and menacing jaws spread open in a savage roar.

"Ereneda, I must ask you one last time if you're absolutely sure," Admiral Vela Noroos' holo pressed Rey as the latter stood in the middle of the command center on the Dragon Queen. "If they open fire—"

"They won't." Rey surveyed the field of combat, her soldiers' anxious gazes leveled on her as she thought about who she could trust and what it meant to trust someone, and she remembered something that Ta'a Chume had told her once.

In a nest of vipers, one had to be a viper, too. If they wanted to survive.

But I'm not a viper. Her fists clenched at her sides. I'm Rey.

"Do it," she said to Vela.

And, as one, every single Battle Dragon in the Consortium fleet swung their cannons away from the First Order.

To face the Resistance.
Frenzied River.

Infinity Plain.

Great Canyon.

The Dragon Queen.

I'm almost 100% positive that what Rey says to Isolder in Hapan is actually from Forgotten Realms Elvish, but I can't find the exact source at the moment. Watch this space.
Chapter 64

Many thanks to everyone who left feedback on the last chapter and to Anonym1989 for helping me with this one! This was supposed to be much longer but, unfortunately, I've fallen victim to cold-and-flu season on top of everything else I have going on. The doctor says I'm overworked xD I've been advised to take it easy if I want to be able to push through with my upcoming birthday trip so, instead of giving you guys a lengthy but subpar penultimate installment just so I can meet a self-imposed deadline, I've decided to increase the chapter count in a way that not only lessens my stress but also allows me to devote the proper time and focus to each remaining scene. I'm flying to Paris in early October and will do my best to update again beforehand but, if that's not possible, I will see you guys when I get back. Je vous aime tous! <3

The relief that swelled in Leia's chest at the Hapan Royal Navy's arrival quickly gave way to confusion as her ship found itself staring down the barrels of thousands of spindly laser cannons gleaming like infinite, winding rows of sharp teeth in the black. The crew of the Raddus sent dozens of alarmed gazes flying in her direction while the bridge's central holoprojector lit up with the stunned, angry visages of what was left of Resistance High Command.

"General Organa, what is going on?" demanded Gial Ackbar. "I thought the Consortium was on our side."

"Should we go on the offense?" asked Wedge Antilles. "My worry is that they'll provide the Empire's fleet enough cover to reposition itself, outflanking us—"

"We should wait," opined Admiral Statura. "If the Hapans wanted to open fire on us, they would have done so by now. And, in any case, no ship of ours would stand a chance against a Battle Dragon in broadsides."

Leia barely listened as her officers continued arguing among themselves, her thoughts running wild with all the different scenarios that could offer some sort of plausible explanation as to why Rey was doing... whatever the hell this was. But she didn't have to wonder for long.

"General." Kaydel spoke up from where she was monitoring the communications array. "There's an incoming transmission— from the Dragon Queen."
Leia exited the conference with High Command; their holos vanished, replaced by Rey's flickering silhouette. It had to be Rey, of course, but—for a moment, Leia almost didn't recognize the solemn young woman in front of her, standing ramrod-straight with hands folded behind her back, military style, on the bridge of her own flagship. Her hair was kept away from her face by a crown braid wrapped around a low bun, secured with long, glittering silver pins. She wore the wide-shouldered, form-fitting reptile-scale armor characteristic of the Witches of Dathomir, except that it was an iridescent, snowy white all over, crafted from the hides of the great glass-snakes that prowled the arctic slopes of the Shattered Ridge, and cinched at the waist with an ivory utility belt that bore the lightsaber hilt glinting at her side. A silver chain cut a path from her shoulder to her hip in a diagonal slash, embellished with an intricately carved dragon's head so lifelike that it seemed to roar menacingly from its perch at the outer edge of her right clavicle.

And yet it was Rey's eyes that held Leia's attention. They were as resolute as steel, a strange fire burning in their depths. Leia had seen those eyes before—when Luke came back from his second trip to Dagobah knowing what he had to do.

_The Force is a harsh mistress_, Leia found herself thinking as she studied Rey's holo. _It grants you purpose, but at what cost?_

Perhaps the same as a lifetime of rebellion had exacted from her.

It was Rey who broke the heavy silence that had fallen over the bridge. "General Organa."

Leia inclined her head. "Your Majesty."

"Is Master Luke with you?"

"He was stationed at Ord Mantell," said Leia, which was as sufficient a non-answer as any. She would have felt her twin brother die the same way she had felt the blade through Han's chest; her best guess at the moment was that he'd escaped and was trying to make his way to the fleet.

Rey seemed to arrive at the same conclusion, because she moved on to the pertinent matter at hand. "I want to negotiate a ceasefire."

_Oh_. Leia blinked as it all suddenly clicked into place, helped along by what she had learned about
the events on Nova Station— about her son allowing Finn and Rey to escape, about a nearly catatonic Rey saying over and over again that she'd made a mistake and she needed to fix it. By sandwiching herself between the First Order and the Resistance, Rey was trying to prevent the opening salvos of what would be nothing short of a bloodbath, blindly trusting that neither side would attack her. By aiming her cannons at the Resistance, she was showing the galaxy that she stood with her husband and had no qualms about protecting him, should it come to that.

It was an extremely risky maneuver. One that had left the entire Consortium fleet wide open to bombardment from the First Order's side of the blockade. Leia didn't know whether to admire Rey or to hop on a shuttle to the *Dragon Queen* and shake some sense into her posthaste.

"You and the Emperor need to sit down and talk about this, General," Rey continued levelly. "The First Order is operating at half of its former naval capacity but that only puts your respective forces on an equal footing. If you engage here at Coruscant, the losses will be staggering for everyone involved. But it doesn't have to be that way. If you and Ben just agree to meet..."

She trailed off, and Leia saw a shard of vulnerability in the new Queen Mother's eyes. *You called him Ben,* she thought, at about the same time that she realized that Rey was giving her a chance not only to put a stop to the violence, but also to speak with her son after so many years.

And therein lay the danger. If she called for a ceasefire now, she would never be able to figure out whether the decision was made as General Organa or as Leia. Every step she'd taken since forming the Resistance had been with her unfaltering knowledge of the difference.

Except one.

"We can still save him. You're his father. There is still light in him, I know it... If you see our son, bring him home."

She'd sent Han to his death that day. And now the lives of millions were hanging in the balance, caught in the shadow of a boy who had killed his own father.

A boy she would still always hold in her heart.

"Rey," sighed Leia. "The war is—" Not something that can be waved away just because I love my son— "it's so much bigger than any two people."
"Maybe," Rey conceded. "But two people have the chance to end it, once and for all. What is your choice?"

The Knights of Ren flanked their master as they stood by the transparisteel panels of the Heresiarch's control tower observing the tableau of ships spread out before them. They were all dumbstruck by what had just occurred; Kylo's features in particular had retreated into the terse sort of rigidity that signified he was trying not to let his emotions get the better of him—whatever emotions they might be. Hircine thought he could glimpse shock and anger, and perhaps...

Perhaps a little bit of fear. After all, the price that the Hapan Battle Dragons paid for their superior rate of fire was markedly inferior shielding, since the space normally allotted for shield generators was taken over by armaments. With no cannons facing the Empire, the Battle Dragons could all be blown up with a few well-aimed hits from one of the more trigger-happy First Order generals—over whom the Emperor did not wield as much power as he would like.

It was a fraught situation, and Hircine didn't envy Kylo Ren in the least. The younger man's eyes were absolutely glued to the Dragon Queen.

Hircine coughed to break some of the tension. "I believe your wife is issuing you a very public apology, my lord," he said in a quiet tone of voice.

"That, or it's a ploy to rescue Skywalker," Clavicus growled, and the look in Kylo's eyes dulled as something inside him shut down. "I say we call her bluff and attack—"

Kylo flicked his wrist. Clavicus was suddenly lifted off his feet by unseen forces and sent slamming against the viewport with a dull thud.

"Get her out of there," Kylo snarled, turning to the Heresiarch's crew.

Lieutenant Mitaka blinked. "S—sir?"

Kylo seemed to belatedly realize that everyone was staring at him in light of what were rather
confusing orders. His fists clenched at his sides as he took a shallow breath.

"Send a message to the Queen Mother's ship," he clarified, much more calmly this time. But it was still a calm that threatened to break at any moment, although the knights were the only ones close enough to tell. "Inform her that her presence is requested on the Heresiarch. For a meeting."

With that, Kylo stormed out of the bridge. Mephala helped a wheezing Clavicus to his feet, and something unspoken passed between the two of them—a certain conspiratorial understanding that Hircine wasn't sure he liked. His gaze darted to the unmasked Boethiah, whose expression made it clear that she'd noticed the silent exchange as well.

But she said nothing, so neither did he.

The Hutt Cartel had spent the last few days moving their navy further corewards. Now they were amassed just outside the Giju Run, and the signal that they'd been waiting for had arrived earlier than expected.

"The battle's almost over already?" Soergg grunted at Hux's holo, which glowed a dim blue beneath the sickly greenish lights of the command center on his Azalus-class dreadnought.

"Change of plans," was Hux's crisp response. "You need to make the jump to Coruscant now. Something unexpected has transpired and we are currently in a stand-off. When your fleet arrives, I'll make my move—before any alliances can be reforged."

Much to the horror of her troops, Rey answered Emperor Ren's summons alone, disappearing behind First Order lines on Kalessin. The stormtroopers who received her at the docking bay were cold and hostile, as were the officers who observed her every move as she was marched through the halls. It was a far cry from the deference they'd shown her as Empress, but the rumors had trickled down from those who'd been in the Citadel's briefing room when the war broke out and she was widely considered a traitor now.

And yet there was some curiosity there as well. Hadn't she turned her cannons on the Resistance fleet? Did that mean Hapes had decided to uphold its end of the bargain, after all? Rey could feel
these questions pressing in on her from all sides as she walked among the stormtroopers, the dragon chain an inexorable weight at her breastbone. Silara Surrel had given it to her in private after the vote. "Your late grandmother entrusted this to me, Your Majesty," the Ducha of Charubah had said. "For you to use in your time of greatest need."

Rey's fingers itched to slip between the silver dragon head's open jaws, to press the tiny button that was located there. But she had to wait for the right moment— and, the Force willing, she might never even have to use it at all. If things worked out...

After a series of corridors and turbolifts, she and her escorts arrived at the set of doors that led to the Emperor's private wing. Boethiah Ren was waiting for them; she nodded curtly at the stormtroopers and told them that she would be taking it from here. She didn't acknowledge Rey's presence until they had been left alone and she'd punched in the code that caused the doors to glide open.

"You know, I didn't think you'd be this cruel," she remarked as she led Rey further into the new corridor that had just been revealed. "I knew you were selfish and self-righteous, but this— this is a new low, even for you."

Had the circumstances been any different, Rey would have issued a scathing retort, but for now she let the other woman speak her mind, let all the resentment boil to the surface in that sullen, caustic drawl.

"What was the point of coming here? We're both well aware that you're not on his side, that you'll never be on his side. Yet here you are, stirring things up again. Is it because you couldn't break him the first time? He managed to reclaim the Core even after your betrayal— that doesn't sit well with you, does it, Ereneda?" Boethiah abruptly stopped walking and turned to face Rey, her eyes blazing with vitriol. "Answer me," she hissed. "What was the point?"

"I'm here because I want to stop the war and reconcile with my husband," Rey said coolly, unflinching. "Whether or not you believe me is up to you, but I am going to talk to him." She lifted her chin and met Boethiah's glare with an aura of quiet challenge. "Even if I have to cut through you and the other knights and the rest of the First Order's army to do it."

"Be careful what you wish for, Your Majesty, because I just might take you up on that—"

"Hang on now," a gruff voice interrupted before things could escalate. It was Hircine, appearing from around the corner up ahead. "There's no need for any of this. Boethiah, Lord Ren wants to see her—" He nodded towards Rey— "preferably in one piece, although he didn't exactly specify."
Boethiah looked murderous for a second but then she desisted, letting Rey walk on with Hircine, who placed himself between Rey and the other knights standing guard outside the designated meeting room. He was surprisingly good at keeping his comrades in line—Rey was ushered through to the chamber, the door closing behind her without further incident.

Kylo's office on the Heresiarch was as sleek and austere as the rest of the ship, furnished with little more than a communications bay and an obsidian metal desk and two chairs to match. There were no viewports, there was nothing that could ease the monotony of cold dark walls and sterile light. It reminded Rey too much of the interrogation room on Starkiller Base, as did the way Kylo—who was seated at his desk in the usual high-collared black garb that he wore to battle—lifted his head at her entrance, looking up at her.

Only, he wasn't wearing a mask now. And hers fell apart upon seeing him in the flesh for the first time since Nova Station two weeks ago.

He was pale and drawn, the skin under his eyes bruised from lack of sleep. There was an ill-concealed weariness to the stiff set of his broad shoulders. His normally immaculate hair was bedraggled, but still looked so very soft to the touch.

There was, however, nothing soft in his eyes or in the line of his mouth. A muscle worked in his jaw and he jerked his head to the empty chair across from his in a wordless command that Rey obeyed just as silently, even though she wanted nothing more than to throw her arms around him. Once she was seated, they stared at each other over the large metal desk; Kylo took his sweet time in speaking and, when he finally did, it was all quiet sarcasm laced with frosty disdain.

"I don't suppose you're here to fight by my side against the Resistance."

Rey before Dathomir would have flinched, would have started either arguing with him or pleading for him to see reason right out the gate. But she knew better now, she knew that she had to lay all her cards on the table. No more games. "If that's what it would take for you to forgive me, then we're never getting back together."

"You believe that to be one of my priorities right now?"

"It's one of mine."
"I see." His gaze drifted to her hands, clasped on her lap. "Well, I regret to inform you that there's only one person wearing a wedding band in this room."

It hurt. It hurt so much that Rey had to take a deep, measured breath through the pain of the sledgehammer blow that had hit its mark between her ribs. Before she could say anything in response, he continued, "Also, 'getting back together' implies that we were in a relationship. But the only times we weren't fighting were when we were in bed. There was no... common ground." He gave a small, barely imperceptible shrug. "Except for loneliness, perhaps."

"That's how I understood love—and how I understand it still," Rey said softly. "Not being lonely when I'm with you."

Something in Kylo's expression faltered, but only for a moment. "It's not enough," he tersely replied. "Not for me."

Rey fought the urge to hang her head. She'd somehow remained convinced that there was a chance he still loved her, but perhaps she'd been hoping for too much on top of everything else. Kylo wasn't obliged to forgive her any more than she'd felt obliged to forgive Aletra Creel. That he still could have—well, it was the last lie Rey had been telling herself, and now she had no choice but to let it go.

"Regardless, that's where I stand," she said at last. "For me it was real, and you deserve to know that moving forward."

"Moving forward? Ah, yes." Kylo's tone veered into outrightly sardonic. "Now we arrive at the true reason for this elaborate charade."

Despite all her good intentions and her newfound patience, Rey could only take so much. "People can have more than one motive for doing something," she all but snapped. "I'm here because I wanted to see if there was a chance that you'd take me back but, failing that, I'll settle for you not getting your stubborn ass killed! Your mother has agreed to a ceasefire. There doesn't need to be any more bloodshed. She's willing to talk."

Kylo's reaction was—unexpected, to say the least. He blinked once, twice, a slight tremor running through his frame. "You didn't do all of this to..."

"To what?" Rey asked blankly when words seemed to fail him.
He took a deep breath. "I—" Then he broke off again, and if she hadn't been scrutinizing him so closely she would have missed it, the way he clutched the edge of the desk, fingers spasming as if about to reach for her across the space between them. But he seemed to think better of it, freezing, then shaking his head. "There's nothing left for me and General Organa to talk about. The war will end today with the Resistance's demise."

"And then you will be king of ashes," Rey said hotly. "You'll have to sacrifice most of your fleet to garner any sort of victory here, only to repeat the cycle in— what, a decade? Maybe even less than that. Because there will always be someone who will come along and say that enough is enough. That's how people work. I told you before."

"I remember." Kylo's reply was hoarse. "I remember everything you've said to me since the day we met. And it has caused me to second-guess all of my decisions and to stray from my path. Because you, Rey—" His eyes narrowed— "are a blight on my peace."

"And you're not a blight on mine?" she retorted. "There were very few things in my life that I questioned before we got married! I was training to be a Jedi, I believed that the First Order had to be defeated no matter the cost, I thought you were a monster and that there was no saving you— and now look at me, look at where I am! Trying to broker a truce because if you die it will kill me, too—"

"Do you think it's not the same for me?" Kylo burst out, his temper getting the best of him as he stood up, spurring her to her feet as well, the two of them moving like each other's mirrors in the cold light. "When you left your flanks wide open to First Order officers who want you dead— do you have any idea— the terror I felt—"

He was cut off by the crackle of static as some hidden audio link buzzed to life. The sound was... incongruous, so far removed from the situation that Rey almost didn't believe it was real. But there was no denying Mitaka's voice on the other end of the line, slicing through the moment like a knife.

"Emperor Ren, the Supremacy has just made realspace out of the Metellos Trade Route. Regent Snoke is here."

* 

After the order to stand down swept through the ranks, Poe Dameron had begrudgingly returned to the Echo of Hope with the rest of his squadron— a decision he regretted when the colossal outline of
a Mega-class Star Dreadnought gradually began to loom over the horizon strewn with First Order destroyers and Hapan Battle Dragons beyond the Mon Calamari cruiser's viewport.

"That's Snoke's ship," he muttered in disbelief, hurriedly accessing the Raddus' frequency. "General —"

"Stand down, Commander Dameron," Leia Organa's holo firmly repeated although she, too, looked upset by this new development. "If Snoke decides to attack, he'll have to go through the Consortium first."

"We can't just sit here—"

"Our options are limited. Rey has situated her fleet in such a way that we have time to launch a counter-assault should any of the First Order units open fire. Let's not squander that." Her gaze held his. "Just be ready."

After Leia signed off, Poe turned to the rest of the crew with a snarl of frustration. "Cloak the bombers," he instructed. "If they stay out of reach of the sensors, we can get them into position for a swoop-down with the Empire being none the wiser."

Jessika Pava spoke up. "But, Poe, General Organa said—"

"She said be ready. This is us getting ready," Poe declared. "I'm not leaving anything up to chance. Not here, not now."

In truth, Kylo hadn't expected Snoke to join the battle. The Resistance had cut off all junctions to the Metellos Trade Route during their initial approach, so the Supremacy must have left the Unknown Regions days ago—no wonder Snoke had been quiet. Kylo had assumed that the regent would bide his time as always, pulling strings from the shadows, but here he was.

With his dreadnought primed to wipe out the Hapan fleet.
Kylo walked over to the communications bay in his office, conscious of Rey's wide hazel eyes fixed on him. As if on cue, a transmission popped up in glowing turquoise Aurebesh letters, their harsh finality searing the air.

**BRING HER TO ME.**

His heart dropping into his stomach, Kylo switched off the communications bay, cloaking the office in a dimmer light than before. Rey swallowed but said nothing as she waited for his next move, her shoulders squared, looking every inch a warrior queen in her white armor, the dragon chain slashing across her torso in a ripple of silver fire.

In the time between the arrival of the Consortium navy and Snoke's message, Kylo Ren had experienced the full gamut of human emotion. There had been surprise and resignation when Rey's warships materialized, then even more surprise at the direction their cannons swung in. There had been the briefest, faintest sliver of hope that she'd chosen him, after all— a hope quickly crushed when Claviclus brought home the point that of *course* Rey would attempt to rescue Luke first— but even the despair accompanying that realization had been unable to quell Kylo's fear that Rey was going to get herself shot to pieces by his generals.

And then there had been the bittersweet ache of seeing her again, the furthest reaches of his ruined psyche hungrily grasping at the light that she brought into the room with her presence even as he sat there and looked at her and let her carry out her games and her rationalizations, sick to his stomach with how much he longed to just believe.

The measure of satisfaction he'd derived from cutting her down to size had been more negligible than he'd cared to admit, and it vanished entirely once it dawned on him that she truly had no idea Luke was on his ship. He'd clung to the bewildered, accusatory anger of the argument that followed, but now— now he was drowning in guilt and confusion. As well as the renewed surge of fear for Rey's life that Snoke's missive had caused to well up.

Kylo was *winded*. More than torn apart, he felt as if the last of the walls he'd constructed around himself had disintegrated and his tenuous grip on his composure was slowly floating away along with the pieces.

And yet Rey was there, slightly nervous but otherwise calm and steady. Anchoring him, *trusting* him, when he hadn't given her any reason to. She'd risked everything to save his life and had told him she loved him with such painful sincerity, and in return he'd lashed out with cruel indifference. He would never be able to take it back, how harshly he'd spurned all her attempts at reconciliation, the callous way he'd told her about discarding his wedding ring.
Force help me, he thought as he stared at Rey with bleak eyes, but I'm always failing you. I'm so tired of failing you. I'm so tired of hurting the ones I love.

I'm so tired.

That had to stop now.

He knew what he had to do.

Chapter End Notes

U.O. Statura.

The Shattered Ridge.

The Giju Run.

Azalus-class Hutt dreadnought.

The Echo of Hope.
A chill shot down Rey's spine as those words flashed above the holoprojector. She was standing a good several feet away from Kylo but those expressive features of his proved easy to read as always, the spasm in the hollow beneath his left eye and the clenching of his jaw speaking volumes like signal fires ignited in the dead of night. She thought back to what he'd said about being terrified that she was going to get herself killed, and a shy, feeble hope began to stir anew— but she quashed it before she once again fell into the trap of holding on to things past. Perhaps he still had feelings for her, but he'd made it clear on more than one occasion— even before he told her he was no longer wearing his wedding ring— that there was no overcoming the hurt she'd caused.

It wasn't like she could simply argue her way back into his life. Rey understood that now. And it was...

*It's okay,* she realized with a bittersweet pang that was sharp and surprising all at once. She'd done all she could to make amends and, as long as he made it out of this war alive, as long as he wasn't consumed by Snoke's darkness once more, as long as he had a future even if it didn't include her— it would be enough.

"I have to take you to him." Kylo's words jarred her out of her reverie. "If I don't— if he is not humored— he'll destroy your fleet."

What he didn't say was that, once Snoke had obliterated the Battle Dragons, there would be nothing to stop him from attacking the Resistance, too. The implication hung heavy in the air.

Rey nodded slowly, fighting the urge to fiddle with her dragon chain. "All right. Let's go."
Kylo stared at her for such a long time that she was left with the oddest impression that he was committing her face to memory. Before she could dwell on it, he looked away with a certain abruptness that reminded her of a bacta patch being ripped off a wound. "Just... just stay close to me," he finally mumbled. "Don't do anything rash."

The beginnings of a rueful half-smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. "You probably will." While he wasn't teasing her, exactly, there was an almost aching tenderness in his voice that made her want to weep for what she'd had and for what could have been. "But stay close to me, anyway."

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On the bone-dry world of Makem Te in the Nilgaard sector of the Outer Rim Territories, a man was running for his life down the busy streets of the vast marketplace that was the nerve center of the ancient capital. He shouldered his way through groups of people congregating around the various stalls and shoved more than a few roaming vendors aside, leaving a trail of guttural Swoken curses and spilled produce in his wake.

The man was young, no older than twenty-five at most, and possessed of the preternatural beauty that characterized all Hapans— as well as a pressing need to get away from whoever was pursuing him. He ducked into an empty alleyway that was little more than a rail-thin corridor between two sandy-hued buildings and then, without stopping, threw a quick glance over his shoulder to see if he was being followed...

The collision with a slim but armored body sent him sprawling to the ground, stirring up flurries of dust. Flat on his back, he gazed up in disbelief through the rust-colored clouds at the woman looming over him, the lower portion of her face obscured by a black half-mask, and he trembled as five similarly attired figures melted out of the surroundings that had previously given no indication of their presence. They swiftly encircled him, cutting off all avenues of escape.

"You've led us on a merry chase, Lord Ettagar," said Astarta of the spy legions, unsheathing her songsteel blade. "But there's nowhere left to run, and now you must submit to the Queen Mother's justice."

"Wait!" Ettagar's protest was pathetically shrill as he held up a hand over his head— a reflexive gesture but one that would do little in the way of shielding him from a weapon that could resist a lightsaber's beam. He wasn't thinking rationally anymore; there was only the animal instinct to survive, whatever the cost. "I have information. There's something you don't know about the Heritage Council— who we were working with— I can tell you that if you let me live!"
Rey had once thought that the *Heresiarch* was the biggest warship she'd ever seen, but she had to admit that the *Supremacy* blew it out of the water. It was twice the length of the Siege Dreadnoughts and had a colossal wingspan of sixty kilometers, completely blocking out the stars beyond the viewport as Kylo's *Upsilon-* class shuttle crawled towards it at sublight. Before long, hangar doors parted like a set of massive jaws, revealing the gleaming black mouth of a docking bay, and Snoke's ship swallowed them whole.

A group of stormtroopers marched over once Kylo and Rey disembarked, their leader presenting Rey with a pair of thick metal binders. Kylo's withering glare could have cut through steel but, to his credit, he managed to affect bored disdain when he asked, "Is this really necessary?"

"It's by order of Regent Snoke, Emperor Ren," the stormtrooper replied with as much apology as his voice modulator could convey. "She needs to surrender her weapon, too."

Kylo held out a hand in a wordless command that brooked no argument. The stormtrooper gave him the binders and he was the one who put them on Rey, his touch unfailingly gentle even though his mouth was set in a grim line as he clasped the metal restraints around her wrists, as he removed the lightsaber from the belt at her waist. Taking her by the arm with his free hand, he led her out of the hangars and further into the ship, leaving their designated escorts no choice but to scurry after them.

Rey's hearthammered in her chest as they walked. This was the first time Kylo had touched her since she walked out on him at the Citadel; despite the layers of his leather glove and her armored sleeve separating them, his fingers burned their pressure into her skin. He was close enough that she could smell myrrh and sandalwood, caf and smoke and ink—that warm collection of scents that was so uniquely him, that was so familiar and so dear.

There were remarkably few people milling about for a ship this size. If Rey had to hazard a guess, most were at their battle stations, preparing to carry out Snoke's will. Kylo was a steady, silent presence beside her, his gaze focused straight ahead with a careful blankness that she recognized from her time at the Citadel.

Stars, but she was nervous. She held her head high, though, carrying herself the way she imagined Lairelosse would if the Ducha were in her shoes. At the same time, she tried not to think too much about Lairelosse and Aleson and all the other nobles who'd become her friends, who had followed her into battle on their Dragons and were now directly in harm's way. It wouldn't do to worry; she needed every ounce of composure she could muster for the audience with Snoke. Keeping that in mind, Rey swept through the *Supremacy* like she owned it, like the binders didn't exist, like Kylo was simply escorting her to dinner, or to a ball.
It worked. More than a few of the soldiers and workers that they encountered looked at her and then moved aside, hands instinctively shooting up in crisp salutes before they even noticed her restraints.

It was all about how you presented yourself. What you projected to whoever was watching. Rey had learned that from the Hapans.

By the time they reached the turbolift, she could almost swear that Kylo's Force signature had warmed with a reluctantly amused admiration. But still he said nothing to her. Not even after he'd closed the turbolift doors in the stormtroopers' faces and they had embarked on the slow ascent all by themselves. He released her arm and stepped back, out of her line of sight, and she was left to stare at the walls and remember another turbolift ride they'd taken together in First Order territory, his breath hot on her skin beneath the flickering lights, his eyes gazing at her in such wonder...

What she wouldn't give to have all of that back.

"You know, when I was on Dathomir, I saw your future." Rey turned to Kylo and his dark eyes flickered to her, a hint of curiosity sparking in their depths. "Or— well— our future, I suppose. I saw you and— and I saw our child. Our daughter." His lips parted slightly, that rigid mask of his collapsing into a semblance of something stunned, something soft. "But I realize now that it was the future I wanted," she hastened to add, suddenly struck by the very real, very visceral fear that he might think she was manipulating him again. "I was selfish to come here and expect that you and I could go back to the way things were. I apologize for being selfish in this regard, but I won't apologize for trying to put an end to this war. You asked me a few days ago if not signing the Enhanced Security Decree made you worthy in my eyes but, the thing is, you have always been worthy. That's why your father went to Starkiller Base, that's why your mother agreed to a ceasefire. Because— because you're worth everything." She felt the sting of tears welling up behind her eyes but she refused to let them fall. He'd accused her of using tears to get what she wanted, and she wasn't going to let anything tarnish her words, wasn't going to let anything make them seem less genuine to him. "I want— I wanted— to be with you again so badly. But that's not what you want and— and I think— I see now that that's all right, as long as you'll be your own person, as long you'll be happy. So even if we go our separate ways when all of this is over, I can live with that if it means you've made peace with yourself. If it means you'll be free from Snoke and everything else that's been holding you back. I can lose you like that, as long as I don't lose you today."

And that was that. Her last stand. Her own personal surrender. A jumble of things she hadn't even fully realized about where her head was at until she said them all out loud.

She searched Kylo's eyes for some sign that he believed her, that she'd reached him. His expression was solemn, indecipherable— and she didn't know whether to treat it with fear or with hope that he was so blatantly guarding against showing his emotions. Was it to shut himself off from her or from
Rey chose hope. She flashed Kylo one last tentative smile as the turbolift coasted to a stop and she heard the doors open behind her, and in the sliver of time that she turned away from him to face the interior of the level they had just arrived at, she said goodbye to her daughter, to the future that had, after all, been just another dream— but a blessed one at that, giving her the strength she needed before it slipped from her grasp.

This woman was literally going to be the death of him.

Kylo took Rey by the arm again and guided her out of the turbolift in a haze of shock. In the span of the past handful of hours, his wife had nearly sent him into cardiac arrest by placing her practically defenseless ship within aim of First Order cannons, had severely tested his willpower by arriving on the Heresiarch looking like... like that, had told him she loved him— and he was still feeling the sting of how badly he'd responded to her confession— and had tugged at his heartstrings and the blood in his veins with the sheer guts she'd displayed in parading through the corridors of the Supremacy like a true queen. On top of that, she'd told him about her vision of their future and their child and let him go with such gentle resignation in the same breath, all while they were on their way to meet Snoke, who was a master of mind games, who would pounce at the first sign of weakness.

Kylo didn't know whether to kiss Rey or to just— just grab her and take her far away from here, wrap her up in soft blankets and curl around her and just stay like that forever in some safe house where no one would ever find them, preferably while he kissed her some more. However, there was nothing to be done at the moment but steel himself for the audience with the Empire's regent— and pray that Rey remembered to at the very least try not to do anything rash.

"So," Rey snapped at the figure on the throne as she strode confidently into the room, her voice ringing with such authority that it was impossible to doubt for one second that she was Ta'a Chume's granddaughter, "we meet at last."

Damn it, Rey, Kylo cursed inwardly.

And Snoke— who was so used to getting the first word in as well as the last—

— blinked—
"Yes, we do," he mused, recovering from his surprise in a flash as Kylo and Rey came to a stop a few feet away from the throne, Kylo's hand falling from Rey's arm as he dropped to one knee in obeisance, his other hand still clutching Rey's lightsaber.

Snoke beckoned the weapon over to him; it slid from Kylo's grasp and glided past its defiant owner and onto the armrest of the throne. Kylo couldn't see Rey's face with her back turned to him like this, but he wondered if she was calculating her odds against the eight Praetorian Guards standing as still as statues by the walls or if she was focusing all the barely reigned-in venom in her stance on their master.

"Welcome, young Rey," Snoke intoned.

"I have several titles," Rey said stiffly, "and I'd appreciate it if you offered me the courtesy of using at least one of them, Regent Snoke." There was something about the way she emphasized regent—almost as if she were reminding Snoke that he only had the one address compared to the plethora that the Hapans heaped on their Queen Mother, their living goddess.

Kylo was... quite honestly, floored.

"Do you still count empress among those titles, I wonder?" Snoke asked, and the beginnings of a satisfied smile bloomed on his withered lips when Rey tensed but said nothing. "But it was never truly yours, was it? You weren't born into it, you didn't earn it, and the same goes for—" His frosty gaze darted to Kylo over Rey's shoulder—"you. I made you who you are today, Kylo Ren. And you have repaid me by letting the Resistance destroy half our navy in one fell swoop and by letting Skywalker live even though you already had him at your mercy." Rey started, her head jerking as if she were about to turn back to Kylo but stopped herself at the last second. "You have, however, done right in bringing Kira Ka Djo to me, so I will concede that you might not entirely be a lost cause, after all."

It was such a different sentiment from what Rey had expressed in the turbolift—"You have always been worthy, you're worth everything"—that Kylo very nearly couldn't suppress a shudder at how blind he'd been, and for so long, too.

Snoke turned his attention back to Rey, his smile growing wider and sharper and more cunning. "Ah. You didn't know that Skywalker was taken prisoner at Ord Mantell, I see. But can you really blame your dear husband for no longer trusting you with such critical information?"
"There are a lot of things I don't blame him for," Rey said coldly. "What do you want? Why am I here?"

Snoke's eyes found Kylo's again, like a lazy nexu switching his attention back and forth between two trapped bark rats. "Quite the spitfire, isn't she? I'm starting to understand why you were so captivated. But I must admit I was expecting someone more refined, more beautiful, to have held you in such a vise grip."

A beat. And then—

"Regent Snoke," Rey said, "you are hardly the first person in the galaxy who should be judging people by their appearance."

Kylo wanted to tell her that it was all a trap, that Snoke was merely taking his time unleashing one barb after another to see what would sink in the deepest, that every word that left Rey's mouth was leading her further into a labyrinth that would close in it was least expected, offering no recourse. Kylo had fallen victim to this trick many times, but he wasn't in any position to warn her.

He had to wait.

"Perhaps I just need to take a closer look," Snoke murmured. He stretched out a pale hand, long fingers curling upwards, spindly and graceful, gathering air.

Kylo mentally prepared himself to see Rey lifted off her feet and pulled towards the throne, but that didn't happen. Instead, Snoke abruptly snatched his hand back with a nigh inaudible intake of breath, as if some invisible thing had just lashed at him.

Or, well, not wholly invisible. Kylo could make out, just barely, the flickering outline of some great, snarling, serpentine beast that wove through the distance between Rey and Snoke, its head reared back as if ready to strike again. Kylo focused, and he realized he was looking at the silhouette of a dragon spun from the threads of the Force.

Apparently, Rey had returned from Dathomir with more than just visions.

"There's no need for that." Her voice was a marvel, strong and composed and yet gilded in fire. "I can walk perfectly fine on my own."
And, as Kylo watched, she marched right up to the throne, stopping only once she was almost within arm's reach of Snoke, staring him down as her energy signature crackled with an aura of quiet menace. And *challenge.*

"I hope my lady understands that this is *highly* irregular," Aleson Gray remarked as he sauntered into the command center of the Talcharaim fleet's lead Battle Dragon, the *Silver Dawn.* "In war, we normally stick to our positions instead of shuttling off to one another's ships as we please."

He shot Lairelosse Yliri a languid grin to indicate that he'd spoken in jest but, as usual, she wasn't in the mood for his particular brand of humor. "Hapes is not yet at war with anyone," she crisply reminded him. "Besides, the matter that has cropped up is far too delicate for the HoloNet."

"And here I thought you were just missing me."

Lairelosse rolled her eyes, ushering Aleson to a quiet nook on the circular bridge that was as far away from the crew as they could get. "Ettagar has been found and apprehended on Makem Te," she said in low tones. "He thought Astarta was going to kill him—"

"Was she not?" Aleson shook his head as soon as the words left his lips, answering his own question. "No, of course not. Kira Ka Chume isn't one for clandestine executions."

"She isn't," Lairelosse agreed. "But of course Astarta let Ettagar believe otherwise. He sang like a bird."

"And?"

"And the Heritage Council was working with a certain splinter faction of the Empire. They cut a deal to overthrow both Kira Ka Djo and Kylo Ren. Those submersibles that lay siege to Alqualonde—they were top-secret First Order tech, hidden from Ren himself. That's why Charubah has had no luck in ID-ing the remnants. Ettagar didn't know which specific officers were involved in the plot, but..."
"But you do," Aleson finished for her.

Lairelosse shrugged. "I have my suspicions." Her gaze strayed beyond the viewport, where Armitage Hux's Finalizer gleamed in the black several leagues away from the Silver Dawn. "Astarta contacted me as a last resort because she was unable to reach Her Majesty."

"Because Her Majesty is currently behind enemy lines not knowing that they are already enemy lines," Aleson sighed. "I think it's time to do some repositioning."

"Yes." Lairelosse walked over to the golden holoprojector in the middle of the room and pulled up a diagram showing the current arrangement of the Talcharaim and Kavan fleets relative to Hux's forces. "I think so, too. Just in case."

*%

Up close, Snoke's eyes were as cold as glaciers, his misshapen face riddled with scars. Rey had assumed that he and Ta'a Chume would be cut from the same cloth but, as she extended her perception, she quickly realized that this wasn't the case. While Ta'a Chume had been similarly adept at manipulation—psychological and political and otherwise—she'd employed it out of a genuine belief that it was for the good of the Hapes Consortium.

Snoke did it for the thrill. The empty and corrupted soul that Rey saw in his wintry gaze, it fed on tugging other people around like puppets on a string. She didn't think she'd ever despised anyone more.

Snoke glanced at Kylo again, but he spoke in a low voice for Rey's ears alone. "I almost lost my prized student because of your little romance. Fortunately, your deception brought him back to his senses. You might as well give up now, Ereneda, for every step he has taken since the day he was born has led him to me, and to me he will always return."

"He's not a toy to be fought over. He can decide his own path. He will," Rey snarled. "You underestimate him. It will be your downfall."

"Oh?" Those gruesome features rearranged themselves into a mocking facsimile of surprise and then Snoke was leaning forward eagerly, like a predator who had just caught the prey's scent on the wind. "Have you seen something?" he asked with a thread of indolent mischief that somehow gave Rey the impression of a trap snapping shut. And then he chuckled darkly, the sound settling into her bones
and igniting shards of trepidation and of fear. "Foolish girl." His voice rose, echoing through the throne room. "It was I who bridged your minds. I stoked your husband's conflicted soul. I knew he was not strong enough to hide it from you and you were not wise enough to resist the bait."

No. Every inch of Rey's being screamed in silent denial. She whirled around to look at Kylo, who was staring at the two of them with a stricken expression that made him seem far too young, far too lost. "Don't believe him," she pleaded. "The bond is— it's real— it's ours—"

She realized her mistake too late. Her temporary distraction allowed Snoke to push forward, breaking down the mental barriers that had so far kept her safe. Like a treacherous root seizing its chance to grow into a crack in the earth, he struck, his Force powers overwhelming her own in a sharp and brutal wave.

Rey's feet left the metal floor. A gasp clawed its way out of her throat as she was engulfed by a pain so searing that the world swam before her eyes in puddles of black spots and white heat. Her body was no longer her own as Snoke spun her around so that she was facing him again and crashed into her mind with all the might of a giant's fist.

This time, Rey screamed out loud.

The invader sifted through her thoughts and her memories and everything that she was with a deliberate, grating callousness. Through the fog of unbearable agony, she heard him laughing once more. "Do you want to know what I see, Emperor Ren?" he asked Kylo. "I see that oh so charming bedroom with the balcony overlooking the black waters. I see your wife talking to none other than Poe Dameron's holo. She's angry, she tells him that you're in the castle and that he shouldn't contact her again until it's safe..." Snoke clucked his tongue in false sympathy. "She really played the long game, didn't she, my boy? And you fell for it. Because, despite all our training, you just wanted someone to love you."

Kylo flinched. Rey felt it, even though she couldn't see him, even though the pain blocked out all else. Snoke delved deeper, more cruelly, with a smirk that grew wider with every second that passed. "What else do we have here?" he marveled. "I see Lairerosse Yliri taking the naive Chume'da under her wing, teaching her the tricks of the Hapan trade. How to smile at a man, how to seduce him, because men are so much more malleable when they follow their blood. I have to hand it to the Ducha Yliri, that is quite a fine saying. Accurate, too. Look how well it turned out for the Consortium—at least for a while."

This was before, Rey wanted to tell Kylo, her thoughts disjointed, scattered to the wind on the crests of the torment that was threatening to rip her apart. Before I really knew you. Before everything. Don't believe him. I love you, I do—
But she couldn't move her lips to form anything other than a wordless shout. She couldn't move her limbs, so strong was Snoke's telekinetic hold on her. She was powerless, completely at his mercy...

Another burst of pain washed over her, more blinding— more *debilitating*— than ever before. Rey squeezed her eyes shut. In the absence of visual stimuli, it wasn't hard to imagine that the Dathomir sun shone warm on her face. Perhaps she was merely delirious, but what unfurled inside of her just then—

— it felt like *wings*—

*At his mercy?* scoffed some inner voice that was her own but also not, that was one voice and yet hundreds upon hundreds of voices, a multitude of images racing together like starlines in the dark, their splinters spiraling backwards into the rivers of time, red sun, seven moons, an unbroken line of witch clan matriarchs and Hapan queen mothers speaking to her, speaking *through* her. A thousand generations lived in her now, and they all converged to say one thing in a vengeful, resonating chorus: *We bow to no one.*

Rey opened her eyes.

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Snoke had to admit that Rey's brash directness had thrown him for a loop when she arrived, but in the end she'd proven as predictable as everyone else who thought they stood a chance against him. Now she was screaming in anguish, her mind ripe for the plucking, and he noted with no small amount of pleasure Kylo's utter stillness, the pain of betrayal etched on his features. Snoke had sensed hesitation in the young emperor when he walked in, but now there was only a resolute purpose after learning more about Rey's duplicity.

It really *was* too easy. Snoke telekinetically pulled the girl's levitating, immobile body closer, eager to extract more of her memories, and she—

— shook the binders from her wrists, eyes *blazing*, and—

— *punched him.*
Square across the jaw.

Snoke reeled back, the base of his skull colliding with the throne. It took him a while to register that his ears were ringing and that his jaw was sore simply because it had been so long since anyone had even dared attempt to strike him. Stunned, he hadn't finished reconciling the blow with reality when the Praetorian Guards sprang to his defense; they moved as one, drawing their weapons and—

Rey's feet landed on the floor and a circle of Force energy exploded outwards from the point of impact, knocking the guards off their feet and sending them slamming against the walls. Snoke hissed, twitching as what felt like great, monstrous claws raked through his mind; he automatically threw up his defenses, but not before Rey managed to get a glimpse, not before she managed to sink in deep enough to start digging, methodically dismantling his barriers with all the might of a solar flare.

"You," she growled, her voice trembling with pure fury as she stood before the throne, towering over Snoke's writhing form, "are a pathetic little man who hides behind others, too cowardly to claim an empire for yourself. It rankles you that literally no one even knew who you were before the rise of the First Order. That is why it had to be Ben Solo. You needed Vader's grandson to satisfy the Imperial remnant and you needed the child of Rebellion heroes to mollify those who were on the fence. And not only that—if someone as powerful as him, if someone with a legacy like his—if a person like that bowed to you, then that showed everybody else that you were worth bowing to." She glared at him with narrowed eyes, the loose strands of hair framing her face stirred by some unnatural wind. "How dare you accuse us of not earning what we have, when you didn't fight for any of this, when you built it all on Skywalker blood!"

The agony was like broken glass being injected into Snoke's veins, but he was able to rally. His opponent was letting anger overtake her, and the thing about too strong a hold was that it left the wielder wide open for an attack from another angle. He found a crack in Rey's shields and pummeled it with all the strength that was left to him, forcing her backwards and onto her knees and then spinning her around to face Kylo, who had gotten to his feet.

Snoke peered into Kylo's mind and flashed a victorious smirk at what he discovered there. "You were naive to think you could ever turn him, Kira Ka Djo," he gloated. "I cannot be betrayed. I cannot be beaten. I have been his shadow since the day he was born, I see his mind, his every intent. I see resolve where there once was conflict, strength where there once was weakness. I see him taking the lightsaber and using it to kill his true enemy." The figure on the throne let the words roll off his tongue, relishing his triumph. "You asked me why you were here, Ereneda. And the answer is—to die by the cruelest stroke." He nodded imperiously at Kylo, who was gazing down at Rey with an impassive stare. "Before you kneels the woman who almost cost you your empire, the one who broke your heart. Do it. Avenge yourself. Take back the pride that was stolen. Fulfill your
"I will," vowed Kylo Ren.

And, with an air of contentment, Snoke waited for that familiar burst of red light.

It never came.

Instead, what filled his vision was the silver-white radiance of durindfire, of desert sun. There was more pain but, this time, it was impossible to comprehend. Snoke looked down and blinked at the sight of Rey's saberstaff ignited through his ribs, and then his eyes flickered up to meet Kylo's across the distance. As Snoke watched in disbelief, the young emperor crooked his black-gloved fingers and the blade shot forward, severing flesh and bone—

And then there was nothing.

*]

Like me, you're a bit slow, mused the voice that had been in Kylo's head for months, instantly recognizable now that there was no other presence to muffle it. And, as Rey's fist closed around the hilt of her saberstaff, as the upper half of Snoke's corpse toppled to the floor, Anakin Skywalker grinned at his grandson from the world that came after. But, also like me, you get there in the end.

Chapter End Notes

Makem Te.

The Nilgaard sector.

Swoken.

Nexu.

Bark rat.
Chapter 66

Chapter Notes

Oh my gosh, thank you so much to everyone who left kudos and feedback on the last chapter! Your kind words and support warmed my heart each wet, chilly autumn day in France, Belgium and the Netherlands. I'm back from my birthday trip, one year older and one big battle, reconciliation, and epilogue away from finishing this story!

By the way, I wrote some of this chapter in my Darth Vader notebook at a sidewalk cafe in Paris. My best life :') I hope you all like it, and I dedicate it to Erateini, myabell0, Anonym1989, and rebelrebelreylo who met up with me in Europe and made my vacation so much more fun and memorable. Love love love. ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

How does it feel to look deep into someone's eyes and know that they hold your life in their hands?

This was a question Rey had never suspected she'd one day be capable of answering. Her fate had always been her own since the childhood years of drought. Even when the Heritage Council had her at their mercy, she'd fought to cut herself loose from those ropes, she'd plunged the venom-laced syringe that was meant for her into Verisya Galney's neck. Even during the many occasions her life seemed to be at its end, she'd always done her best to go down swinging.

Not this time, though.

This time she was on her knees and statue-still, searching Kylo's impassive features for any sign of leniency. For the light that she had so often glimpsed in the past existing side by side with his darkness. She did this instead of fighting because it mattered that she was doing this instead of fighting.

And it was like hovering on the edge of a cliff, preparing to jump, waiting for her body to be dashed onto the sharp rocks below.

Or for him to catch her.

Another second ticked by. Kylo turned the hilt of his saber as if in preparation to activate it, staring down at her all the while. Rey held her breath, and—
And she felt the exact moment Snoke died. It wasn't just that his telekinetic hold on her dissipated; his Force signature also winked out, the sudden absence of it like a weight being lifted from the room. From the galaxy. The reflection of her saberstaff's arctic glow blazed in Kylo's dark eyes.

Strange how the combination of shock and urgency could distill even the most momentous occurrences into the simplest of concepts, the mind painting over the canvas in broad strokes that carry detail between the lines.

You killed him. He's gone.

She rose to her feet, her weapon finding its way back into her hand. She was unable to tear her gaze from Kylo as he ignited his own lightsaber, its piercing radiance washing over his features in a scarlet cast.

It's over. You're free.

* *

Kylo wasn't even looking at Snoke when Rey's saber struck true. His former master would have hated that— would have hated that his death hadn't merited much notice. But Kylo didn't care. He only had eyes for Rey, for her pale face turned up to him against the red walls and the black floors, for the telltale shimmer of pent-up tears that she refused to let fall because he'd accused her of using tears to manipulate him.

His strong, brave girl, whom he had hurt so much. This was how he would begin to make it up to her.

What if it wasn't enough?

I'll try, anyway, he stubbornly decided. I'll keep trying, like she did for me.

It had all happened so fast that the Praetorian Guard had been unable to protect Snoke; now, they sought to avenge him, descending upon Rey and Kylo in a whirl of crimson laminate armor and melee weapons crackling with ultrasonic frequencies. The next few seconds were chaos and
movement, spiked with the adrenaline of combat, lit by the sparks that came off each resounding blow. Through it all, Kylo guarded Rey's flanks and she did the same for him, the two of them keeping up a tightly-knit defensive circle that none of their foes could penetrate.

*I would stand at your back,* he thought as he felt her hand on his thigh, their bodies pressing together as he boosted her up so she could kick the advancing guards away, *that the world might never overtake us.*

*

Nearly an hour had passed since Kylo Ren's shuttle boarded the *Supremacy.* Armitage Hux regarded the aforementioned capital ship with increasing suspicion as it loomed unnervingly still and silent beyond the *Finalizer*'s viewport. He hadn't risen through the ranks of the First Order by failing to pay attention to his instincts; they were finely honed, and they were telling him that something was wrong.

He commed Lusica Stynnix, a junior officer aboard Snoke's ship who was one of his contacts. "I need eyes on the throne room." There were no security cameras on that level, as the regent had always valued his privacy.

This point was also foremost on Lusica's mind. "*General, I doubt Regent Snoke would appreciate the disturbance."

"On the off-chance that nothing's amiss, tell him I have an urgent message," Hux instructed. He'd think of an excuse later; right now, it was imperative that he learn what was going on behind those closed doors.

"*Affirmative, sir. Heading up."

Hux signed off and resumed his vigil over the blockade of Coruscant. His calculating blue eyes lingered on the Dragon Fleet as he began to plan his attack.

Rey on Starkiller Base had been untrained yet lethal, stronger than she knew. Rey during the first war had been a whirlwind, somewhat unfocused as she sought to incorporate the structured forms
Luke Skywalker had taught her with the Jakku style of combat that wasn’t a style at all but, rather, a no-holds-barred scrappiness.

But the Rey that fought at Kylo’s side now—

She knew how strong she was.

She was a whirlwind with teeth.

They were currently on opposite ends of the throne room. Two of the eight guards were already dead, leaving Rey and Kylo to handle three apiece. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Seventh Guard wrestle Rey’s arm backwards over her shoulder; he would have rushed to her aid but he was currently being driven towards the wall by two guards whose intersected electro-bisento blades were straining against the scarlet beam of his lightsaber while a third rushed at him head-on.

But he needn’t have worried— her saberstaff split into two, coaxed apart by Force energy, and her free hand grabbed one hilt before it could clatter to the floor and thrust the lethal end into the side of the guard’s head.

His wife, Kylo decided— as he surged free of the blade-lock and ran his lightsaber through the chest of the charging guard, pitching the limp body into the nearest turbine where it was shredded into grisly pieces— could take care of herself.

A few seconds later, he wasn’t sure if the same thing could be said for him. One guard pounced as soon as he decapitated the other, forcing him to jump back with his lightsaber still embedded in the dead man’s armor. He dodged the rain of strikes as best as he could, trying to grapple the electro-bisento out of his opponent’s hands. But the guard had the advantage, and soon Kylo was rendered immobile, the staff pressed to his throat, the blade’s curved edge a hair’s breadth away from cutting into his cheek.

“Ben!”

He hadn’t known— he truly hadn’t known— just how much he’d missed the sound of Rey saying the name he’d cast aside. Having just dispatched her last opponent, she threw the hilt of her rejoined saberstaff at him and he grabbed it, thumbing the emitter. The plasma beam crackled as it lanced straight through the forehead of the guard who was restraining him. The guard’s hold on Kylo slackened and he collapsed onto the floor of the throne room, never to stir again.
Chests heaving from exertion, Rey and Kylo stared at each other across the sea of corpses and small fires. There was a feral glint in his eyes, dangerous and hungry, and she didn't know whether she wanted to run away or run towards—

But then she realized, with a jolt, that they weren't alone.

The turbolift's doors had cracked open sometime within the last few seconds; now they were sliding shut again, but not before affording Rey a glimpse of the slack-jawed First Order officer taking in the scene as she repeatedly pressed the button to facilitate her escape, her free hand darting to the comlink clipped to her ear.

Acting on pure instinct, Rey stretched out an arm to knock her unconscious with the Force equivalent of a blow to the head. The officer slumped to the floor of the turbolift as the doors finally closed, but it was too late. She'd managed to send out some kind of alert, and almost immediately the shrill whine of sirens pierced the air.

"It's a security breach warning." Kylo's voice was like gravel and he spoke as slowly as if he were in a daze. As if the weight of what he had done was only just beginning to sink in. "Stormtroopers will be closing in on our position any moment now."

"Then we have to go," Rey said decisively, recalling her saber to her palm and then tapping its hilt to her utility belt.

He mirrored her actions but otherwise offered no response, his gaze flickering to Snoke's remains. She closed the distance between them, blocking his view of the throne as best as she could despite the few inches he had over her.

"We have to go," she repeated, more forcefully this time. The bond stirred in that capricious way it often did, and into it her hope flowed like a river, like gold worn at the edges but still enduring.

_I know you won't let me die here. I know you won't let the sun go down on us like this._
Kylo stirred, exhaling a tremulous breath. "We can take the escape shuttle." Grabbing Rey's hand, he pulled her towards the back of the room, using the Force to pry open a side door that led to a small hangar. She followed without question, and they left the ruins of Snoke's best-laid plans behind them.

Although Lusica had yet to make contact, Hux was well aware of the security breach warning that had gone up on the Supremacy and was now being disseminated to the other flagships as protocol required. Because he was already watching like a hawk, he was the first to notice the shuttle hurtling out of the Mega-class Star Dreadnought, making a beeline for the Heresiarch.

"General Hux!" Another officer— not Lusica— was on the line, sounding panicked. "He's— Regent Snoke is dead!"

The bastard actually did it, Hux thought, his lips tightening into a firm line. Well, well.

Kylo Ren had just handed him his rebellion. On a silver platter.

"All units, concentrate fire on that shuttle," Hux coolly intoned into the frequency of the Finalizer's TIE complement. "Leave only ashes."

When he moved on to another frequency, he didn't waste time with words. Instead, a coded signal raced through certain heavily encrypted HoloNet channels and, aboard their respective destroyers, Kosimo Westermal, Ephin Sarreti, Gilad Pellaeon, and the rest of Hux's cohorts made ready to follow his lead.

Like most vessels of its ilk, the escape shuttle was tiny and nondescript— designed to be as visually unobtrusive as possible, its cockpit simple yet functional. There wasn't much to pore over but Rey did, anyway, her eyes glued to the dashboard so that she wouldn't have to dwell too much on other things.

Or one other thing, to be more accurate.
Namely, the fact that she was sitting on Kylo's lap.

The shuttle was meant to seat only one humanoid individual— Snoke had not had any interest in saving anybody aside from himself. And now the Queen Mother of the Hapes Consortium was floating through space uncomfortably aware of the Emperor of the First Order's muscled thighs beneath hers and his broad chest pressed to her spine. It was apparent that he was making a concerted effort to breathe as shallowly as possible, but they were so close together that puffs of warm air ghosted over her nape nonetheless. Her stomach whirled with a thousand butterflies that seemed to have no regard for how inappropriate their existence was, considering the life-or-death situation that had just transpired on the *Supremacy*.

That was transpiring still, as the little shuttle sped through the Empire's side of the blockade, racing past massive dreadnoughts and clouds of TIE fighters.

"It will be all right once we get to my ship." Although Kylo's voice was strained at the edges, no doubt because of their current position, his tone was soft— as if trying to reassure her. "Just go as fast as you can and stop for nothing."

Rey nodded, fiddling with the controls. Due to its small size, the shuttle had no cloaking device and their best bet was to make it to the *Heresiarch* as quickly as possible, ideally before the other capital ships could put two and two together.

She dipped low, beyond the radars of Pellaeon's fleet. From here, it was a straight shot to Kylo's destroyer. It wasn't that far off, they had a chance...

A large, black-gloved hand curled at her hip. It was an instinctive act, bowing to the tension of the moment. Perhaps in the midst of such a nerve-wracking journey he needed something to hold on to, and she was more than willing to be held. The light pressure soothed her, but at the same time—

At the same time, adrenaline was pumping through her system, heightening her senses. Coupled with the fact that she had missed being touched by him so, so much... it was almost *unbearable*, and yet she never wanted it to end.

The slight indent of his fingers on her hipbone too much, and not enough.

His lips moved wordlessly, skimming the back of her neck, and maybe it was only wishful thinking
on her part but it felt like they formed the silent shape of her name.

She shifted on his lap, turning her head to face him—

And that was when a volley of laser blasts rocked the escape shuttle's hull, the world beyond the transparisteel canopy lighting up red.

* 

On the bridge of the *Echo of Hope*, Poe Dameron's crew had long since sunk into that terse, desultory sort of waiting. But now light and movement several leagues away were catching their attention, and several figures rushed to the viewport for a closer look while those manning the various dashboards craned their necks toward the sight, their tasks forgotten for the moment.

"The *Finalizer*'s TIES are firing behind their own ranks?" Jessika Pava's brow creased. "What's going on? Who are they trying to shoot down?"

No sooner had these questions emerged from her lips when the *Finalizer* itself—along with several other First Order flagships—unleashed streams of crimson energy from their respective weapons systems, sending a barrage of turbolasers and missiles and ion cannons straight down the middle of the Hapan navy.

Poe wasn't going to wait for Leia's word on this one.

"*Move those bombers forward!*" he yelled, the bridge becoming a whirl of activity as dozens of fiery explosions illuminated the velvet black of space. "Scramble all units! We have to reinforce the Consortium fleet!"

Fortunately, it seemed that the other Resistance commanders had the same thought. Their side of the blockade sprang to action, all the great ships shifting to get an angle of fire on the First Order as X-wing starfighters hurtled off into the fray.

Soon, Poe's squadrons joined them, *Black One* leading the charge.
"I knew it," ranted Lieutenant Guila Angira after Leia had sent the first wave of heavy cruisers to the Hapans' aid. "I knew Ren couldn't be trusted. He had no intention of following through with the peace talks— he was just lulling us into a false sense of complacency!"

Leia's first instinct was to agree with Angira, but there was a part of her that couldn't stop thinking of the unflagging belief that Rey had shown little more than two hours ago. There was a part of her that wanted to have faith in her son, the man that Rey insisted still lived on in the shell that was Kylo Ren. And it was that part of Leia that won out.

Because that had been her mistake, her greatest failure as a mother— not believing in him when he needed her to.

With this in mind, Leia squinted out the viewport, perusing what glimpses of the First Order ranks were available to her over the roil of combat.

"That's not what's going on here, Lieutenant," she told Angira after a while. "Look closely. They're firing on the Emperor's ship, too. This is a power grab." She shook her head in disgust. "Armitage Hux sure knows how to pick his moments."

Turning to her crew, Leia began reeling off commands in a voice that rang with authority. "Keep one line open for Rey and put her through immediately if she makes contact. Move the divisions forward, tell them to concentrate fire on Hux and Pellaeon." There were other ships that she could spy joining in the mutiny, but the Finalizer and the Harbinger and their complements were the heaviest hitters. "The Raddus' top priority right now is to reinforce the Dragon Queen— and the Heresiarch fleet."

Rey had told her that she was going to Kylo's dreadnought to speak with him. Leia had no way of knowing if the Queen Mother was still there, but she figured she might as well cover all her bases.

And keep as many as she could of the Emperor's loyal forces in one piece while she was it.

"General Organa!" another one of her lieutenants protested in shock. "I mean— the Dragon Queen, yes— but Ren's fleet?"

"Yes," Leia confirmed, looking him straight in the eye. "I am your commanding officer, and I order
"The greatest treason of them all, Admiral Daala, was committed by Kylo Ren himself," Hux frostily replied. Blinking data at the edges of the transmission indicated that scores of other ships were listening in. "Regent Snoke is dead. He and his Praetorian Guard were massacred on the Supremacy by Kylo Ren and Kira Ka Djo. The Emperor is a traitor, and for that he must be destroyed. I'm taking control of the First Order now."

"Over my dead body," Daala gritted out.

Hux smirked. "It's not too late to come over to the winning side. And I am the winning side, make no mistake of that."

Daala cut the transmission without another word. "Put me through to Canady and Rook," she snarled at Major Tschel. They were the only fleet commanders she could think of at the moment who would assuredly not go along with Hux, but more would emerge from the woodwork as the battle unfolded.

She hoped.

Tschel started to do as he was bid but, before he could establish a connection with either Canady or Rook, he froze as a message flashed on the screen of his communications panel. "Admiral Daala." He gulped. "Our ships in the vanguard—they've spotted..."

Behind the Resistance side of the blockade, the black of space rippled and whorled in on itself as hundreds—thousands—of Hutt Cartel warships streamed out of the hyperlane. Ajuur-class heavy cruisers and massive Azalus-class dreadnoughts bulldozed their way through the Resistance's ranks, supported by bright crimson M22-T Krayt gunships armed to the teeth with concussion missile launchers and Kossak-class frigates that unleashed tractor beams to render enemy ships immobile before blasting them to smithereens with relentless waves of ion cannons.
Then there were the Hutt starfighters—the breathtakingly swift Dune lizards, the ferocious Kimogilas, the sleek and dangerous Scyk s—lunging at the X-wings that engaged them and descending on the bigger Resistance ships like swarms of vicious hornets.

It was a surprise attack that completely overwhelmed the rear guard. Seizing their advantage, Hux's forces and the Hutt Cartel continued to press forward from opposite ends of the battlefield, trapping the Hapes Consortium and the Resistance in a valley of fire and ruin.

"On your left."

In response to Kylo's urgent warning, Rey pulled the shuttle—

— *also* to the left—

It shouldn't have worked, but it did. The TIE leapt out of the way to avoid a collision, leaving the shuttle free to continue its frantic dash towards the *Dragon Queen*.

Not the Heresiarch. It would have been folly to continue gunning for Kylo's dreadnought, which was currently undergoing heavy bombardment. Rey's ship was out of range—*for now*—and it was therefore the better option, even if it was *much* farther away.

The little shuttle's battered hull groaned in protest as it was urged forward, already within an inch of its life.

Kylo didn't have time to dwell on Hux's betrayal, although he dearly wished he'd mastered the art of Force-choking someone across the vast reaches of space. Ever since the initial barrage of TIE artillery had rocked the escape vessel's foundations, he'd been consumed by a singular purpose—getting Rey to safety. It was this goal that was centering him in the Force, allowing him to push his powers to their limit; as she took care of maneuvering through the chaos of the First Order's shifting ranks, he focused on telekinetically deflecting as many lasers as possible.

Deflecting them *onto* the TIEs whenever he could.
Again, it shouldn't be working, but it was. One after another, splinters of scarlet light veered away from their target at the last second, piercing instead the attacking starfighters' viewports and engines and leaving a trail of debris. But there were two particularly determined units racing towards them, getting some good hits in, and the minimal shielding couldn't take much more...

Kylo gritted his teeth into a snarl, his hand shooting out over Rey's shoulder and slashing across the currents of the Force. The TIEs were suddenly yanked off their trajectories and sent slamming into each other at full speed.

From her perch on his lap, Rey craned her neck to gape at him, her eyes wide, her lips parted in awe, her features lit up by the conflagration of burning metal.

Before either of them could say anything, there was another burst of radiance that made both of them look to the east— and what Kylo saw made his heart drop into his stomach.

The *Supremacy* had rallied, its captain obviously following Hux's orders, and from its turrets a deluge of heavy turbolasers joined the onslaught on the Dragon Fleet. Although the Hapans had recovered from their initial surprise and were starting to return fire— as well as let their smaller ships loose— they were hopelessly outflanked. Now that the *Supremacy* had joined in, it wasn't long before the first Battle Dragon went up in flames, followed by another, and another...

Rey cried out— a hoarse, raw, disbelieving sound that Kylo felt in his very chest. Her people were dying right before her eyes because she'd placed them in the least strategic of locations, in order to save him from himself.

This was all because of him.

A new TIE squadron swooped down on them. Rey coaxed the shuttle into an abrupt, harrowing nosedive. For a moment it looked like they would be in the clear, jackknifing below the field of combat, lower and lower still—

A fresh volley of lasers slammed into them from another squadron that had been lurking south. The world spun wildly on its axis and they began losing altitude, the dashboard screeching shrill warnings of engine failure.

As Rey cursed under her breath and wrestled with the now useless controls, Kylo hurriedly
considered their options. They were free-falling through space, cut off from their allies, trapped in a shuttle that was moments away from complete and total disintegration.

There was only one way out that he could see. But surely it was madness, surely there was no way he could pull it off...

For some reason, he found himself thinking about his father. About things his father used to say, back in the days of the kind of hero worship that only a son could be capable of.

"Never tell me the odds."

...*

"Rey."

Kylo's soft, deep voice broke through the churning mire of her panic and despair. He shifted her in his lap so that she sat sidesaddle and she let him, not knowing what else to do. At first she blinked in surprise when he wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his face in the slope of her neck, but it was only a beat later when she returned his embrace, the sound of his heart thundering in her ear. She couldn't exactly call it acceptance, this feeling that settled over her bones, but it was a certain sense of calm.

The man she loved was with her. She was ready to face anything.

Even the end.

Their job done, the TIE fighters that had been in hot pursuit changed course, flying off to engage new opponents as the escape shuttle— trailing smoke from its wrecked engine, helpless against gravitational pull— plummeted into the atmosphere of glittering Coruscant.

Rey squeezed her eyes shut and clung tightly to Kylo's neck, steeling herself to burn up upon reentry along with the ship. She heard the durasteel hull splintering as heat and pressure tore it apart and she smelled the acrid, chemical tang of liquefying circuitry, and she waited for her body to catch fire. Waited for the pain.
It never came.

Her eyes flew open. The cockpit was awash in heat haze, its transparisteel canopy running like molten glass, the view beyond it a puddle of the shivering, violent hues of ozone and atomic nitrogen and helium. But she and Kylo remained untouched even as the space around them shimmered with temperatures that no human being could withstand.

She drew back slightly in order to look at him. He lifted his head from her neck, meeting her gaze with dark eyes that blazed with power, beads of sweat dotting his pale brow.

He was using the Force as a barrier, encasing them both in an invisible, protective sphere that kept the immutable laws of physics at bay while the rest of their surroundings transmuted into a roaring inferno.

Rey could do nothing but stare at him in wonder. You, she thought, knowing that he would be able to hear her loud and clear— the amount of energy he was channeling was opening everything up, everything including the bond— are quite possibly the craziest, most amazing person I've ever met.

Kylo cracked a smile. It was somehow solemn and roguish all at once, very nearly a smirk. His hand cupped the base of her spine, pressing her closer to his chest. I won't let you die here, he vowed, echoing her plea from the throne room as he rested his forehead against hers and their burning ship fell into the blue skies above Coruscant. I won't let the sun go down on us like this.

* 

The two stormtroopers stationed outside Luke Skywalker's cell were at a loss as to what to do. The battle had obviously started— if the frantic bursts of communication on the shortwave hadn't told them so, then the vibrations that rippled through the brig with each missile that found its mark would have made it abundantly clear— but they hadn't been given any new orders. All communiques were going unanswered, which wasn't that much of a surprise considering that everyone else had been mobilized to deal with far more urgent matters.

Still, they were getting antsy.

Another explosion rocked the Heresiarch's core, and the male stormtrooper had finally had enough. "Why don't you nip up topside and see what's going on?" he suggested to his female colleague. "I'll stand guard until you get back."
"You sure?" she asked, a shred of doubt in her tone.

He snorted. The prisoner hadn't put up a fight when they brought him in and he'd been sitting obediently in his cell ever since then, as if acknowledging the weight of his hopeless situation. "I can handle him. He's just an old man."

She nodded and left, and he continued to wait at his post, holding his blaster in a slant across his torso and shifting position every so often to avoid losing balance as more and more explosions reverberated through the foundations of the destroyer.

Suddenly there came a series of knocks from the other side of the cell door. "Hey!" Skywalker called out, his voice muffled by layers of metal. "Hey— I need to use the 'fresher!"

"In a bit," the stormtrooper grunted into the intercom. Protocol dictated that at least one other guard be present whenever the cell was opened.

"You don't understand, all these blasts are giving me motion sickness," the old man hurriedly explained. "I'm going to retch all over the floor. Who do you think will be mopping it up?"

The stormtrooper's features screwed up in disgust within the confines of his helmet. "All right. Step away from the door and keep your hands where I can see them," he instructed, and then he entered the cell.

A few minutes later, a figure clad in stormtrooper armor scurried out the open door, morosely shaking his head at the predictability of it all. "Works every time."

Chapter End Notes

Electro-bisento.

Lusica Stynnix.

Guila Angira.

Ajuur-class heavy cruiser.

M22-T Krayt gunship.
M3-A Scyk fighter.

M12-L Kimogila heavy fighter.

G1-M4-C Dunelizard fighter.
Chapter 67

Chapter Notes

I had intended to encompass the rest of the final battle in one long chapter but there is so much going on that, in the end, I decided to split it into two parts... and this update is still a monster, clocking in at 6,600-ish words xD Sorry I haven't been able to reply to everyone's comments as I'm currently juggling NaNoWriMo with my day job, but the good news is that LWABOC is part of my goal to write 50,000 words of Reylo fanfic in a month. Which means that hopefully, hopefully I will be able to finish this fic before the TROS premiere.

If y'all will notice, the projected chapter count is now at 69 because I plan for Chapter 68 to be the last part of the final battle and for 69 to be the aftermath, wrapping up of loose ends, etc— basically, the end of the main LWABOC storyline. There will be an epilogue, which will push the final chapter count up to 70, but as of 69 I will consider this fic completed.

If you're wondering if I realize what I'm saying, yes. Yes, I do. But let's try to be professional for a moment... hehehe 😊

Anyway, that's enough blathering from me. I hope you guys like this update! MWAH!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

With the battle raging around them, the Resistance bombers lumbered through the black of space, sublight ion thrusters groaning as their pilots desperately coaxed them to full speed. While capable of unleashing a devastating payload, each T-shaped, gargantuan MG-100 StarFortress SF-17 was cumbersome to maneuver and— despite Poe having moved them to a position that gave them a straight shot to the First Order vanguard when Snoke's ship appeared— easy pickings, now that Hux and his cohorts had mobilized their forces.

Paige Tico flinched as another one of her starfighter escorts was shot down. They were almost to Kosimo Westermal's fleet, but the situation was looking more and more dire with every second that passed. This deep in enemy territory, their limited number of X-wings couldn't contend with the endless waves of TIEs that were being hurled at them from the surrounding carriers, even with the StarFortresses themselves opposing attacking fighters with overlapping fields of fire.

"Paige." Poe's voice came flooding in over the Resistance frequency. "Hang tight until I get to you."

"You're all the way on the other end of the battlefield," Paige pointed out. It would be nothing short of a suicide run for him and his squadron, and they both knew it.
Poe started to argue, but Paige's attention was caught by bursts of emerald green lasers at the edge of the viewport. Her eyes tracked the source and then widened, right before a sigh of relief escaped from her lips. A swarm of *Miy'til* starfighters had appeared, their opalescent hulls gleaming in the light of the cannons that they leveled at the TIEs in a sleek yet deadly rain.

"Don't worry about me, Commander Dameron," Paige told Poe as her bomber was suddenly encased within the protective circle of dozens upon dozens of pale wings. "The Hapes Consortium's got our back."

"General."

Nastia Unamo's brisk, strident tones momentarily diverted Hux's attention from his hushed conference with Westermal's holo. He tilted his head towards the flint-eyed petty officer, waiting for her to proceed.

"The Cartel advance was successful," Unamo announced as she rifled through the battlefield reports that were blinking all over the screen at her terminal. "They've decimated Stavin Thaal's fleet and driven Wedge Antilles almost to the middle of the blockade. The Resistance formation is, for all intents and purposes, officially broken."

"Excellent." Hux allowed himself a small, tight-lipped smile. "Tell Siralt to skirt around the Hapan fleet and attack Antilles from the east. Sarreti will handle the western front while the Hutts continue pressing in from the south."

"Wait— what about me?" sputtered Westermal. "The Resistance bombers are taking out my dreadnoughts as we speak. I understand that you're preoccupied with engaging Daala and the Consortium, but Siralt is the second closest, he should reinforce me."

"That will take time we don't have," Hux said dismissively. "You'll just have to do your best, Kosimo."

Westermal paled. "You're... you're leaving me in the lurch?"
"We do what we must," Hux evenly replied. "If the enemy breaks through your ranks, they will have mine to contend with. It's all for the greater good, you see. Not to worry, old friend," he added with all the casualness of an afterthought as the other man's holo began to shake with impotent rage, "I shall avenge you."

"Hux," Westermal growled, "you spineless, treacherous son of a—"

Hux ended the comm. It really was too bad, he mused as he returned to directing the movements of his forces. Westermal had been the first officer Hux had recruited to his cause and he would be sorely missed— but he had let himself get outflanked, and it was simply more trouble than it was worth to help him clean up his mess.

"General." Unamo called his attention again, her gaze flickering from the dashboard to rest solely on him, a hint of triumph on her usually impassive, waspish features. "The squadrons have radioed in—we have a confirmed hit on the Supremacy's escape shuttle. It went down over Coruscant."

Hux's smile widened by a fraction. The king is dead, he gloated as a new flock of lieutenants entered the bridge to receive their orders, standing deferentially before him as they snapped off sharp salutes in perfect unison. Long live the king.

Atmospheric pressure had whittled the shuttle down to almost half of its original size by the time it punched through the cloud cover. Trailing jets of smoke and flame behind it like a meteor, it spiraled madly towards the metal spires of Galactic City that stretched out tens of thousands of feet below, waiting to break Rey and Kylo's fall in the most fatal of ways.

His brow knitted with the monumental effort that was required to keep the Force barrier intact, Kylo tightened his arms around Rey, drawing strength from her presence, using her light to anchor him amidst the rolling seas of his own doubts. More and more of the hollow metal shell that was all that was left of the cockpit peeled away with each second that ticked by and Coruscant's towers rose up to meet them, gleaming in the sunlight like bared spears. He squeezed his eyes shut, wondering frantically as sky blended into skyline if the barrier would hold up against impact—

— And he remembered the cliffs of Rarlech. Long ago, in his early days as Snoke's apprentice. He'd been little more than a boy, terrified out of his wits as he floated in the purple dusk, suspended by nothing but Snoke's telekinetic grasp.
"Are you afraid?"

"No."

"You are. I can feel it."

Snoke had let go without preamble and Kylo had started plummeting rapidly, the air leaving his lungs even as it whipped at his hair and robes. He'd done something, then— something that had stopped his descent inches away from the jagged rocks that would have impaled him.

"If you are to rule by my side," Snoke had rumbled as lightning flashed overhead, "then I can't have you defeated by heights."

Kylo's eyes snapped open.

For all that he was Emperor, one thing he had come to understand about himself was that he worked best when governed by instinct. When the noises of strategy-making and hidden motivations faded away and the labyrinth of the next move was narrowed down to simple choices. And right now, his choices were twofold— save Rey, or don't.

There was no middle ground.

Jaw clenching, Kylo summoned another burst of power just as the shuttle was about to hit the streets of Coruscant. Rey pulled away from him to look around wildly as the ruined vessel abruptly froze in mid-air, five feet from what would have been a devastating collision, its durasteel casings groaning as they were torn between the opposing demands of gravity and telekinesis, fire lapping at the barrier's intangible yet impenetrable walls.

Kylo scooped Rey up in his arms, one hand tucked under her knees and the other arm cradling the backs of her shoulders, and leapt out of the pilot seat. They were, by some stroke of coincidence, right outside the gates of the Citadel, and the stormtroopers who were standing guard all gaped at the sight of their Emperor landing in front of them on both feet, bridal-carrying his Empress, his black cape rippling in the wind as the remnants of a burning shuttle crashed to the ground behind him in a heap of charred metal.

Kylo decided that all these other people— and the battle and Hux and the rest of it— could wait just
a few more seconds. He peered down at the woman he had just fallen through the heavens with, the tides of his adrenaline ebbing to be replaced with the same dazed sort of wonder that was written all over her upturned face.

"Stars," Rey whispered. Her hazel eyes were the widest he'd ever seen them. "I can't believe you actually pulled that off."

"I can," Kylo murmured, thinking back over the events of the past few hours, especially the upper half of his former master's body crumpling to the floor of the red-and-black throne room. "When I'm with you, I can do anything."

Rey exhaled slowly. A shy, tentative joy blossomed on her features, as heart-wrenching to watch as the first faint overtures of sunrise. Her rosy lower lip quivered and, once his gaze had latched on to the movement, it refused to fixate on anything else.

He should kiss her. Every muscle in his body was screaming at him to, consumed by the need for affirmation that they were both alive and in one piece despite the odds.

Yearning, simply, to taste his wife's lips. It had been so long.

Kylo bowed his head. Rey's fingers curled into his sleeve in hopeful anticipation. The moment spun on into the infinite, as brilliant and as golden as a summer's day.

"Emperor Ren!"

Kylo blinked, the mechanical crackle of a voice modulator jolting him back to reality. His eyes swiveled away from Rey to glare at the approaching soldiers and their foolhardy captain, even as he deposited his beloved burden onto her own feet.

"Orders, sir?" the stormtrooper captain asked, his men huddled behind him. Despite the white helmets that hid their faces from view, Kylo could feel the fear and confusion that radiated off of them in waves. Could very nearly hear the garbled chatter of their thoughts, rife with a myriad questions—Is Snoke really dead? What's going on with Hux? Has the Consortium come to help us, after all? What do we do? What do we do?

Right. There was a war on.
Kylo took a deep breath, forcing himself back into the mindset that was required to strategize, to lead. They had sent all their combat-worthy ships to the blockade, but the Citadel was not without its own defenses. "Marshal the ground troops," he told the captain. "Repulsorcraft, walkers, anti-aircraft cannons— prepare all of them. The objective is to prevent Coruscant from falling into enemy hands."

The captain hesitated, his masked head turning slightly in Rey's direction before darting back to face Kylo straight on. After several long moments, he managed to grate out, "With all due respect... which enemy would that be, Your Majesty?"

At first, Kylo could only look at the other man with a trace of disbelief. But then again, it was impossible to climb the stormtrooper hierarchy without being in possession of a certain boldness. The captain was merely asking for information that would help him carry out his duty and, last he'd heard, the Hapan Queen Mother had all but declared war on her husband before very shockingly interrupting said war by placing her ships in the middle of the blockade.

"Armitage Hux has staged a coup," Kylo informed the gathering of soldiers. "In doing so, he has interrupted peace talks with the Resistance and the Hapes Consortium. It won't be long before he sends his forces down to try and seize Coruscant. Have I answered your question? Good," he snapped before the captain could so much as nod, "now do as I say. I'll issue more orders from the command center."

"Wait." Rey spoke up, drawing everyone's attention even though her gaze remained fixed on Kylo alone. "If the battle is coming to Galactic City, then the civilians need to be evacuated. To the mountains, perhaps, or the shore..."

It was cold pragmatism that insisted to Kylo that they had neither the time nor the resources to launch such a wide-scale evacuation effort. Not when Hux and his forces were hovering above like birds of prey. But if there was anything he had learned over the last several months— if there was anything he knew now as he looked into Rey's eyes— it was that there was always time to save someone. "That's why your father went to Starkiller Base," she had told him in the turbolift. "That's why your mother agreed to a ceasefire." And if he was worth all that, then so was every single one of the thousands upon thousands of innocent souls in Galactic City. Ordinary lives, to be sure, but all worth saving, nonetheless. Understanding that had to be the difference, it had to be what separated him from Hux and his cronies— or else they might as well still be on the same side.

"The mountains," Kylo decided aloud. "We'll mobilize a couple of divisions to get as many people out of the city as possible— or at least away from the center, where the fighting will be thickest."

Rey nodded, biting her lip, and the two of them hurried through the gates of the Citadel. At first, they
were accompanied by stormtrooper escorts, but these soon dispersed to carry out Kylo's various instructions and it was only the two of them who took the turbolift up to the command center.

"That was a smart move, mentioning the peace talks," Rey said as they embarked on the gliding ascent. "Did you feel it?"

Kylo raised an eyebrow at her— apparently, while he'd been busy wrangling with internal moral dilemmas, she'd been reading the room, so to speak.

"While their loyalty is to their military commanders rather than to Snoke, your soldiers are tired of war," she went on to explain. "Word will spread that Hux interfered with the negotiations that would have ended it, and hopefully the other stormtroopers will resent him as much as the ones who were stationed outside the gates now do."

"Hopefully," Kylo echoed. "But I wasn't really thinking about— that is to say, that wasn't my reason for telling them."

Rey looked stricken. Not because of him— it was the kind of emotion that was turned in on the self, like a dagger aimed at the heart of the one who held it. "My time at Ta'a Chume's court has taught me to see ulterior machinations behind every little thing," she admitted, blinking down at her feet, and he thought about the scavenger girl he had met in the forest. And how much both of them had changed since then.

"You had to learn that in order to survive, just like you had to learn how to fight with a staff and how to trawl the junk heaps," Kylo said. "Political acumen is a necessary skill for She Who Has No Equal."

"I do have an equal," Rey said hoarsely.

And how else could he respond to that, if not by taking a step towards her, and then another...

The turbolift ground to a halt and the doors slid open. He would have cursed under his breath, except that the command center was full of people waiting for his orders and he had no choice but to immediately turn his attention to matters of war.
Natasi Daala bit back a groan of frustration as yet another flotilla of First Order Light Cruisers defected to Hux's cause and opened fire on her ships. Most of her allies— which so far consisted of less than a handful of fleets— were far better positioned than she was, having been on the outskirts of the formation when the fighting broke out. However, Daala and Turr Phennir— who had taken over the reins of the Heresiarch when Kylo Ren was nowhere to be found— were boxed in between Hux and Pellaeon, and there had been no strategic option left to them other than to establish a defensive perimeter that wouldn't hold up for long.

"Maybe we should defect, too," Tschel said worriedly, and there were mutterings of assent from the rest of the crew on the bridge of the Despot.

Daala glowered at all of them. "Let's get one thing straight," she barked. "I would rather pitch myself out of an airlock without an enviro-suit than serve under Armitage kriffing Hux. Not only would that weaselly bit of slime blow up the entire galaxy if it were to inconvenience him in any way, but I swore an oath to the Emperor and I don't plan on breaking it anytime soon."

Choices. It was all about choices, and whether one chose to bring chaos to order and to fly boldly in the face of adversity. A soldier was only as good as their word. Tarkin had taught her that.

Oh, he would have hated this new breed of Imperials and what some of his peers had become. Backstabbing one another left and right, betraying their sworn commander-in-chief... it was unthinkable.

"Now," Daala continued after looking around at her stock-still crew and taking a deep breath, "if the rest of you want to proclaim yourselves rebel scum, so be it, but I will have you thrown into the brig!"

Her words echoed through the silence that had fallen over the room. She waited, fearing for several long moments that she would have a mutiny on her hands, but eventually Tschel spoke up.

"I apologize for speaking out of turn, Admiral Daala," he solemnly proclaimed. "I have served with you since the days of the Galactic Empire and I shall continue to do so until the final hour."

He saluted, as did the rest of the crew, and they went back to their duties.

Minutes later, Daala thought she was hallucinating when several squadrons of X-wings and Adumari
Union starfighters flashed into view beyond the *Despot*'s transparisteel canopy, diving into the fray to engage the light cruisers who were attacking her fleet as well as the *Heresiarch*'s.

Old man Tarkin was definitely rolling over in his grave now, Daala inwardly griped, shaking her head as she ordered her TIE units to fight alongside the Resistance.

#

Thanks to Lairollose Yliri acting on her suspicions and speaking to Aleson Gray, the Talcharaim and Kavan divisions of the Hapan Royal Navy had been adequately prepared to use the beginning of hostilities as cover for repositioning themselves. To anyone else, it would have looked like these particular sets of Dragons were pulling back from the battlefield to avoid the same fate that so many of their comrades had suffered; in truth, though, Lairollose's *Silver Dawn* and Aleson's *Wolfsnake* had merely dipped low enough to be able to shoot up between Hux and Pellaeon's dreadnoughts at the right moment and with enough support from their respective fleets.

Whether that moment would ever arrive and whether the support from their fleets would be enough to keep them driving forward— well, that was still up in the air as of now.

"I have to be honest, Ducha, this plan doesn't exactly fill me to the brim with confidence," Aleson remarked over their two-way frequency.

"Why not?" Lairollose fired back. "It sounds like something you would cook up."

"Exactly, my lady."

She shushed him as another light blinked at the communications panel, signaling another incoming transmission.

"It's from the *Fulminatrix*, Ducha Yliri," said the lieutenant manning the dashboard. "Moden Canady's ship."

What could we possibly have to discuss at this time? Lairollose wondered to herself even as she nodded at the lieutenant to patch Canady's holo through— or, at least, she was expecting it to be Canady's holo. What flickered into existence on the bridge of the *Silver Dawn* instead was a grainy feed of Hux addressing all First Order ships, which the *Fulminatrix* was currently also transmitting to
Lairelosse frowned. Why was Canady showing her this? Walking closer to the viewport and squinting across the sea of blazing warships and dogfights, she spotted Canady's dreadnought hovering in the distance—at a perfect angle to have eyes on her fleet—and it wasn't long before it occurred to her that he must have cottoned on to her plan and was doing what he could to keep her informed of Hux's movements.

The Ducha of Talcharaim was reluctantly impressed. She'd heard stories of Palpatine's old guard and their mastery of battle tactics, but it was only at this moment that she truly understood just how adept some of them could be. However, her grudging admiration soon gave way to horror when she realized just exactly what Hux was saying.

*

It wasn't very often that it could be apparent to onlookers that Armitage Hux was enjoying himself, but this was a special occasion. There was a triumphant glint in his blue eyes and a self-satisfied smirk playing on his lips. "Now that we have confirmed the demise of Kylo Ren, I am once more inviting all First Order ships to join me." He drew out each word, savoring the sweet taste of victory on his tongue, knowing that everyone who had access to the frequency was hanging on to each and every syllable. "For those who are still on the fence, allow me to explain the situation. You are all surrounded and outnumbered by myself and my esteemed colleagues while the Hutt Cartel continues to move in from the south, crushing the Resistance in its wake. Soon they will reach the Consortium navy and together we will pick the remaining Battle Dragons off one by one. And then we will focus our combined might on you." He paused, briefly regretting that he couldn't see the look on Daala's face as he reiterated how hopeless her circumstances were. "For Organa's forces and the Hapans, it is already too late. But for those who once fought by my side, I am offering you the chance to do so again. Help me usher in the most glorious age the galaxy will ever witness. Build a new world with me. Let all the planets shake before us—"

"Hux." The rumble of deep, familiar tones washed over the frequency, interrupting the general's broadcast. It was Kylo Ren's voice, and it was being transmitted from the Citadel. "Shut. Up."

A live map of the battle flashing on the table in front of her in different-colored beams of holographic light, Rey glanced up from the communications array that had been hastily cobbled together so she could get in touch with her navy and direct their movements. She shot Kylo a look of mild disapproval. "You just couldn't resist, could you?"
He shrugged from a similarly designed station beside hers, where he was also poring over his own map and sending instructions to his own ships. "My forces needed to know that their commander wasn't dead and Hux needed to be put in his place. Two birds, one stone."

"And now the very well-armed bird that hates you knows where we are," Rey countered dryly.

"Which means," Kylo retorted, "that some of the coup's resources will be diverted to Coruscant, taking a little bit of the heat off of your navy."

She was unable to argue with his logic, but that didn't stop her from wishing there was another way. Her left hand strayed to touch the dragon's head at her breastbone, strung up on its glittering silver chain.

"Not yet," he said quietly.

She nodded. "Right."

"Now?" Aleson asked.

Invigorated by the reveal of his survival— and most likely given new directives now that he was able to consult with his officers— Kylo Ren's loyal forces had switched from defense to offense. With the aid of the Resistance and the Consortium, they were exerting more pressure on Hux than ever before, distracting him. It was the perfect time.

"Now," said Lairolsse.

Unleashing the last of its mag-pulse warheads, Black One pulled up from a strafing run on one of Pellaeon's Maxima-A class heavy cruisers and jerked to the side as it was rocked by the fiery explosion of its target. There was no opportunity to regroup; Poe Dameron had to immediately coax the still wobbling X-wing into another dive to avoid the AG-2G quad laser cannons that a Lancer-class frigate sent his way, and then he had to spin into a barrel roll as several TIE fighters latched
onto his tail with a ceaseless barrage from their Lb-14 dual turrets.

"Hang in there, BB-8!" Poe called out to his beleaguered astromech droid, who whirred a foul response that made him shudder. "You've been hanging out with R2-D2 too much, buddy!"

He ran his pursuers into the teeth of a formation of Hetrinar assault bombers that destroyed them all in the first wave of fire with a swiftness that made even the seasoned Resistance commander blink. *Damn.* The Hapans had powerful ammunitions and ridiculously eagle-eyed gunmen— it was just too bad that they'd been caught off-guard in the worst place for a fleet to be.

But they seemed to be trying to make up for lost time now...

Poe did a double take as he flew over the Consortium bombers and saw two Battle Dragons charging the *Finalizer* and the *Harbinger* at full speed from below. *What the—*

No sooner had he started to formulate the question when it clicked into place. Believing in the old adage that there was safety in numbers, Hux and Pellaeon had moored their dreadnoughts practically side by side, creating a barrier that seemed impossible for any foe to surmount. However, there was a gap between them, just wide enough, for someone who was brave—or foolish, or both—enough—

*"Black Squadron! Green Squadron!"* Poe shouted into his comlink. *"To me!"

And he fired up the thrusters and bolted forth to help cover the Hapan advance.

*#

It was Gilad Pellaeon who noticed it first, who put two and two together first and sent a frantic warning to Hux's ship.

But it was a warning that came too late.

By the time the *Finalizer* and the *Harbinger* focused their units and armaments south, all that was needed for Aleson Gray's *Wolfsnake* and Lairelosse Yliri's *Silver Dawn* to squeeze into the gap between the First Order destroyers was a final burst of speed, the combined forces of X-wings and
Miy'til starfighters swirling around them to engage the TIEs and light cruisers that attempted to halt their approach. Soon the star emblems of Talcharaim and the fanged serpent of Kavan were gleaming in the black alongside the charcoal-hued dreadnoughts as both Hux and Pellaeon yelled last-minute orders at their crew.

In stark contrast, a resigned calm had fallen over the command centers of the two Hapan ships, the crew of each one having no illusions about their fate. While they were now in prime position to take out their opponents, there was also nowhere left for them to run.

A message filtered in from the Wolfsnake, breaking through the stillness that had engulfed the Silver Dawn.

"Laire." Aleson spoke in a solemn voice, tinged with static at the edges. "Ai armiel telere maenen hir."

Everyone’s gazes swiveled to Lairesse.

The imperious and unflappable Ducha of Talcharaim smiled. It wasn't her polite, courtly smile that was designed to keep people at arm's length. It was the smile that reached her eyes, the one that only a few had ever seen before. It softened her features as the stars rained down their cold light.

"I know," she quietly replied.

Squaring her shoulders, she nodded at her crew and gave the command. "Ialpor od cnila."

Fire and blood.

And, cannons bristling, the Dragons roared.

* *

Kosimo Westermal was down for the count, thanks to Paige Tico's formation having succeeded on their bombing run, and two Resistance destroyers and their complements under the command of General Garm Bel Iblis and Admiral U.O. Statura had waded into the Supremacy's corner of the
blockade, affording Leia Organa a window of opportunity to take on the _Finalizer_. She didn't have high hopes for the outcome; even if by some miracle she and half of her fleet—the other half already having been dispatched to assist Rey's ships—managed to defeat a _Resurgent_-class and its accompanying cruisers, they would still have to contend with Pellaeon's forces before swinging around to face the oncoming Hutts.

But she had to try.

As the _Raddus_ led the charge on Hux, the horizon beyond its viewport seemed to explode in brilliance. Although she raised a hand to shield her eyes at first, Leia soon found that she couldn't resist the desire to look. And what she saw—well, it was worth burning one's corneas off for, really.

There was a reason no one in their right mind wanted to confront a Hapan Battle Dragon in straight-up broadsides. That reason came in the form of ion cannons and turbolaser batteries affixed to rotating circular sections on the top and bottom hull plates that allowed for freshly loaded guns to be brought to the forefront while the previously used guns were being recharged. As a result, the _Wolfsnake_ and the _Silver Dawn_ were now unleashing nonstop rivers of fire on the _Finalizer_ and the _Harbinger_, supplemented with proton torpedoes that discharged every six seconds and slammed into the enemy ships with all the might of a hundred battering rams.

It was a masterclass in mass destruction, and Leia felt a shiver go down her spine. It had probably been a good thing for the rest of the galaxy that the Hapan Queen Mothers had decided to keep to themselves all these thousands of years.

One of the _Raddus_' communication panels blinked with an incoming transmission. Upon ordering it to be patched through, the Resistance's top-ranking general rose an eyebrow at the sight of a face she hadn't seen in decades, staring at her somberly in the bluish holo-light.

"_Leia._"

She nodded in response. "Natasi."

"_I have orders from Emperor Ren to press forward and free up the Dragon Queen,"_ Natasi Daala announced. "_You may recall your other ships to this side of the blockade to help take down Hux and Pellaeon._"

"As you wish, Admiral," Leia said dryly.
An equally dry half-smile lifted the weathered corners of Daala's mouth just the slightest bit. "It's your son who wishes it, General."

Ending the comm, Leia reeled off the necessary instructions to be disseminated amongst her fleet, and then she turned back to the viewport. The Harbinger was hanging on by a thread— it was an older class of Imperial Star Destroyer, and all but powerless in the Hapan blaze— but Hux's flagship was getting some good hits in, and its escorts were rallying.

"All units, concentrate fire on the Finalizer fleet!" Leia ordered, her voice ringing through the bridge of the Raddus like tempered steel. "Starfighters, bombers, cruisers— get everyone in there!"

* 

All color had drained from Armitage Hux's face. He watched in stupefaction as Gilad Pellaeon's holo was consumed by plumes of smoke and showers of sparks in the middle of a desperate communique, the older officer screaming in pain before his visage dissolved into a field of static as the Harbinger succumbed to the Dragons' fiery breath, breaking apart into clouds of debris and nothingness.

Hux was given scant opportunity to dwell on the unceremonious loss of his strongest ally within the First Order. "Sir," cried one of his adjutants, fingers frantic over levers and buttons, "X-wings, sir— they're taking out our cannons!"

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Hux snapped. "Scramble the Interceptors!"

"Already did, sir, but they've run into trouble of their own—" The adjutant gestured to the live feed, where it soon became apparent that most of the Interceptors were tangled in dogfights with the Hapans' Miy'til starfighters.

Another blast— the strongest one yet— rocked the Finalizer's foundations as the Wolfsnake and the Silver Dawn stepped up their attack, with help from the Resistance. Hux opened his mouth to get a message to Westermal so that the latter could swoop in from above— only to freeze as he remembered that Westermal's fleet had been picked clean by the Resistance's StarFortresses earlier.

There was probably some irony in that.
"I hate to admit it, General, but the Finalizer's a loss," Unamo said slowly. "I recommend abandoning ship while we still can."

Hux's blue eyes narrowed in anger. He wasn't going to allow his victory to be snatched from him at the final hour. Fortunately, the Hutts were advancing and the coup's other divisions remained relatively unscathed and were holding their own elsewhere in the field.

"We'll gather up what's left of our forces and Pellaeon's," Hux told Unamo. "The Cartel and the other fleets can take care of things up here."

Unamo stilled at his choice of words. "We're going planetside, then, sir?"

"Yes," Hux confirmed with a growl. "It's time to lay siege to the Citadel."

If this were a Resistance command center, a collective cheer would have risen up from the gathered throng and bounced loudly off the walls as people hugged and congratulated one another on the total destruction of the Finalizer, most dreaded of warships and Armitage Hux's pride and joy that—after one last barrage from Lairelosse and Aleson's Battle Dragons—was now drifting through the weightless currents of space in a million shattered pieces.

Rey had no doubt that such festivities were taking place on the bridge of the Raddus and elsewhere but, for her part, she was in the Citadel, where the people surrounding her were living up to their rigid First Order training and exhibiting nothing more than sighs of relief and a slight sag to their postures as they received confirmation that Hux's destroyer was space dust. Then it was back to business as usual at their respective stations.

*Bit anticlimactic,* she mused to herself.

"Good job," said a quiet voice beside her.

Rey turned to Kylo with a small smile. "I had nothing to do with it. It was all because of Lady Yliri. And Lord Gray."
"They answer to you so I'm congratulating you," Kylo huffed. The look on his face made it clear that he would rather bring Snoke back from the dead than toss anything that could be interpreted as a compliment in Aleson's direction.

"Perhaps when all of this is over you could give them medals," Rey suggested. It was hardly an appropriate time for teasing, with the battle so far from won, but she was feeling rather lightheaded from all of the seemingly impossible stunts that had been pulled off today.

"Lady Yliri, yes." Kylo moved closer. "As for Gray— I'll think about it."

And as Rey stared up into Kylo's dark eyes, it occurred to her that she might not be the only one who was feeling lightheaded. He was so near now. Near enough for her to...

To what?

And once she had gotten her thoughts in order and figured out what that what might be— would he even allow it?

"Rey," he murmured. For the briefest of seconds, she could have sworn that his gaze flickered to her mouth. "Rey," he said again, "I—"

"Your Majesty!" cried an officer manning the dashboard. "Ships from the Finalizer and Harbinger fleets have just been spotted entering Coruscant's atmosphere. Mostly TIEs and assault shuttles, but we've confirmed several bombers and troop transports as well."

"Update on the evacuation proceedings?" Rey asked sharply.

The officer checked the slew of reports that were coming in. "Approximately eighty percent of civilians have been removed from the city center, Your M— er—" He stumbled over his words, uncertain as to what Rey's current role in the Empire was after all that had happened, before finally deciding on a relatively harmless, "Ma'am."

"Tell the divisions overseeing the evac to step it up, then seal the perimeter," Kylo ordered to the room at large. "We'll form another blockade around the Citadel as well. Make sure all anti-craft is primed and ready." He turned back to Rey. "I don't suppose you brought any military with you."
She shook her head. Dragons and the *Nova-* class cruisers were out of the question for surface warfare, but— "I could call down some of the frigates, those are capable of deploying three squadrons of *Miy'til* starfighters each."

"No. You need all your available starfighters up in the black to support your capital ships."

*You've lost so many already,* was what he didn't say, but the unspoken words were a heavy, palpable burden in the air around them.

"We could ask the Resistance for help," Rey ventured.

A muscle ticked along Kylo's jaw, but in the end he nodded, watching her dispassionately as she typed a hurried message to Leia. Then he strode out of the command center and she followed him—to one of the Citadel's square-shaped metal balconies that offered a view of the city spread out below their feet.

Kylo was silent as Rey went over to stand next to him, his brows knitted together and his lips pressed into a firm line. He was studying the terrain, she realized— attempting to determine both the angle of attack and how best to defend against it. He looked so young with the afternoon sunlight gilding his pale features, a slight breeze carding through his soft hair, and the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"Do you think Hux is leading the charge?" she asked.

"Undoubtedly," he replied. "If he'd gone down with his ship, Siralt and Sarreti would have surrendered by now. Neither of them command enough loyalty to lead a coup and they both know it."

She remembered that Siralt had been one of the admirals more inclined to working with Kylo—at least, until Rey had ripped his proposed Terraforming Decree to shreds. A pang of regret shot through her at the way she'd handled things back then.

After a while Kylo nodded to himself as if he'd settled on a game plan, then turned to peer down at Rey. He searched her face for... for *something,* she didn't know what, but on his she saw none of the recrimination she'd been subconsciously bracing for now that there was a kind of calm before the storm and the true magnitude of all the losses could be felt. Instead, he was unfailingly gentle as he
reached out to stroke the pad of his thumb against her cheek, wiping away a lick of soot she'd sustained from the burning escape shuttle that she hadn't even known was there. For a moment it could have almost been the kitchen in Alqualonde once more, with her covered in pink batter from a cake recipe gone wrong and him cleaning her up with careful touches and a vaguely amused expression.

*Start over,* Rey thought, all battle-worn spirit, all aching heart. *I want to start over. I want to meet you again for the first time and skip all of our mistakes. I want to love you right from the very beginning.*

Kylo's thumb stilled, finding no more dirt to scrub off. He appeared to hesitate, and then his hand began to fall back to his side. Acting on pure instinct, she seized his wrist, keeping his palm cradled against her face, keeping her eyes locked on to his. The bond hummed from the corner of her mind where it lay curled up, then stretched forth to cast its cautious nets, searching, yearning...

A throat was cleared from somewhere that sounded far, far away but in reality was only at the balcony doors.

"Emperor Ren, we have a response from General Organa," said the officer who looked like he deemed it his misfortune to have stumbled across such a scene. "She will dispatch her military to the Citadel posthaste."

Kylo's hand *did* drop to his side then, but he didn't move away from Rey. "We'll go over the defense fortifications in the command center," he told the other man, who saluted before retreating indoors.

Kylo followed, the hand that had been at Rey's cheek rising up again to touch the small of her back, guiding her inside. She glanced over her shoulder just as they stepped into the hallway, and the pit of her stomach sank with dread at the distant yet telltale glimmer of sunlight refracting off of the metal hulls of approaching ships on the horizon.

Chapter End Notes

*MG-100 StarFortress SF-17.*

*Force barrier.*

*Stavin Thaal.*

*The Rarlech system.*
First Order Light Cruiser.

Turr Phennir.

Enviro-suit.

Mag-pulse warhead.

AG-2G quad laser cannon.

Lb-14 dual heavy laser turret.

Hetrinar assault bomber.

I stole "Ai armiel telere maenen hir" from some kind of Elvish (I want to say Forgotten Realms) and it's being repurposed as Hapan in this chapter, with the meaning "You hold my heart forever." Likewise, "fire and blood" is obviously from Game of Thrones, translated using the fan-made dictionary over at the Royal Hapan Library.

Garm Bel Iblis.

TIE/ba Baron Space Superiority Interceptor.
Although I haven't had the opportunity to respond to everyone, please know that I do read your comments and they mean the world to me. Writing can be such a lonely, time-consuming endeavor, particularly now that I'm pulling out all the stops to meet my daily word count for NaNoWriMo, but knowing that you guys are still reading and enjoying this story makes it all worthwhile. I could say more, but I think I'll save some mushiness for the last chapter and the epilogue :) This update is just shy of 9,000 words and honestly kind of a mess, but it is a labor of love and many sleepless nights and quite possibly the chapter I'm proudest of so far. I hope you like it. 

❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Procyon Kantale, the young Lord of Stormhold, muttered a fierce expletive under his breath as one of the coup's Mandator IV-class Siege Dreadnoughts scored a fatal blow on the last surviving Nova-class cruiser in the Ducha of Arabanth's fleet. Aside from tearing the capital ship to shreds, the explosion also put Kantale's own Battle Dragon, the Heliost, in the way of debris that pelted its transparisteel viewport as mercilessly as a sudden rain of asteroids— as well as leaving it wide open to the Siege Dreadnought's orbital autocannons.

"Over to you," Kantale barked at his second-in-command before hightailing it out of the bridge, toward the hangars. He was in the black a few minutes later, leading the Heliost's reserve squadron of Miy'il starfighters in a strafing run on the enemy ship.

As far as last-ditch efforts went, however, it was too little and too late. A Resurgent-class Star Destroyer joined the Siege Dreadnought in its attack, firing at the Heliost from below, and Kantale could only watch in stunned horror as his cornered Battle Dragon went up in flames. Shaking his head, he unloaded another set of concussion missiles at the Siege Dreadnought's turrets before arcing up high over the field of combat in order to gain some perspective on how things were going.

He almost wished he hadn't. Despite Lairelosse and Aleson taking out the Finalizer and the Harbinger and Hux effectively abandoning the blockade in order to bring the fighting to the ground, the situation still looked... grim. The coup had boxed in Daala, Phennir, most of the Consortium navy, and the Resistance vanguard, with Canady and Rook hovering at the edges unable to break through. In addition, there was the specter of the approaching Hutt Cartel to contend with; if Wedge Antilles and Gial Ackbar failed to hold them off and they reached the Hapan center, the war was as good as lost.

And, from what Kantale could see, Antilles and Ackbar were definitely in the process of failing to hold the Cartel off.
The Consortium frequency crackled to life and soon Rey's voice was blooming soft and static-tinged within the confines of Kantale's Miy'til starfighter as he dove back into the fray. "This is Her Majesty Kira Ka Djo, transmitting from the Imperial Citadel on Coruscant."

She spoke in fluent Hapan with the slightest hint of an accent, and wasn't it a strange turn of events, Kantale mused, that the current Queen Mother was a foreigner? It should have been impossible but she'd managed to pull it off, navigating the viper pit and winning people's hearts and loyalty while never losing sight of who she was and what she believed was right. Somehow, that reminder buoyed him— if a lost Chume'da- turned-scavenger-turned-Jedi could be restored to the Dragon Throne and if she could convince the royal court to follow her into battle to save a wayward husband, then perhaps anything could be within reach. Even victory. Even when the odds were stacked against them. He wondered if all the pilots and officers and soldiers who were listening to her address were arriving at the same conclusion.

"I'm not yet used to giving speeches. In fact, I doubt I'm any good at it," Rey baldly continued, and Kantale— whose peers had accused him on more than one occasion of having a rather dark sense of humor— issued a laughter-tinged groan of disbelief while he set his lasers to stutter-fire. "All I know is that— it seems to me— there's nothing left for us to do but win."

"That's rather good, actually," Kantale remarked aloud, veering sharply to the left in what turned out to be an unsuccessful bid to lose the TIE fighter that had latched on to his tail.

"The Emperor and I will do our duty, and I must now ask that you do yours," Rey intoned. "Hold the line. Stay with me. And I will see you again— in this life or the next." She took a deep breath, and then spouted her next words in a rush. "Also, starfighters, if you have to choose between knocking out a sensor globe or a laser turret on an SSD, go for the sensor globe because a bigger target is easier to hit. And, cruisers, you're faster than the First Order models, so make full use of that. Lastly, Dragons, launch your proton torpedoes the instant you make the switch to fresh ion cannons— this will ensure that you're always covered. Over and out."

Kantale's shoulders were shaking with barely repressed chuckles even before the Queen Mother had gotten halfway through her addendum. "A solid effort, Ereneda," he said to the empty air after she had signed off, and then he swung his ship around to meet the foe head-on.

"General, we lost three transports to enemy fire," reported Lieutenant Kaydel Ko Connix, her datapad clutched to her chest as she walked up to Leia on the bridge of the Raddus. "The rest
successfully went blue and they're on their way to rendezvous with Ren's forces at the Citadel."


"Yes, ma'am," Kaydel cautiously agreed. "But their sacrifice bought the other transports enough time to make it to planetside."

It wasn't that she sounded cold, exactly. Just... pragmatic. And fervent, all at once. Leia blinked at the younger woman's hardened features, at the steely gaze that belonged to someone who believed that the right measures had been taken. Dear stars, she thought, what have we done to you? A new generation set askew by war, because hers had made all the same mistakes...

This can still be fixed, Leia told herself determinedly. One last battlefield. After this, no more.

It was then that she became aware of a certain familiar presence, one that lifted her heart at its approach. She turned to the main doors moments before they slid open, and she broke out into a smile as her twin brother clunked into the room on heavy armored boots, a white helmet tucked under his arm.

"Well, well," Leia teased, quirking a brow at the new arrival. "Aren't you a little too old to be a stormtrooper?"

It wasn't that Kylo's defense strategy had been lacking in any way. He'd juggled arranging both fortifications and civilian evacuation to the best of his ability, optimizing the Empire's meager resources. Rey was of the firm opinion that no one could have done better.

It was just that Armitage Hux had brought along a Torpedo Sphere.

Rey wasn't entirely a stranger to such tech. She'd seen The Rebel Files for herself— a non-electric data archive of sensitive information dating back to the First Galactic Civil War that had been unearthed on Durkteel in 34 ABY and passed on to Resistance agent Korr Sella, who in turn had made sure it reached General Organa sometime before she perished in the Hosnian cataclysm. Among those files was an intelligence report from Colonel Haxen Delto deducing that Palpatine's forces had gotten their hands on the schematics for the Torpedo Sphere— originally proposed by the Special Weapons Group of the Old Republic in the aftermath of the Invasion of Naboo— and were
currently in the process of developing it.

"We're going to be looking at a whole constellation of battlemoons if the Empire can pump these out," Delto had said in his report. Years later, Major Caluan Ematt of the Resistance had left a handwritten note on the same document stating his concerns that the First Order could have restarted the project, among others.

The Old Republic had nixed the design due to pacifist ideals and a subsequent lack of funding, while Palpatine's Empire hadn't had enough time to see the weapon through to its completion before they were defeated by the Rebel Alliance.

But the First Order junta that had been allowed to grow unchecked at the borders of the galaxy were not pacifists, and they'd had all the time and money in the world.

The Torpedo Sphere had initially been conceived as a battle station equipped with hundreds of proton torpedo launchers that, given enough time, could breach a planetary shield. The First Order had modified it for surface conquest, and now a two-kilometer-long, disk-shaped siege platform was lumbering through the cityscape of Coruscant, mowing down buildings and defending troops in equal measure. Hovering only a few feet off the ground, its plated hull smashed aside the foundations of even the proudest skyscrapers like they were made of cardboard, and its turbolaser batteries and proton torpedo tubes effortlessly reduced oncoming repulsorcraft and walkers to smithereens.

"This was one of the first projects I ever canceled," Kylo tersely recalled as he and Rey stared at the behemoth on the grainy live feed that was being piped through to the receptors in the Citadel's command center. "Hux and his cohorts must have continued working on it behind my back."

"He's a madman," Rey grated out. "Coruscant is going to be completely leveled."

"I didn't want to be king of ashes." The flickering glow that emanated from the transmission pulsed over Kylo's drawn features, his somber gaze oddly far away. "Hux just wants to be king, full stop."

"He won't be," Rey vowed. "We're taking him down."

"You never let anything faze you, do you?" Kylo wasn't looking at her, still transfixed on the scene of reckless carnage that was unfolding right before his eyes, but there was a faint trace of warmth that had leached into his tone. Like she'd brought him back from the dark place his mind had gone when he first saw the Torpedo Sphere on the horizon. "No matter what you're up against, you just make
whatever needs to happen— *happen.*"

"So do you," Rey told him quietly.

Before he could respond, yet another alert went up amidst the myriad blinking lights and flashing screens that dotted the command center. "More enemy troops approaching from the south," announced the junior controller in charge of that particular station. "They're going to surround us."

"Are they bringing in another siege platform?" Kylo asked in what—it had to be said—was a spectacularly *dry* tone, given the situation at hand.

"No, Your Majesty," the controller replied. "Just infantrymen and some tanks."

"About time I caught a break," Kylo mumbled almost to himself, and he looked and sounded so *grumpy* in that moment—so very much like his father, with a sharp veneer of droll Organa imperiousness—that Rey's heart gave a twinge.

He turned to her then. "I'm going north. Stay here and hold the southern front."

She opened her mouth to argue—there was no way she was going to let him confront a kripping *Torpedo Sphere* without another Force-user at his side—but she quickly snapped it shut as logic kicked in. Halting the siege platform's advance would be next to useless if the enemy were to swarm in from behind, not to mention the fact that everyone in the room was watching the two of them anxiously, waiting for instructions. It was imperative that a clear chain of command be established and maintained under these circumstances, and she would not do the Emperor the disservice of flouting his authority in front of those who were looking to him for leadership.

And so Rey held her peace, and nodded, and it seemed that a little of the tension left Kylo's frame. Like he'd been bracing himself for conflict in *this* area as well, and was relieved that she'd acceded to his wishes without a fight.

"Vekarr, Foss, Monsula, with me," he ordered, and the three officers didn't miss a beat in falling in behind him, ready to follow him to the front line.

Rey escorted the party to the main doors of the command center. At the threshold, Kylo paused, one foot already out in the hallway as he gave her one last, searching look. "Stay here," he repeated. "I
mean it, Rey. Direct the battle from inside this room."

She wanted to retort that not even the fortified walls of the Citadel could protect her forever and that she would be at her most effective when out on the field, but she had just resolved not to argue with him. Literally seconds ago. And she wasn't about to lie to him again, not after all that had happened. Her lips pressed into a thin line as she considered her options, and then—

— And then Kylo relented, with a slight exhale. A sigh that wasn't quite a sigh. "You're going to charge out back immediately after I leave," he stated flatly. It wasn't a question.

"I— well—" Rey faltered, a flush of color heating her cheeks— "not immediately after, I don't think —"

He stooped down and pressed a kiss to her forehead, cupping the back of her neck in one large palm. She allowed her rigid posture to collapse, leaning into the warmth that his broad figure emanated and breathing in his familiar scent.

"May the Force be with you," Kylo murmured, his lips tracing the words on her skin.

"Come back to me," Rey whispered. Please.

He pulled away after too short a time and she had to clench her hands into fists at her sides so that she wouldn't grab hold of him and refuse to let go, and then he was striding down the corridor with the three officers he had selected and she was turning to face the rest who had stayed behind in the war room, suddenly grateful for the latter group's stern brand of military training that ensured none of them looked or acted like they had just witnessed the tender exchange between the Emperor of the First Order and the Queen Mother of the Hapes Consortium. If anyone were to show her even the smallest iota of sympathy now, surely she would burst into tears on the spot.

"Pull up the battle map," Rey said to another one of the junior controllers. "Let's begin."

*"

"Move out!" Finn gave the order at the top of his lungs so that he could be heard over the combined din of whining repulsorlifts, roaring engines, thunder-like detonations, and rattling laser-fire. "Go!" he yelled for emphasis when the last wave of Resistance soldiers took far too long to exit the couple
of transports he was in charge of for his liking.

They scrambled to do as they were bid and, shifting his EL-16HFE blaster rifle to the ready position in his arms, Finn led the group of forty men and women through the eerily deserted streets of Coruscant. *They got the civilians out,* he realized, a weight lifted from his shoulders. It wasn't usual First Order policy but he was more than willing to bet that Rey had had a say in it. Other squads trickled around his, all moving swiftly in what could at first glance have been construed as any other Resistance military operation— except that *this* time, their objective was to *defend* the base belonging to Kylo Ren that they were closing in on.

It was a head-scratcher, all right, but Finn was more or less taking it in stride. He didn't think that *anything* could truly confound him anymore— not after what he had witnessed on Nova Station, and how Rey had fallen to pieces afterward.

In the distance, the spherical outline of a dark gray silhouette glided forward, at first visible only through the gaps among the buildings that obscured Finn's view— and then *wholly* visible, looming up from out of clouds of smoke and debris as it completely *demolished* the aforementioned buildings in a stream of red light.

Finn nearly tripped over his own feet.

All right, so maybe there were *some* things that could still confound him.

"What the hell is *that?*" one of the soldiers on his team gruffly demanded.

"I have *no* idea, but it's definitely bad news," Finn replied, his eyes widening as the true size of the behemoth sank in. It was almost as big as a star destroyer, and Hux was using it on the ground. The little weasel was off his damn *rocker.*

As the Resistance neared the city center, they were met by what was left of a division of Kylo's stormtroopers who were currently attempting to regroup after the siege platform had plowed into the initial defensive perimeter like a battering ram slamming through a house made of wood. One of them did a double take upon catching sight of Finn.

"FN-2187—"
"Afternoon, TR-3046," Finn said. He hadn't seen her since he defected, but they'd gone on training missions together once upon a time. "It's Finn now, by the way."

"Oh, I know." Her tone—or as much of it as he could make out through the crackle of the voice modulator, at least—made him wonder if they talked about him in the barracks, when none of the higher-ups were within earshot. If there were some of them who dreamed of becoming more than they'd been raised for, like he had.

But it was hardly the time to ruminate. TR-3046 collected herself, shifting to curt professionalism. "The enemy is trying to outflank us by swooping in from two sides at once. A pincer move," she announced to the Resistance at large. "As per His Majesty, my division and I will join him in taking down the siege platform, while your troops will reinforce the Em—" She paused, and Finn was also more than willing to bet that this wasn't the first time in the last several hours that someone in the imperial ranks had expressed visible confusion as to whether Rey was still Empress or not—"the Queen Mother," TR-3046 finally corrected, settling on the safer choice, "as she fends off the coup from the south."

"You need numbers to destroy that— that thing," Finn protested, jerking his head toward the aforementioned siege platform that, despite being relatively far away, already looked bigger than worlds. "You need us."

"Numbers mean nothing if they aren't efficient," TR-3046 retorted crisply. "We have fought at the Emperor's side for years and have honed our strategies. Likewise, you and Kira Ka Djo will be able to work together better."

"That's a load of bull!" Finn snapped. "The Resistance and the First Order are familiar with each other's techniques and strengths and weaknesses— we've been at each other's throat for ages— we know each other!"

"Oh, this is nice," grumbled one of his more smart-mouthed infantrymen in position behind him. "Are we and the bucketheads supposed to profess our undying love now?"

"Wait here." TR-3046 stepped away, fiddling with her comlink. She returned after only a minute—maybe two. "The Emperor thanks the Resistance for their generosity and apologizes that he was not more precise with his instructions," she told Finn. "What he actually meant was—" She cleared her throat and relayed the tail-end of Kylo's message—"protect his wife, or every single one of you will wish that you'd never been born."
In what was yet another unexpected turn of events in a day that it was no exaggeration to decree had not been going as planned, Kylo was oddly pleased by the discovery that Hux and his forces hadn't completely thrown all common sense to the wind. The coup's stormtroopers had each tied a scrap of red fabric— obviously salvaged from First Order banners— around their upper arms so that they could differentiate between friend and foe. This was good news for the Empire as well because it meant that none of the armies involved in today's shenanigans would be attacking itself and, thus, the most embarrassing battle in galactic history could be avoided.

Unfortunately, Kylo also suspected that this was the only bit of good news that was going to come his way over the next few hours.

That, and the fact that the Torpedo Sphere was, for all its power, actually rather slow.

Of course, the speed of any superweapon didn't matter so much when it was equipped with long-range missiles in addition to the capacity to obliterate an entire street as easily as if it were blowing out a candle in a stiff breeze, but Hux had committed a tactical mistake. He'd sent his smaller ships and his infantry to lead the charge and they were already halfway to the Citadel's northern perimeter long before the siege platform had even been lowered to the ground. Consequently, the Torpedo Sphere now ran the risk of hitting its own allies— an error that was of such glaring magnitude that Kylo couldn't believe Hux had made it.

And perhaps he shouldn't believe it.

From his vantage point on the rampart of the Citadel's northernmost watchtower, Kylo observed the flow of the chaotic battle that was ensuing below his feet. His troops were holding their own against their opponents thanks in no small part to the four-legged All Terrain Armored Transports that were standing guard at the front gates; standing was all they could do since the cramped walkways of Coruscant were no place for combat walkers to go blundering about, but they were proving to be adequate deterrents to the TIE squadrons attempting to swoop in.

Still, despite the AT-AT battalion's effectiveness, Hux's army continued pressing forward, rolling in like the tide from their staging point at the initial fortifications that the Empire had established around the city center and was now in ruins. It took Kylo a few more seconds of surveying the field before he came to the conclusion that Hux was merely using the Torpedo Sphere as backup— he intended to claim the Citadel with foot soldiers and air strikes first and foremost and, if that failed, only then would he unleash the siege platform's true might on the depleted imperial army.

Well, Kylo was going to stop him before that could happen.
"Bombers incoming, sir!" cried one of his men, and Kylo whipped his head to the far northeast and saw them, the TIE Surface Assault Bombers with their dual elongated spaceframe pods and inclined wings, their solar ionization panels glinting in the light as they approached the Citadel carrying their hefty payloads of orbital mines and proton bombs and thermal detonators.

He gave the go signal into his comlink; several buttons were pressed in the control room below and the watchtower's facade reconfigured itself to bristle with dozens upon dozens of laser turrets, sticking out like the quills of a threatened and murderously furious Hoth hedgehog.

"Open fire."

As soon as the command left his lips, off the watchtower's defense systems went, in a volley of plasma blasts that lit up the world in bright crimson, slamming into the bombers' hulls with lethal force. Kylo reeled off another order and nearby AT-ATs let loose with their own heavy laser cannons, soon supplemented by a bevy of concussion missiles from the squat, lizard-like anti-aircraft walkers that he'd arranged to lurk amidst the surrounding buildings and lie in wait for such an eventuality.

But it wasn't enough.

Although several bombers were brought down crashing into the hollowed-out maze of the Galactic City streets, there were four of them that managed to slip through the cracks. Kylo only had mere seconds to gaze up at the metallic underbelly of one such enemy ship before it relinquished a smattering of orbital mines right on top of him.

Acting fast, he leapt.

The watchtower disintegrated. And it was almost like flying, the way his body sailed through currents of air rocked by the explosion, the momentum carrying him almost within arm's reach of the attacking vessel's curved lower wingtip, and he saw his chance and he took it, using the Force to tilt the ship towards him by the scant few millimeters that he needed to grab hold and—

— With a grunt of effort, Kylo hauled himself on top of the TIE Surface Assault Bomber. He was familiar enough with the design to calculate that it had dropped only a quarter of its payload and he had to stop it before it could scatter the rest over the main buildings of the Citadel. The scarlet crossguard beam of his lightsaber shrieked into existence before he drove it straight through the hull, hacking away until the cockpit was exposed to the open air and the pilot was scrambling out of his
Kylo's blade slanted in front of him, deflecting the first shot. The second one never came, for his free hand lashed out to telekinetically lift the pilot off of his feet. With a flick of his wrist, the Emperor sent the hapless man flying out through the hole in the ship's roof and he never once looked back as he dropped down into the now vacant seat and steered the foundering bomber into its nearest compatriot. The latter's pilot did their best to evade but this particular model had never exactly been famous for its maneuverability, and it wasn't long before the two bombers were falling out of the sky.

Kylo ejected from the cockpit before he, too, could be engulfed in the conflagration of hard impact and twisted metal, his body hitting the ground in a rolling motion that sent lances of pain splintering behind his eyes as his exposed face scraped against the gravel. That mask would have come in handy, he couldn't help but self-deprecatingly quip to himself as he stood up— only to discover, much to his chagrin, that he'd rolled right into the middle of the enemy ranks.

Almost immediately, he was besieged by a swarm of riot control stormtroopers with strips of red fabric tied around their upper arms and lightsaber-resistant Z6 batons crackling in their grasps. They encircled him and he fought back like a man possessed, his blade slicing through limbs and across torsos, his free hand orchestrating telekinetic shoves and strangleholds in equal measure.

But there were many of them and they were relentless in their onslaught, the way they'd been trained to be. As such, no matter how quickly Kylo was able to cut down his immediate circle of foes, more kept trickling in and he was constantly outnumbered by four to one or even more. The fact that their batons weren't being sliced in half with one blow from his lightsaber wasn't helping much, either.

And just as he started to think that he was finished— just as one riot stormtrooper knocked him to the ground and the hilt of his blade slipped through his fingers and the Z6 baton's conductor vanes sparked with electric shock currents as they were brought down over his head—

— Help arrived, in the form of an obsidian dagger waltzing through the air and burrowing its poisoned tip into the stormtrooper's neck. The man crumpled and Kylo promptly liberated the baton from its now deceased wielder's grip, smashing it into the skull of the next stormtrooper to lunge at him. There was a sickening crack, and then the Emperor tossed aside the weapon that he no longer had any use for, stepped over the freshly limp body, and nodded in the direction the dagger had come from as he summoned his lightsaber back into his palm.

"About time you got here."

There was a hint of mild reprimand in his tone that was easy to shrug off, and Boethiah Ren did just
that as she charged into the battlefield with Hircine and Jyggalag. Kylo was about to ask where Clavicus and the twins were when he became aware of a commotion overhead; looking up, he saw three TIE fighters engaging the remaining two bombers, bobbing and weaving amidst the larger ships while raining down mag-pulse warheads and ST7 missiles. They moved wildly, pulling off maneuvers that no average pilot who wasn't attuned to the Force would dare try.

Deciding that the aerial defense of the Citadel was in good hands, Kylo went back to focusing on the ground assault.

Finn and the other Resistance soldiers arrived at the southern perimeter just in time to see Rey throw a tank at another tank.

The seven-meter-long, armor-plated, track-propelled vehicles outfitted with three powerful Dymek MK 2e/w medium laser cannons apiece were informally known as Occupiers, and one had been snatched off the street by some great invisible hand which had then unceremoniously lobbed it at yet another Occupier that had been about to breach the makeshift barricade that the imperial forces had constructed.

"Finn!" Rey turned to him, breaking out into a wide, relieved smile that was all lit up by the sparks emanating from the two durasteel giants she had just taken out of commission with nothing more than an outstretched arm. "So glad you made it!"

He cocked his head at her. "Do you even need my help?" he asked wryly.

"Incoming!" yelled one of the imperial stormtroopers from the eastern portion of the barricade, prompting everyone stationed in the immediate vicinity to dive for cover as several grenades made it over the top and the fortifications shattered in a whirl of sound and fury.

Rey sucked in a sharp breath through her teeth before answering Finn's question. "Yes."

After it had done its job leveling a few city blocks and obliterating the Empire's initial perimeter, Hux had ordered that the Torpedo Sphere's pace be slowed to what was little more than a crawl. The way
he saw it, Ren's forces could either make a beeline for the siege platform and be mowed down in the process of trying to destroy it, or they could choose to tangle with the coup's first wave and tire themselves out even before they took on the Sphere.

Either way, there was no outcome in which Hux did not win.

Kylo Ren seemed to have gone for the second option, which the general didn't mind one bit. It drew things out, yes, but that would only make the coup's inevitable victory all the sweeter. And Hux would have his revenge for the very public humiliation he'd endured when the Emperor had interrupted his broadcast.

"Update from the black?" he prompted as he stood in the command center that was nestled deep within the core of the siege platform. There were no viewports; the ground battle was being observed through a multitude of screens fed by cameras lodged in several nooks and crannies on the outer hull.

"The Resistance is down to twenty-six capital ships, not counting their starfighters and frigates," said the adjutant in charge of monitoring the blockade. "The Consortium navy has been reduced to nearly a quarter of its original size, and so far only a handful of their Dragons have been successful in slipping out of the trap. Of the Emperor's destroyers, only the Heresiarch, the Despot, and thirty-nine others are still standing, among them Rook and Canady's flagships."

"And what of our fleet?" asked Hux.

The adjutant coughed, nervousness palpable in his demeanor. "We have fifty dreadnoughts left, General. Some light cruisers and, of course, the TIE squadrons... It's not much but we still have the advantage in terms of position."

"I am... disappointed, but not surprised," Hux remarked. He'd known it would be a risk leaving the likes of Siralt and Sarreti in charge. Those two could barely strategize their way out of a paper bag. "How is the Cartel doing?"

The adjutant sat up a little straighter, happy to give good news. "The Hutts have reported only minor losses. Lord Durga estimates that they will be able to break through the Resistance front within the next fifteen standard minutes."

"Tell Lord Durga that they are to open fire on the Hapes Consortium at once," Hux instructed, still smarting from the loss of the Finalizer. "Do not give any of those Dragons a chance to regroup."
"Affirmative, sir."

Hux shifted his attention to the surveillance feeds and rapidly analyzed each screen in order to give himself a clearer overall picture of how his troops were faring in the ground assault. The city center of Coruscant was practically a wasteland by now, its skyscrapers felled like trees that had been chopped down for wood. Hunks of twisted metal and piles of broken glass littered the streets, along with countless bodies of stormtroopers who had fallen in battle and a few civilians who hadn't gotten out in the nick of time. In the middle of it all, the Imperial Citadel held fast like an island amidst a sea of destruction, but it wouldn't remain that way for long. Not if Hux had anything to say about it. His bombers had taken out several of the AT-ATs before they themselves had been shot down, and he still had a few TIE squadrons left.

It was time.

He turned to the Torpedo Sphere's piloting crew and gave the order. "Full speed ahead."

* *

With the help of the Resistance, the barricade at the southern perimeter had successfully fended off the first wave of Occupiers. But more were coming, appearing from behind buildings and the ruins of buildings, rolling steadily on towards the Citadel with menacing purpose.

"An alert has just gone up on the northern front," one of the stormtroopers told Rey, looking up from his comlink. "General Hux's siege platform is on the move."

At first she could do nothing but stare at the reluctant bearer of bad news, her entire being frozen with indecision. But then Finn touched her arm.

"Rey," he said gently. "Go to him. We'll handle things back here. I promise that we won't let you down."

Biting her lip, Rey nodded and threw her arms around Finn in a tight hug. "Don't let them past you," she mumbled in his ear. "And— stay alive."
"I think I've gotten pretty good at that last bit by now," he joked, patting her reassuringly between the shoulder-blades. "See you when all of this is over."

She let go of him and ran to where an assortment of repulsorlift vehicles were docked and ready to move out at a moment's notice. Her gaze fell on a sleek black-and-red speeder bike, which was just what she needed— lightweight enough to be fast and maneuverable, but also armed with dual laser cannons that wouldn't leave her totally defenseless. All it took was one look at the determined expression on her face for the stormtroopers stationed in the area to step aside, and then she was off — hurrying through the air on the whine of the repulsorlift engine, zipping past the westernmost walls of the Citadel and into the chaos of the northern front.

Even amidst the frantic violence of combat, it didn't take her long to find Kylo— how could it have, when his presence burned in the Force, brighter than anything she had ever known? He was with Boethiah, Hircine, and Jyggalag, the four of them making quick work of a battalion of stormtroopers, and Rey hurriedly started firing as she approached them, picking off as many as she could before she jumped off the speeder bike and charged into the fray with the beams of her saberstaff flashing in the air.

Kylo's eyes met Rey's just as he slammed a man bodily into the dirt. Had the circumstances been any less urgent, she would have been captivated by the sight of him like this, his hair windswept and a certain wildness to his features, his muscular frame exuding both raw power and reckless grace...

And then of course he had to go and ruin the illusion of magnetic and fearsome warrior by blinking and then looking very, very cross with her.

"What are you doing here?" he called out to her as he punched a new opponent in the face. "I told you to stay back!"

"Because it was much less dangerous?" Rey snapped. A stormtrooper rose up from behind a pile of rubble to her left and she elbowed him hard in the ribs and turned on her heel to spear one end of her saberstaff through his chest. "You know I can take care of myself!"

"So can I," Kylo said through gritted teeth, freezing several blaster bolts in mid-air before redirecting them onto the stormtroopers who had fired them. "There was no need for you to—"

"Why don't you just let me help?" Rey demanded hotly as she dodged the vicious arc of a Z6 baton and then whipped up her free hand to telekinetically shove its wielder away. "I organized the southern defenses and they're holding up rather well," she continued as she slashed and stabbed at the seemingly never-ending wave of assailants, "so I obviously must have some idea how to fight a
The rant died on her tongue as the end of her next spin brought her straight into the path of a jagged scarlet crossguard that had just loped off a nearby foe's head. Rey automatically blocked with her saberstaff and then all of a sudden she was—

— looking up at Kylo through the hazy red and white of their intersected blades, the two of them frozen in time, the furor that surrounded them temporarily grinding to a halt, almost fading away—

Dimly, she remembered a ballroom by the black waters, and another fight that had ended up with them like this. He had kissed her, then, the two of them still so unsure about everything except for what was ignited when they touched.

In the present moment, Kylo took a deep, shaky breath, his plush bottom lip trembling, and Rey wondered if he would kiss her now...

"Oi!" came a gruff shout from somewhere off to her right. It was Hircine, fighting five stormtroopers at once, his testiness evident even from behind his obsidian helm. "We've got a siege platform incoming!"

Rey and Kylo stepped back from each other, blades lowering to their sides, their respective gazes moving further north, where a dust storm was brewing, stirred up by the Torpedo Sphere smashing its way through yet another cluster of buildings.

"I have an idea," Kylo said.

Armitage Hux watched the Citadel grow closer on the flickering screens, the path toward it marked by towers that the Torpedo Sphere's sheer bulk knocked aside without a second thought, rains of laser bolts that glanced off its armor-plated hull as if they were mere insects, and tanks and walkers that were mowed down by its own armaments and TIE complements almost as soon as they began to charge. It wouldn't be long before he reached the Emperor's seat of power—another five minutes at the most. Perhaps it would even coincide with the Hutt's arrival at the center of the blockade if the latter stepped up their game. The prospect of such dramatic timing rather tickled Hux, although he would never admit to such a penchant for showmanship in a million years.
As his superweapon plowed on, it took care of itself enough that he barely had to monitor the adjutants manning its defense systems. Thus, his thoughts strayed to how best to attack the Citadel itself. The place was a veritable fortress, boasting nigh-indestructible walls and an array of weaponry built into its very foundations that could put any destroyer to shame. None of these weapons had come into play yet; Ren must have given the order to hold off until the final hour, saving everything up for the siege platform once it came near. It was what Hux himself would have done if the tables were turned but, unfortunately for Ren, he would only be delaying the inevitable.

The command center lurched slightly too far to the side for the briefest of moments, causing Hux to frown. When his surroundings had righted themselves, the meter on one of the dashboards indicated that they had lost some speed.

"A couple of the repulsorlift engines have been taken out, sir," said a lieutenant.

Hux sighed, more annoyed than outright troubled. "It's not as if we're in short supply," he said crisply. The Sphere's underbelly was equipped with several of those engines and by the time the enemy had destroyed enough to actually stop in its tracks, the Sphere would have already flattened the Citadel. But still... "Tell the gunners around the remaining engines to be on high alert."

"Yes, sir."

*  

After short-circuiting a couple more of the siege platform's repulsorlift engines with a clever combination of the Force and some lightsaber slashes— and, in Jyggalag's case, a wrench, the application of which was inspired, if he did say so himself— he and Boethiah returned to Kylo, Rey, and Hircine on their commandeered speeder bikes. They'd only slowed down the Torpedo Sphere by a fraction, but perhaps a fraction would be enough.

Jyggalag hoped so, anyway.

The next stage of the plan commenced. The three Knights of Ren positioned themselves around the Emperor and the Queen Mother, forming a three-point circle amidst heaps of torn cables and shattered pillars. Holding their weapons at the ready, Boethiah, Hircine, and Jyggalag kept an eye out for any oncoming foes while Rey and Kylo turned as one to look at the silhouette of the siege platform that was growing larger and larger as it barreled toward the Citadel. With any luck, the debris would obscure them from the cameras' field of vision and Hux wouldn't realize what they were doing until it was too late.
With any luck, Jyggalag mocked the direction of his own thoughts, mouth twisting underneath his helm. Luck had been in short supply lately.

Still, he did as he had been commanded, lightsaber in opening stance, eyes narrowed into slits, intently scanning the perimeter for any hint of the approach of enemy stormtroopers that might perchance break away from the main battle and attempt to disrupt the proceedings.

"Are you sure about this?" Rey asked Kylo.

"Of course." He waited a beat. "Not."

Her mouth dropped open. "Was that a joke? Did you actually crack a joke just now?"

"You don't have to sound so surprised," he muttered, not meeting her gaze. "Anyway— you mentioned that you practiced the technique with rocks."

"Yes," Rey confirmed. "And my final test was a disk of Mandalorian iron." The memories came rushing back to her— the peaks of Ahch-To, the wind-tossed ocean roaring an ancient lullaby in her ears as objects disintegrated on the tips of her fingers under Luke Skywalker's watchful eye. "But that Sphere is practically two kilometers long—"

"The principle is the same," Kylo insisted. "Find the fault lines, pour the Force into them, tear the whole thing apart at the seams. If you can break Mandalorian iron, you can break anything."

"It took me five whole minutes to—"

"Now you just have to do it faster," he cut across. "And, besides, you won't be alone."

Spurred on by the fiercely self-assured way that Kylo spoke, Rey gathered up all her misgivings and locked them away in some hidden corner of her mind. Hadn't he told her that she never let anything
stop her, and hadn't she said the same of him? They were the two most stubborn people in the galaxy. They were going to make this risky, ill-conceived plan work.

Rey stretched out an arm, fingers splayed and pointing toward the siege platform. She saw Kylo mirroring her posture right before her eyes drifted shut and she disappeared into somewhere inside herself.

Inside the Force.

* 

They were called shatterpoints; the weakest spots in the composition of a structure. Any structure, in theory—even one as colossal and as secure and as elegantly engineered as the Torpedo Sphere.

However, in order to locate these points, Rey needed to wrap her mind around the whole of the thing itself. She needed to see it in the Force, to mentally take it apart before applying the requisite energy to follow through in the physical realm.

The size of the siege platform rebuffed her initial efforts. She told herself not to panic, but she was so pressed for time and the battle was raging all around her—even though her eyes were closed, she could hear explosions and blaster-fire and footsteps drawing nearer, and then the shriek of kyber crystals, the grunts and screams and thuds of close-quarters combat as Boethiah, Hircine, and Jyggalag defended the perimeter from a group of enemy stormtroopers who were trying to breach it.

You're losing focus, Rey warned herself, feeling the shape of the Torpedo Sphere slipping from her grasp. She dug in, holding on to it the way she'd held on to her fibercord during countless ascents, the way she'd held on to the belief that her family would come back for her, the way she'd held on to what she had felt for her husband despite everything, everything...

Rey.

In hindsight, it should have come as no surprise that the bond would once more open up when she and Kylo were exerting so much Force power between the two of them. His voice dropped into her head like a stone through water.

And all of a sudden there was water, there was—
Rey knew where she and Kylo were—where the Force had brought them—from the sound of the waves and the smell of salt. She knew where they were even before she blinked and she was standing by the black waters, on a shoreline where a castle spun from basalt rose up over the rocks, glittering in the sunset, not so far away.

Why here? she wondered. Why now?

Because this is where you were happy, answered something that sounded like enormous wings unfurling over the vast sea. Because, here and now, is where you remember what's worth fighting for. To have these days back again.

Rey turned to Kylo, who was beside her. Who was gazing quietly at her as the wind dragged its cool fingers through his hair and the ends of his cloak, the light fiery in its dying as the sun sunk low into the horizon, turning the sand into rivers of gold. There was uncertainty in his Force signature—tiny flickers of doubt at finding himself in this place in the bond, with her.

"You know it doesn't matter, right?" she said to him, a lump in her throat. "What Snoke told us—about being the one who bridged our minds—it doesn't matter. Not to me, because—because it's ours now. We reshaped it, we made it into something just for ourselves. Something that no one else can touch."

He was silent for what seemed like an eternity, and then he squared his shoulders and nodded—at her and to himself, and to the ghosts that he was laying to rest.

"Come on." He took her hand in his. "Let's finish this. Nothing's unbreakable." His tone was soft, as was the look in his eyes in the glow of the setting sun. "Except for you and me."

They found the shatterpoints. Dozens of them, scattered all throughout the Torpedo Sphere like veins in a body or fault lines deep within the earth.

They channeled the Force into these cracks, and the siege platform's hull groaned as it began to splinter in several places, the metal plates warping and coming apart while alarms blared inside the control room and a now rattled Hux frantically scanned the cameras in a bid to discern where this
The Sphere inched forward, driving into another row of buildings that collapsed like dominoes, stopping just short of the Citadel and scattering aside the debris already on the ground. And that was when the cameras picked up the five figures nearby, two of them standing still with arms extended toward the siege platform in the middle of a protective circle formed by the other three.

"Shoot them down!" Hux screamed. "All portside cannons, open fire!"

At the urgent command, a barrage of torpedoes were let loose, catapulting in the direction of the five figures on the ground. Striking with pinpoint accuracy.

However, once the dust had settled, Hux saw that none of his artillery had hit their mark.

Instead, every single one had come crashing against some invisible barrier that the three Knights of Ren had erected at the last possible second.

Hux narrowed his eyes. The floor rumbled beneath his feet as another series of fissures bloomed within the Sphere's hull, but he would kill Kylo Ren and Kira Ka Djo before they managed to destroy the Sphere completely. "Keep firing!" he ordered. "More! More!"

Boethiah's jaw clenched as the second volley of torpedoes hit the Force barrier, followed by another, and another. Her strength was starting to fail, the pain threatening to split her skull in half. She could tell that Hircine and Jyggalag weren't faring much better and that the three of them couldn't keep up this energy shield for long. Not in the face of so many cannons.

But Kylo and Rey needed more time. The siege platform was vibrating furiously, more and more pieces of its armored shell peeling away with each second that ticked past.

And it wasn't enough. They needed someone to help them, they needed more power...

Boethiah's eyes had long since screwed shut with the effort of maintaining the barrier. She didn't see
the figure in dark-colored robes approaching, picking his way through the fallen rocks and myriad small fires. But she felt his presence and she realized at once who it was, even before her eyes flew open to confirm her suspicions.

"What are you doing here?" she snarled.

"Helping you and Ben," Luke Skywalker solemnly replied. "Which is something I should have done a long time ago."

Kylo was not concentrating so intensely that he didn't sense the man taking up position between him and Rey. He shot a contemptuous glance at his uncle, but it wasn't as virulent as it could have been.

"How did you get out?" he demanded.

"Shatterpoint now, my life story later, kid," Luke said dryly. "You want to bring this thing down or not?"

And, without waiting for a response, he joined his former students in coaxing the Force through the Sphere's weak spots, widening them enough to create more fractures even as torpedoes rained down upon them. The combined outpouring of energy stirred the air and several nearby soldiers still engaged in battle glanced around, momentarily bewildered, as heaps of rubble were lifted off the ground to float on unseen currents.

But three Force users could hardly tear a two-kilometer-long vessel to shreds in such a small window of time, no matter how skilled each of them were. With the tiny part of her that wasn't completely immersed in the technique, Rey was keenly aware that they needed help. That she, Kylo, and Luke couldn't do this alone.

No one walks alone.

Her grandmother Augwynne had told her that. And that was what Rey had learned on the Singing Mountain. And that was what she understood now as she caught the scent of wild berries and the touch of a warm, callused hand on her face, and felt Teneniel Djo standing beside her.
"Remember," said Teneniel, "I'm always with you."

The Force worked in mysterious ways. It connected all things. It found goodness in the midst of suffering. And, right now, it sensed an opportunity for balance, and it ripped away the veil between worlds and blazed with light.

The light that Kylo Ren saw surround the tall figure that had appeared in front of him, there but not quite, arms raised as if holding back three generations' worth of war as the afternoon sun danced through a mane of shaggy brown hair.

The same light that Luke felt in his heart as two figures shimmered into existence at the periphery of his vision, as thin at the edges as memory, and yet bearing none of the cares of old age that they had when he'd seen them last.

"Not too hard on yourself, you must be, young Skywalker," the smaller of the two figures said to Luke, one hand channeling raw energy into the barrier while the other wove more of it through the siege platform's shatterpoints. "Grown beyond us, you have. Grow beyond you, they will. And it is all right."

"Look at what you have risen above." Obi-Wan Kenobi flashed Luke that achingly familiar sage smile. "Look at how beautifully you live in the world now. All its aches and its glories, and your eyes still on the horizon." He then called out to the younger man standing in front of Kylo, with a trace of laughter in his voice, "Put your back into it, Anakin!"

"Easier said than done, master," the Jedi Knight grumbled in long-suffering tones. But then he seemed to rally, and another wave of Force power surged from his fingertips.

And Kylo thought he heard Anakin whisper to himself, "This is for my family."

And the Torpedo Sphere exploded, torn apart at its shatterpoints, consuming the battlefield and the edges of the Citadel in brilliant white heat.
While we were having lunch at a sidewalk cafe in Paris, my friend Anonym1989 told me that she suspected Luke was going to come in and save the day. I swear this girl and I are Force-bonded.

Kantale's Battle Dragon is named after the avian creature heliost.

**Orbital autocannon.**

**Sensor globe.**

**Torpedo Sphere.**

**The Rebel Files.**

**Durkteel.**

**Korr Sella.**

**Haxen Delto.**

**Caluan Ematt.**

**Republic Special Weapons Group.**

**TIE/sa bomber.**

**Hoth Hedgehog.**

**All Terrain Anti-Aircraft.**

**TX-225 GAVw “Occupier” combat assault tank.**

**First Order speeder bike.**

**Shatterpoint.**
Chapter 69

Chapter Notes

First of all, much love and gratitude to billysmind and capsharmony for the beautiful artworks and bleakleberry for the amazing playlist.

Secondly, this 15,122-word chapter works better broken up into two separate installments. I suggest taking a breather after the line break with the "Three standard days later" timestamp if you wish to preserve my original pacing.

Thirdly, there is a scene inspired by Judith McNaught's Something Wonderful. My fellow romance junkies will most likely recognize it right off the bat ;)

Fourth item on the agenda: I'm not a hundred percent sure when I'll get around to writing the epilogue. You can check the sidebar of my Tumblr blog for ETA updates. But this final chapter of the main LWABOC storyline ends at what I did my best to make sure was a satisfying place, and I hope you will like it.

Last, but definitely not the least— thank you, my dearest readers, for everything. It has been the best two years of my life. May the Force be with you. ❤

As near as Rey could surmise when she regained consciousness, the shatterpoint technique had splintered not only the Torpedo Sphere’s hull but also its energy reactor, leading to an explosion that had blasted everyone in the vicinity off their feet. One minute she'd been using the Force to dismantle the monstrosity, and the next—

Well. She couldn't remember too clearly. There had been heat, and pain, and flying backwards through the air. She must have hit her head and blacked out. And now she was...

Where, exactly?

Rey gingerly hauled herself into a sitting position, taking stock of her surroundings as she coaxed healing energy through her system to smooth away the various cuts and bruises that she'd sustained from the fallout. She winced when a cracked bone was clumsily set back into place, a bolt of pain shooting up her torso. Exhaustion had sunk in; her abilities were depleted.

To put it in layman’s terms, she was almost out of juice.

But that was the least of her concerns right now, because—
— Because half of the Citadel was gone.

She was huddled amidst the remnants of what once been the northeast wing but was now nothing more than piles of scrap metal and blown-out glass. The air was foggy with clouds of ash and dust so thick that they almost obscured the sun, and an acrid, burnt smell hung over every inch of space. The entire front half of Kylo's fortress had been completely leveled, so much so that, looking over her shoulder and squinting through the haze, she could make out the central courtyard and the relatively unscathed towers beyond.

In hindsight, they should have expected something like this would happen. It hadn't been a particularly well-thought-out plan, but it had been their best shot— and the important thing was that it had worked. The Torpedo Sphere was no more; in fact, Rey spotted hunks of the once mighty siege platform scattered among the Citadel's toppled pillars and panels of caved-in rooftop.

She stood up. A quick glance at the chrono on her wrist told her that seven minutes had passed. She was just about to check in with the Dragon Fleet regarding the status of the battle up in the black, but she stopped short when it felt like—

— A door, opening in her mind—

The bond hummed to life.

Where are you? Kylo asked.

The northeast wing. What's left of it, anyway, she replied. You?

Near the courtyard. His energy signature seemed just as weak and dazed as hers was. I— I think I controlled— I think I'm controlling it. The bond. I called out for you and— and there you were. Are. There you are.

Rey couldn't help the relieved smile that spread across her face as she began making her way through the rubble. Making her way to the courtyard, towards him. I told you it was ours.

You were right, he whispered. You were right about so many things. Rey, I—
She froze in her tracks. Three masked silhouettes had stepped out from behind the heaps of debris in front of her, and they were approaching her with measured gaits through the rain of ash that was drifting softly to the ground like snow.

*What's wrong?* Kylo asked sharply, sensing the sudden spike of dread on her end.

Rey didn't answer. She shoved her exact location into their mental link and then severed it, knowing that she would need all her concentration for— for whatever *this* was, as the three dark figures surrounded her at a distance that could not have been called cautious.

More like— *ready*.

"Nice to see you again, Ereneda," spat Mephala Ren.

Rey's hand automatically dropped to the lightsaber hilt cinched to her utility belt. And, without further ado, Mephala, Meridia, and Clavicus fell upon her.

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To the northwest, a gauntleted hand shot out from underneath the small hill of metallic detritus that was all that remained of a couple of office walls. There were bits of AT-AT in there, too, and the hand scrabbled around frantically before latching on to a section of knee joint which it subsequently bashed against its prison, dislodging fragment after fragment until, at last, Hircine popped out, wrestling off his helm and taking in a big gulp of air— only to immediately choke on a mouthful of the ash that permeated everything.

He continued chipping away at the debris encasing him as his shoulders shook with violent coughs and then, once he was free, spat out a glob of slimy grayish matter at the feet of the woman nonchalantly lounging on a torn TIE fighter wing beside him.

"Think I hacked up a lung," Hircine grunted. His eyes narrowed at Boethiah in accusation. "You could've helped dig me out, you know."

"I could have," Boethiah agreed in even tones. "But I didn't."
Hircine made a face. "Come on. Let's go find the others."

As the two knights staggered away, it was obvious that neither of them had survived the blast unscathed. Hircine walked with a slight limp and Boethiah left a trail of minuscule blood spatters in her wake, dripping from a wound in her side. But they said nothing, each one quietly calling on the last reserves of Force powers to mend their injuries—or at least ease the pain until they could get medical attention.

After they had vanished into the gloom of the wasteland that the Citadel had become, there was a flicker of movement several feet away from where Boethiah had been sitting. A tall, lean figure emerged from the hollowed-out shell of the Torpedo Sphere's control room, crawling on its hands and knees. Bright crimson blood trickled down one side of a pale, chiseled face.

And, slowly, Armitage Hux rose to his feet.

The pure silver-white beam of a durindfire saberstaff clashed against the scarlet of a kyber blade, sparks bursting at the point of impact.

"Why are you doing this?" Rey demanded through gritted teeth as she pushed against Meridia. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Clavicus run at her with barbed mace in hand and she stomped a booted foot into the ground, setting off a chain reaction of tiny earthquakes that overturned a loose pillar nearby. The male knight grunted as the pillar fell on top of him, pinning his sturdy frame to the battered concrete.

"It's nothing personal, Your Majesty," replied Meridia. "We just don't forgive traitors, is all."

"Sounds pretty personal to me," Rey snapped. The unmistakable razor-thin coil of a slicewire wrapped around her neck from behind and she immediately let go of her saberstaff, prying her fingers into the minute space between her throat and the wire before its noose could tighten and, at the same time, shoving Meridia away with the Force.

The hilt of Rey's blade flew back into her palm as she spun on her heel to face the other twin and she ignited it without missing a beat, cutting the length of slicewire in half. Although she'd had no other choice, it was a move that cost her dearly, for Mephala had been expecting it and took advantage of
her momentary distraction to hurl several wickedly sharp throwing stars, only three of which Rey was able to deflect. She cried out as one sank into her thigh and the other into her shoulder, and then Mephala lunged with her own lightsaber ablaze.

Rey blocked again but it was a weak attempt owing to her new injuries; her leg gave out and she hit the ground, barely managing to roll away as Mephala brought the blade down over her head. Red light scraped against the charred earth where Rey had been only a heartbeat ago and she scrambled to her feet, the Force yanking the throwing stars out of her body and then quickly sewing up the wounds the way she'd been taught on Dathomir. *Don't stop, never stop, not until your foe is down.* One end of her saberstaff swung at Mephala, who dodged it easily as her twin sister shot out from behind her, driving Rey backwards with a series of relentless blows.

Clavicus had wriggled free of the pillar, a fact that Rey, preoccupied as she was, noticed only when he loomed up from out of the shadows and smashed his mace into her side, sending her flying into another collapsed section of wall. She blinked up at the gray heavens, unable to breathe through the pain. Her reptile-scale armor had prevented any serious puncture damage, but she had definitely bruised some ribs.

"I don't want you to die without knowing why," came Mephala's vocoder-modulated drawl as the three knights advanced on Rey's prone form. "So— this is revenge. For betraying the Empire. For killing Malacath."

"She didn't kill Malacath."

It seemed to Rey that time came crashing to a halt at the sound of that voice. Soft yet deep, and ragged at the edges. She raised her head and saw Kylo drawing near, the glow of the several small fires interspersed throughout the rubble gleaming off his messy hair. Their reflection burning in his dark eyes.

His three knights all turned to him as well. It was Clavicus who broke the heavy silence that had fallen after such a declaration. "Lord Ren?" His tone was bewildered. "What are you saying?"

"He boasted about killing General Organa," Kylo replied, and memories from the invasion of Coruscant came back to Rey in a flash. Malacath Ren's greatsword slashing across a defenseless Leia's torso, Rey shoving the knight off the balcony with the Force. Back when Clavicus had mentioned that she'd killed Malacath, Rey had assumed that it was the fall or a group of Resistance soldiers that had done him in, but now... now it was all clicking into place. "At the time, I was unaware that she had survived," Kylo continued. "In my anger, I struck him down. It was me."
"So that's why there were scorch-marks on his corpse," Meridia spat, and Rey remembered what had taken place in the Citadel after her coronation. She remembered two knights suspended in her Force grip and Mephala's strained laughter as she looked over at her twin, see, I told you it was her, told you she had dark in her, Skywalker never could've done it.

And here and now, in the present moment, Mephala was asking, in a voice that sounded oddly hurt, "You were the one who turned the lightning on Malacath, Lord Ren?"

"Yes." Kylo's hand hovered over the saber hilt at his side. "And if you don't stand down, you'll meet the same fate."

"We have been nothing but loyal to you." Clavicus was bridling with anger. "And you would still choose her over us?"

"You're the ones who are forcing me to choose." Kylo's response was calm enough, but there was a hint of sorrow weighing on his broad shoulders, and that was what set off the alarm bells in Rey's head. No matter what his face gave away, he'd always been able to affect a rigid posture, standing tall and ramrod-stiff and ever on guard. The events of the day— the impossible feats he'd pulled off within such a short span of time— they'd taken their toll on him. In terms of combat acuity and Force utilization, he was much closer to the end of the rope than she was.

She struggled to clamber to her feet, only for Meridia to point the lethal end of her blade straight at her heart, one false move away from spearing through. Rey stilled.

"You've gone soft," Meridia growled at Kylo. "We've been discussing that. How you were ready to throw it all away for her practically from the moment you met."

"When you came back from Starkiller Base, there was a change in you, Lord Ren," lamented Mephala. "And it only got worse after you married the enemy."

"Some things changed, yes, but for the better," said Kylo. "I realized that I didn't have to destroy the old world in order to build a new one." He paused. "That we don't have to."

And in his tone Rey recognized a shadow of the same entreaty from all the times he'd asked her to compromise, to stay with him. Perhaps even the same entreaty with which he'd begged his father to come back soon and, later on, his mother to not send him away. A lump formed in her throat and she wished— so badly, for his sake— that his knights would listen to reason. That they would lower
"I believe that we should cut all weakness out at the root," snarled Clavicus. "Even before I joined you, I've always believed that."

"As have I," Mephala was quick to add.

"Same here," Meridia stated in a near whisper. And her elbow pulled back to drive the blade into Rey's chest.

Kylo lashed out a hand; electricity surged from his gloved fingertips, and Meridia shrieked as she collapsed to the ground and spasmed while the currents rippled through her slight frame. Rey seized the opportunity to get up, launching herself at Mephala at the same time that Clavicus attacked Kylo, beskar mace slamming into scarlet crossguard.

As she dueled with Mephala, Rey's bruised ribs groaned in protest. The wound in her thigh split open—she hadn't been able to heal it properly. Blood trickled down her leg in a steady flow.

The throwing star's spikes had cut deep. It hurt.

Normally, she could rely on the Force to act as a sort of anesthetic, numbing pain until it could be dealt with. But it was requiring all her focus to keep up with as skilled a fencer as Mephala, to dodge and parry the scarlet light that came from several angles almost at once. Rey could either sacrifice inner resources she was unable to spare so she could dull the pain...

Or she could fight through it.

One last battlefield.

*After this, I'll go to a cantina with my friends.* The thought flitted through Rey's mind as she ducked a sideways slash and pivoted on her heel to bring her saberstaff down on Mephala's head. The knight was quick, though, and managed to shove her away with a telekinetic blast before she could make contact. *After this, I'll congratulate Lairelosse and Aleson on a job well done.* She blocked another swing and then, seeing the other twin picking herself up off the ground, pulled her staff apart into two separate blades, one of which slanted against Meridia's at the last possible second. *After this, I'll kiss Ben, if he'll let me.* It took a burst of all of Rey's strength and agility to wrestle away from the
twins, a maneuver that granted her the briefest of reprieves before Meridia and Mephala circled her like a pair of hungry wolves as she slipped into the dual-saber Jar'Kai opening stance. After this, someday, I will have a daughter— if he wants—

I do, Rey.

Kylo had opened the bond to check in on her, just in time to catch the last strand of her musings. She could see him over Mephala's shoulder, dueling viciously with Clavicus.

But she'll need to have your ears.

Rey laughed, much to the consternation of her opponents.

"Think she's losing it," Meridia remarked.

"I would, too, if I were in her shoes," said Mephala. "It's over for her."

And the two sisters moved as one, rushing at her from different directions. She met them both in a whirl of white light and bared teeth.

Wedge Antilles' flagship, the Lusankya, had survived two galactic civil wars, but it would not make it through until the end of the third, despite his best efforts. It exploded under the onslaught of an Azalus-class Hutt dreadnought's turbolasers as Wedge and the rest of Rogue Squadron fled from the blast.

The Cartel fleet continued to roll in like an unstoppable tide. They would reach the middle of the blockade any moment now. From her command station, Admiral Vela Noroos of the Hapan Royal Navy organized the defenses as best as she could given the fact that her division was still pinned down by the coup's forces.

"Any word from planetside?" Vela asked her second-in-command, who shook his head mournfully.
Vela's lips pursed, her gaze shifting from the battle map on the holo-table to the glittering expanse of space. She trusted the Queen Mother's judgment. She would just have to hold on and keep as many ships as possible in one piece until Kira Ka Djo made her move.

Rey was badly injured. Aside from the bruising on her ribs, one of the twins had scored a deep gash on the same thigh that had already been hit by the throwing star and the other twin had gotten her left arm. She'd started relying more heavily on the Force— the nigh invisible, serpentine outline of the dragon that she'd used against Snoke was shimmering in the ash-stained air, snapping at Meridia and Mephala when they got too close— but she was faltering.

Kylo could see it all out of the corner of his eye. He had to help her, but Clavicus was a kriiffing tank and it was all Kylo could do to remain one step ahead of that damnable mace. His luck ran out eventually and he hissed through his teeth as the mace slammed into his bicep, its barbs puncturing textile and flesh.

The burly knight followed up with a punch to a scarred cheek and Kylo fell to the ground, ears ringing, the metallic tang of blood filling his mouth.

"Should've hung on to your mask, Lord Ren," Clavicus sneered, towering over his crumpled form and raising his mace to accomplish the finishing blow.

A few feet away, Rey screamed as Mephala used the Force to rake another throwing star down her spine. Kylo knew he had to finish this if he didn't want to lose her. As the mace swung towards him, he summoned one last burst of Force energy, pouring into it every single ounce of Skywalker talent and Organa defiance and Solo stubbornness combined.

Clavicus' armor... 

And then the breastplate cracked and splintered and caved in on itself, the shards piercing the man's heart. He dropped his mace with a gurgling roar of pain and not even a second later Kylo was on his feet, crossguard lightsaber slicing through the air.

Loping the knight's head clean off of his shoulders.

Kylo had hoped that, upon seeing him kill Clavicus, one or both of the twins would disengage from
Rey and round on him instead, but all Meridia and Mephala did was intensify their current attack. They knew him well. They knew what would hurt him the most.

He staggered over, wondering how the hell he and Rey were going to defeat two expert duelists who sported no major injuries and who hadn't already wrung themselves dry ripping a two-kilometer-long siege platform to shreds. But just as he was about to enter the fray, Meridia abruptly stretched out a hand—an obsidian dagger paused in mid-flight, inches away from her palm, and she made an irritated sound low in the back of her throat as she redirected the weapon onto its source.

Who deftly sidestepped it and snatched up the hilt as it whizzed past, before using a free hand to telekinetically yank Rey off of her feet and send her careening into Kylo. He stumbled a little, but he steadied them both.

"We'll handle things here, Lord Ren," said Boethiah.

"Take Rey to the southern barricade," Hircine instructed, stepping out from behind the rubble. "They have med droids and bacta there."

Kylo wrapped a protective arm around Rey as she leaned against him for support. He could feel the jagged gash on her back soaking into his sleeve. But Hircine and Boethiah didn't look to be in such great shape, either—

"Go," Boethiah insisted even as she kept her coppery gaze fixed on the twins. "It's all right, Ben."

Kylo nodded at her and Hircine in mute gratitude then led Rey away. Mephala started to chase after them but Boethiah slid in front of her, blocking the path. And then it was on.

Rey fumbled for her comlink as she and Kylo made their slow, halting way through the debris. He had an arm around her waist to support her. He was carefully avoiding her spinal column but his fingers tightened at her hip in stern warning. "Don't move around so much. You'll aggravate the wound on your back."

She ignored him. *Fight through the pain. One last battlefield.* "Admiral Noroos," she croaked into the mouthpiece. "Status report?"
The woman on the other end of the line hesitated, and Rey wondered how weak she must have sounded for the no-nonsense Hapan officer to be concerned. But Vela was a soldier first and foremost, and soon she replied, "We're losing. Badly. They have not, however, reached the center yet."

Rey briefly squeezed her eyes shut. "All right. Just—just hang on. For a little while longer."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

Rey signed off. She and Kylo trudged forward ten more steps before she couldn't bear it anymore and a whimper clawed its way out of her throat. Her injured torso felt like it was about to split into two. The wound on her thigh burned.

Upon hearing the sound of her pain, Kylo immediately stopped walking. Steering her by the hip so that her front was now pressed against his chest, his free hand darted to her spine. Although the pressure of his fingertips was as light as a feather, it was still unbearable, and she stifled another cry into his tunic. His Force signature lit up the tangled clouds of agony that swelled in her mind, but its bright glow flickered as he attempted to pour healing energy into her veins.

He cursed under his breath and tried again.

Still nothing. The pain that was ripping through her only grew worse.

"Rey. Rey, I'm sorry, but I can't. I'm sorry." His voice was hoarse and trembling in her ear. "The southern barricade's not far. Just put one foot in front of the other until we get there. Okay?"

"Okay," she echoed, tucked safely into his chest, concentrating on the warmth of his presence in the Force. Her rock, her anchor. Her Ben. "Don't worry about me. I can make it. I..." She trailed off as her failing senses grabbed hold of the thread of physical torment that was running beneath his energy signature, and she pulled away so she could scan him in a bid to determine its source. Her eyes fell on his left arm, the one attached to the hand that had been trying to heal her, and her lips parted in a gasp.

His upper arm, just below his shoulder, was completely mangled. Clavicus' mace had reduced it to a mess of blood and exposed muscle and shattered bone. How could he have even lifted his hand to
the small of her back—

You can't cry, Rey told herself. Her tears would only bring unpleasant associations for him. But there was still a distinct waver in her voice when she blurted out, "You do so much for me."

She wasn't sure if she'd meant it as a question, but Kylo answered, anyway, bowing to gently rest his forehead against hers. "Because you're worth it."

And that was when a new voice spoke up from somewhere behind her. A cold drawl that shot through Rey like ice.

"If it isn't a fine picture the two of you make, bleeding all over what's left of the floor."

Rey couldn't force her body to turn around. Every inch of her seemed to coil in fear at the prospect of how much it would hurt when the wound stretched out if she were to move like that. But she knew that voice and she knew who had just stumbled upon them, even though her Force powers had ebbed so low that she could no longer sense him.

It was Hux.

* 

Kylo glared at the new arrival with a mixture of frustration and disbelief, struggling to center himself in the Force so that he would— in spite of his current state— be able to keep Rey safe if the situation got out of hand.

No, not if. It was a matter of when.

Because, even though there was a cut on his forehead that had spattered blood down his face, Hux was in prime fighting condition compared to Kylo and Rey. In addition to that, he was holding the sword that Rey had presented to Kylo as a token on the eve of their wedding, which he'd since kept in a compartment in his office. Unsheathed, Telemnar gleamed a bright silver amidst the rain of ash, the First Order emblem on its hilt gilded by the light of the small fires that had broken out in the aftermath of the Torpedo Sphere's explosion.
"I've always been a big believer in making your own destiny. I was a kitchen woman's bastard, I had no other choice," Hux remarked with unsettling nonchalance. "But, somehow, my exact location inside the siege platform's fortified control room sheltered me from the worst of it and, practically as soon as I crawled out, I found this—" He studied the sharp Hapan warblade with equally sharp eyes — "amidst the rubble, along with a few other personal effects of yours. What were the odds, Ren, that the blast would hurl me into your office? It was almost as if this was waiting for me."

"I wouldn't read too much into it, Hux," Kylo deadpanned. "Besides, do you even know how to use a sword?"

The pale general's lips twitched. "You're right." His free hand dove into the lining of his coat and reemerged with a blaster.

Kylo instinctively pushed Rey away from him.

Two shots rang out.

"As you can see, I'm much more comfortable with pistols," Hux continued. "Top of the class in marksmanship at the academy and all."

It took Kylo a stunningly long time to register that he'd been hit right where his side still occasionally twinged from a ghostly echo of the bowcaster wound that had been Chewbacca's parting gift on Starkiller Base. He was down on his knees before he knew it, fresh pain flooding through his system. Rey had been shot in the leg and she was now slumped against a pile of disfigured metal, and Hux approached her first.

Kylo tried to move but his body refused to obey, sapped of the Force and losing too much blood and internal organs damaged. The scene before him blurred at the edges.

"Doesn't feel nice, does it, Ereneda, to lose when you think you're on the verge of winning?" Hux spoke to Rey in conversational tones. "But you were never on the verge. Listen to this." He activated the comlink on his wrist. "Status report?"

It was a deep, gurgling, inhuman voice that responded, in guttural syllables that chilled the air. "Jeejee doth wata."
We are here.

The Hutt Cartel had reached the middle of the blockade.

Rey's shoulders sagged. And only Kylo knew that it was in relief, not defeat.

"About time," Rey muttered, her hand flying to the silver chain. She was looking triumphantly into Hux's eyes when she pressed the button embedded inside the dragon's mouth.

Lady Silara of House Surrel, who ruled the tech hub Charubah in the Rifle Worlds region of the Hapes Cluster, glanced down as the signal beacon attached to her lapel flashed green in a series of insistent pulses. Although she walked with a slight limp, her pace was brisk as she returned to her seat of command on the bridge of an uncommonly large Battle Dragon that sparkled with newness, and her voice rang with authority as she gave the order to make the jump into the uncharted hyperlane that Kira Ka Djo had mapped using the instinctive astrogation Force technique.

Silara's ship was not alone when it vanished into the starlines, and the seam that Rey had discovered was functionally a shortcut between Hapes and Coruscant. Not even three minutes later— as the Hutt Cartel swarmed the beleaguered Resistance and Consortium forces that were trapped in the middle of the blockade—

— Five hundred Battle Dragons, each one twice the length of the original design, materialized right on top of them, along with clouds of accompanying Nova-class cruisers, Stella-class frigates, and lithe, opalescent Miy'til starfighters.

The Ducha Surrel had been uncertain as to whether the Queen Mother would sanction the use of this latest branch of the Royal Navy that Charubah had, at Ta'a Chume's behest, spent the past year building in secret. Outfitted with superior shielding and rate of fire compared to their predecessors, this batch of Dragons was, in a word, overkill. Even by Hapan standards.

"When did you start making these ships?" Rey had asked Silara when the latter presented her with the dragon chain after the vote and explained its purpose— to summon the new fleet.

"The day after you returned to us and assumed your place as Chume'da, your grandmother ordered me to begin work on the redesign," the ducha had answered. "The project was at seventy-five
percent completion when you married Ren and became Empress. After the Reef Fortress was attacked on the night of the masquerade ball, Ta'a Chume had my people work faster so that the whole fleet could be ready for—for whatever purpose you would one day deem fit."

It turned out that Silara's concerns over the recently ascended Queen Mother's lack of enthusiasm for the project had been unfounded. Rey's inner conflict had flickered across her features in the space of merely half a heartbeat before she decided to use the new Dragons as a contingency plan; they were to remain behind at the navy's staging area and make the jump to the battlefield only if things went south.

And things had gone south, and the Consortium navy had been decimated. And now the reinforcements had arrived and they were out for vengeance.

For fire and blood.

Tractor beam projectors attached to the bottom hull plates unleashed wide beams of energy that captured dozens upon dozens of Huttese capital ships and coup-allied First Order destroyers in one fell swoop, freezing them in place. Before the captains of each immobilized dreadnought could even register that they had crawled into a trap—or, to be more accurate, that their trap had been spun on its head—the reserve Hapan fleet's smaller vessels descended, surrounding them in countless whirls of lasers and concussion missiles. The perimeter that Hux had so carefully choreographed was easily broken in the face of such an onslaught, and the original Battle Dragons that had survived surged free.

Electrified by such an unexpected turn of events in their favor, the Resistance and Kylo Ren's forces pushed back against their foes with a renewed sense of determination. The coup's ranks crumbled like towers of sand swept away by a hurricane.

On the war-torn surface of Coruscant, Rey watched horrified realization dawn on Hux's features as the Hutt commander on the other end of the line sputtered something about the Consortium bringing reinforcements before the frequency dissolved into static.

"I really hated my grandmother, Hux," Rey said calmly into the ensuing silence. "She was a nasty piece of work. But she was even nastier than you, and for that I suppose I should be grateful. Ta'a Chume sends her regards."
Hux struck Rey across the face with the hand holding the blaster. Although the force of the blow made her see double, it didn’t hurt—which she understood in a removed sort of way to be worrying, because it meant that she was already in so much pain from her other injuries that her body simply refused to acknowledge more stimuli. She heard the sound of her name torn loose from Kylo’s throat in an enraged roar and she saw him trying to struggle to his feet, a gloved hand reaching out for her in vain. There was a flash of red light from Hux’s blaster and Kylo reeled back, snarling, as the bolt speared his knee.

A strangled scream clawed at the air, and it took Rey a while to realize that the sound was coming from her.

"I had intended to deal with you first. Make him watch," Hux told Rey stiffly. "But now I think I want you to be the one to suffer more." He slipped the pistol back into its holster and stalked toward Kylo, holding the Hapan warblade. "After all, I don’t need to be good with a sword to kill you with one at point-blank range, do I, Ren? Consider this poetic justice."

Hux raised the blade over Kylo’s head. Kylo twitched weakly, but otherwise made no move to resist. *I called out to Luke*, he murmured to Rey from within the place that was theirs and only theirs. It hit her like another blow that, instead of using the last of his strength to defend himself, he’d poured it all into making contact with Luke as well as reestablishing the bond. *He’s somewhere near here. He’s on his way. Hang on until he arrives.*

Hux, oblivious to what was happening in the Force, brought the blade down and—

— And—

And Rey was too far away and too injured to reach Kylo in time. She had nothing left, no more tricks up her sleeve except for the Force bond, but perhaps... perhaps that would be enough. She remembered how it had sometimes taken them into each other’s worlds and, while she had no idea if a one-way trip would even be possible—

*It’s ours*, Rey defiantly insisted. *Mine and his. It answers to us and to us alone.*

*It will do whatever we want it to.*

*Whatever I want it to.*
And she took a deep breath, and she grasped her end of the connection, and she held on tight—

— And she *pulled*.

It was like climbing towers. Like scaling the wreckage of dead ships. The feeling was the same. Higher and higher...

*And salvation and sunlight,* Rey thought, a lone tear finally slipping free from the tangle of her lashes. *And always, and mine...*

The Force brought her to Kylo's location just as Hux dealt his final strike. She appeared on her feet in front of Kylo's prone body, facing Hux, and the Sword of the Morning— the sword that she had given Kylo in a garden shining in the moonlight— sank into her stomach.

She heard Kylo utter her name in a hoarse shout from behind her. Hux jerked back in shock, but he was still holding on to the hilt of the warblade, which ensured that he and Rey were still connected. That he was still within her reach.

She tugged one of the silver pins loose from her hair. It was crafted in the Hapan style, meaning that it was beautiful and also a weapon. A last line of defense when everything else had failed. Unlike the needles that Daemora AlGray had hidden in Rey's crown, it wasn't poisoned, but it was sharp enough that it didn't need to be. And, with the last, fading vestiges of strength and motor function, Rey drove it straight into Hux's jugular, and she pushed it *down* and—

Hux released the blade, staggering backwards, screaming. She collapsed to the ground at the same time that he did, and she saw him spasming out of the corner of her eye, blood spurting out of his throat, until he was finally still.

Rey didn't know how long she lay there, bleeding out and feeling life drain away as she stared up at the gray sky, ashes drifting over her like a light dusting of snow. But it couldn't have been for very long, because she was still alive when Kylo crawled over to her and hauled himself up onto his knees as he gathered her in his arms.

"No, no, no, no." He was shaking his head, his dark eyes strangely bright, his normally pale features flushed red and streaked wet with tears. He was crying. "Rey— please—"
"Don't... don't move so much," she rasped out. Contrary to what she'd been bracing for, it didn't hurt to speak. It didn't hurt to do anything anymore. "Your wounds..."

She wanted to touch his face one last time, but she could no longer lift her arm. Kylo solved the problem for her, grabbing her hand and pressing desperate kisses to her palm, his tears warm and wet on her skin. "Why did you do that?" he demanded, his voice rough with grief. "Rey, why?"

He was nonsensical, helpless, not really expecting an answer. But she gave him one, anyway, as she closed her eyes, as he held her tighter and buried his face in her neck, his broad shoulders trembling with violent sobs.

"Because I was so tired of not getting to choose you first," she murmured, her breath ghosting over his scarred cheek. "And because I love you."

Her heart didn't feel heavy anymore, now that there were no more unsaid words lodged inside it. She slipped away into the darkness, into something that was like peace. Safe in his embrace at last.

Up in the black, Vice Admiral Amilyn Holdo of the Resistance spearheaded the final charge on the Supremacy, the cruiser Ninka scoring the killshot and a resounding cheer echoing through its crew as the Mega-class Star Destroyer came apart.

There was a hint of what could almost be called vengeance in Leia Organa's slight smile when she turned the Raddus around and led her ships and the original Dragons in a brutal offensive that blew through the Hutt Cartel's already scattered ranks, leaving almost no survivors in its wake.

Working together, Natasi Daala and Wedge Antilles cornered Siralt's remaining ships and destroyed several of them. In the end, a frightened, panicking Siralt beamed a transmission of surrender to Daala.

Ephin Sarreti had no time to surrender. Had no time to do much of anything, really, because the Consortium's new Battle Dragons razed his fleet within minutes, their artillery swallowing his flagship whole in a vicious storm of fire and blood.

Commander Moreem Espara of the Royal Guard took a boarding party from the Dragon Queen to Narbuj Desilijic Preor's Azalus-class dreadnought. The Nikto enforcers were no use against Hapes'
military elite, and soon Moreem had kicked down the doors of the room on the ship where the kajidii had taken refuge.

"Girls in armor," Narbuj spat as the soldiers approached him. "You would all look so much prettier dancing for me."

Moreem gave him a blank stare. "I have literally no idea what you're saying," she told Narbuj in disdainful Basic, and the Hutt realized too late that his contempt for female bodies was no match for a Hapan's contempt for anything that wasn't Hapan. "Do you speak Huttese?" Moreem asked her second-in-command.

"Of course not," the other woman snorted. "I have neither the time nor the inclination to learn such a... rural tongue."

They were, however, still conversing in Basic, so that he could understand he was being insulted. Narbuj roared in anger but, before he could do anything else, Moreem unleashed the cannons mounted on her shoulder plates straight into the crime lord's gut.

On Coruscant, the exhausted but victorious Resistance infantry rejoiced alongside their stormtrooper comrades as word came that the coup's navy had surrendered and its ground forces saw no choice but to follow suit.

A ways off from the southern barricade, Hircine sent an unconscious, heavily wounded Mephala crashing into her twin's arms.

"You can still save her if you get her to a med-droid as soon as possible," he told Meridia gruffly. "I saw where you stashed your TIE fighter. You could probably slip away while everyone's distracted."

Boethiah had already sheathed her weapons and was in the process of stretching out a sore arm. "See you guys around, I guess."

"And how do you know what I've decided?" Meridia growled.
"Because I know you very well," said Boethiah, "and I know you will always choose your sister. Bye now."

There was a tense silence, during which both Hircine and Boethiah pointedly looked away as if fascinated by some indeterminable speck in the distance. Denying culpability, until the sound of Meridia's footsteps had faded.

Soon there were new footsteps, approaching instead of leaving, and Hircine and Boethiah turned to Jyggalag with an air of annoyance.

He'd lost his helmet and was sporting a broken arm hanging off his shoulder at an awkward angle. "So," he said, grinning at them, "what did I miss?"

*

The breeze had subsided and most of the ash had settled by the time Luke Skywalker traced his nephew's desperate summons. His robes were singed in several places and one side of his body was riddled with burn marks from having been caught up in the fires of the Torpedo Sphere's explosion, but he hobbled over as quickly as he could to where Kylo was crouched on the ground, clutching Rey's eerily still form to his chest as he wept.

"Ben." Luke's prosthetic hand dropped onto the younger man's uninjured shoulder. The eyes that peered up at him were so much like Leia's, except that they were wild with grief. "She's alive. I can feel her Force signature. It's weak, but it's there. I'll stabilize her—" And you, Luke added silently, because Kylo looked done— "and then we'll get her into a bacta tank. All right?"

Kylo didn't say anything. He didn't move. He just stared at his uncle, very nearly in an unseeing sort of way.

"I won't let you down, Ben," Luke fervently promised. "Not this time."

Only then did the Emperor nod. Only then did he gently deposit his wife into Luke's arms, before slumping further down and hiding his face in the dirt.

Such forgiveness, Luke thought, swallowing the knot of unshed sorrow in his own throat. You have your mother's eyes and your father's spirit, but you have my heart, too. I am sorry that I didn't
realize that until it was too late.

There would be time for more apologies. For now, Luke had to focus on Rey. He closed his eyes and poured healing energy into her, stoppering what was bleeding, mending what was fractured and bruised. He'd arrived on the scene none too soon, but he managed to hold on to her before she disappeared completely.

What is alive must heal, Luke reminded Rey, as he had reminded himself so many times past. What cannot heal must endure.

Three standard days later

General Leia Organa had been provided with naris-bud tea and t'iil seed cake— her favorites, as if someone had issued very specific orders to the kitchen droids. She was too anxious to truly be hungry but her son had made an effort and so she did, too, sipping the tea and nibbling at the cake as she sat and waited and took stock of her surroundings.

Most of the Citadel's conference rooms had been located in the northern portion of the fortress, the pieces of which were currently being cleared away. The moment her transport shuttle docked, Leia had been escorted to this chamber that was obviously someone's office, the metal desk cleared of everything except for her tray but the shelves containing several personal effects that were arranged with no particular rhyme or reason, like they'd been hastily removed from the table.

There was a window. It had cracked during Hux's failed siege but the rest was still precariously nestled in its frame, although whoever had prepared the room for Leia's arrival had missed the shards of broken glass on the floor. She was just getting stir-crazy enough to actually contemplate sweeping it all up when the door opened.

And Kylo Ren walked in.

Leia hadn't seen her son in the flesh in so long. Statistically speaking, it wasn't all that odd that they'd never once crossed paths during the entirety of the Resistance-First Order conflict that had spanned the whole galaxy, but she found herself almost wishing that things had been different— that she'd caught even just a glimpse of him on some battlefield, somewhere. Perhaps then she wouldn't have felt as if the rug had been pulled out from under her feet when he offered her a curt nod that wasn’t so much a greeting as it was a mere acknowledgement of her presence.
Holo recordings hadn't been enough to prepare her. Hadn't been enough to indicate just how much he'd changed. He was a man now. Tall like his father, with wide shoulders and soft, thick hair. He hadn't exactly grown into the assortment of features that was a combination of hers and Han's, but he more than made up for it with an air of quiet command and a penetrating gaze.

And yet Leia could also see that he had dark circles under his eyes, that his hair was disheveled, and that his complexion was unnaturally pale. According to Daala, they'd pulled him out of the bacta tank after twenty-four standard hours; he looked like he hadn't slept since.

"General," he said in an excruciatingly formal tone of voice. He didn't take his place at the empty chair that had been placed across from hers on the other side of the desk. "We can't speak for long, I'm afraid. My wife is in a medically-induced coma as she heals from injuries sustained during the final battle. I must return to her posthaste."

"You don't want Rey to be alone when she wakes up," Leia guessed.

Kylo looked away. She knew that it was because he was trying to get his expressive features under control. Oh, she hadn't been at all surprised when she first learned about that horrible mask. He'd needed it to survive Snoke.

"To business, then," Leia said gently. There was no sense in making Kylo resent her more than he already did. "Why have I been summoned to the Citadel?" After the battle, most of the Resistance had withdrawn to their footholds in the Inner Rim, but the Raddus had stayed behind, refueling at Gus Talon Station in the Corellian system before making the jump back to Coruscant. To wait for the missive from the Emperor that Leia had known in her heart of hearts would come.

"While I was under, you and my officers agreed to a meeting three standard weeks from now, to discuss the terms of the peace treaty." Kylo waited for Leia to nod before placing a datastick on the table, a hint of wariness in his demeanor as if he expected her to reach out and stab him. "I have compiled a list of the things that I am unwilling to compromise on. I suggest you go over them with your advisors so that you will know what to expect from myself and my delegation. Hopefully, this will prevent tensions from escalating beyond repair during the meeting."

Leia blinked down at the slim device. She had no idea whether to laugh or to cry, and it took all of her self-discipline to abstain from doing both. "I believe that you and I had the same thought, Your Majesty," she finally said, fishing out a datastick of her own and sliding it over to him. "I've compiled a list of my non-negotiables as well."
Like mother, like son, she was tempted to quip, Luke's less desirable traits rubbing off on her, but she had a feeling that would be pushing it.

Kylo was expressionless as he pocketed the datastick she'd brought with her. He made to take his leave, but, just as he had reached the door, Leia blurted out, "Ben."

A tactical mistake. She'd meant to call him by his title. But he gave no sign of flying into a rage or having her arrested on the spot; instead, he stopped in his tracks. His back was turned to her, it was true, but he was waiting. Listening.

"Rey's friends would like to see her," Leia told him quietly. "If you're amenable to that."

His rigid posture stiffened even further, and then there was the slightest exhale, so slight that she wouldn't have noticed it if she weren't already staring at his back. "I am amenable." His response was terse and strained. "They may coordinate with Lieutenant Mitaka to arrange a suitable time. It might be good for her to... to be with those she cares about."

If she'd had any doubts regarding her son's feelings for his wife, that moment would have laid them all to rest. "She cares about you, too," Leia ventured to say.

"For all the good that did her."

Leia gave a start at the bitterness and self-loathing that twisted Kylo's words. He left the office before she could figure out how to respond.

Rey was floating.

At first in bacta, and then the sea.

Not on the surface, but beneath the waves. The currents rolled her around, heavy and soft, in every direction except upwards. It was dark, so she believed that she slumbered under the black waters that surrounded the Reef Fortress.
Fitting enough, she supposed. Back on Jakku, she'd dreamed about the ocean, and then she'd found herself living right next to one. With somebody who had sometimes kissed her good night.

The Force had deigned to be merciful, for once. The Force was allowing her to die where she had been happy.

Sometimes Rey heard voices. They sounded like her friends—Finn and Rose and Poe and Jessika—or Lairelosse and Aleson and the ladies-in-waiting—but they were too indistinct for her to make out any actual words. Which made sense, for she was hearing them through several fathoms of water, wasn't she? Perhaps they were on the surface, calling out her name. Looking for her.

_I'm here_, Rey wanted to shout. _I'm here. Come find me._ But her mouth refused to move.

Sometimes she..._felt._ There would be someone who took her hand and pressed slow kisses to her knuckles and her wrist, and she knew that touch and she knew those lips, and those would be the moments that Rey fought harder to wake up, to kick her legs, to climb the depths...

But she couldn't. And so she slept, and floated on.

* 

"Your Majesty."

Kylo looked up from where he was keeping vigil at Rey's bedside. Another three days had passed since his meeting with Leia. Rey's friends had come and gone twice now, with still no progress on her end. And now Dopheld Mitaka was standing in the doorway of the sickroom, looking like the bearer of even more bad news—although, in all fairness, that was his default expression whenever he had to approach Kylo.

"What is it, Mitaka?" Kylo asked warily, wondering what trifling bureaucratic detail the lieutenant would seek to bother him with now—and he doubted he would find it in him to care even if it weren't trifling at all. Kylo had more or less left administrative matters in Daala's capable hands in the week following the battle, but he was well aware that his officers were getting anxious and that they needed him at the helm. Particularly with the peace talks coming up soon.
But as the hours had turned into days and the days had turned into a full-fledged week with Rey's body still refusing to emerge from stasis, Kylo had found it more and more difficult to give a damn about anything that wasn't her.

Mitaka walked over to him with tentative steps. He stopped at a cautious arm's length from the chair that Kylo had barely gotten out of in the last six days and he withdrew something from his pocket, holding it out to the Emperor.

Kylo's eyes widened at the sight of his wedding ring. The shard of the ice moon set into its golden band shone brilliantly in the sunlight streaming in through the open window.

"I told you to dispose of this," was all he could think to say to Mitaka.

The lieutenant gulped, but otherwise made no move to retract his offering. "I... forgot, sir."

"You forgot," Kylo repeated blankly.

"Owing to the stress of battle and my... my easily stressed nature, it completely slipped my mind. I apologize and I accept full responsibility."

Kylo took the ring and closed his fist around it, nodding at Mitaka in dismissal. The other man saluted and scurried back to the doorway as fast as his feet could carry him without actually running.

"Lieutenant."

Mitaka froze in the middle of stepping out into the hall.

"Thank you," said Kylo Ren.

"You're— you're welcome, sir," Mitaka stuttered.

Once he and Rey were alone again, Kylo peeled off one glove and slipped the wedding band onto his ring finger. Then he removed the other glove as well, and let both fall to the floor as he clasped
one hand around Rey's wrist while the other tenderly brushed loose wisps of her hair back from her
forehead. Her other hand was hooked up to an intravenous drip but the machines that had previously
been keeping her in stable condition had been removed. She was stable. She just wasn't waking up.

And... and she felt so impossibly fragile beneath his fingertips. So much so that the same wave of
terror that had gripped him when Hux stabbed her— it tore through Kylo once again.

"You've lost weight," he mumbled to the woman lying so deathly pale and unmoving on the hospital
bed. "You have to snap out of this so that you can eat. I will have the droids make all the hot
chocolate you want if you wake up. Please wake up." It was as if some immense, bone-deep
weariness crashed over him in that moment, the dam broken by the mere act of talking to her, of
putting the reality of the situation into words. And once he started, he couldn't seem to stop. "It's all a
bit of a mess, you know. There's the details of the peace treaty with the Resistance to figure out, the
rebuilding efforts, what to do with those who surrendered, what the Consortium's role will be— I
need you with me to navigate all of that. I've only ever known how to fight, I can't lead a galaxy out
of war if you're not by my side. I'll screw it all up and you'll get mad at me..."

Kylo's voice wavered, trailing off into silence. A silence that was heavy and thick and all-
ens compassing, and yet he failed to hear Rey breathing through it all. Failed to even discern her Force
signature through the haze of unconsciousness that her mind had shrouded her in. It was with a burst
of desperation that he dropped his head, pressing an ear to her chest until he picked up the sound of
her heartbeat. Far from soothing him, however, it filled him with even more dread. It was so faint.

"I haven't even gotten to kiss you again," he rasped. "Or to tell you that I love you, too. Or to be a
better husband— one that you deserve. How can I do any of that if you leave me now?"

She had no answers for him. He squeezed his eyes shut and hot tears fell down his cheeks, dripping
onto her thin white patient's robes. Why wouldn't she leave him? Kylo realized, bitter self-loathing
twisting his stomach. He hadn't given her anything worth staying for. He'd spurned all her attempts at
reconciliation, he'd spat her love back in her face with the harshest of words, he'd let her be tortured
— and she had still sacrificed herself to save him, without a second thought.

Because that was the sort of person she was. Jakku hadn't been able to stamp that out of her. Their
turbulent marriage hadn't been able to stamp that out of her. Every hard decision she'd ever had to
make, every cruelty inflicted upon her— none had eaten away at the light she carried and left her a
shell of the person she used to be.

Unlike what had happened to him. Unlike what he'd become.
"Please wake up," Kylo repeated hoarsely, lifting his fingers from Rey's wrist so that he could fold her much smaller hand into his. "You don't have to stay for me. I don't expect you to. But your friends need you. Your people need you. And... and you... need to go on and have the safe and happy life that you deserve. It doesn't have to be with me." Even as he assured her of that, he felt something start to shatter within the depths of his very soul at the mere prospect of letting her go.

He knew it was nothing, however, compared to the pain that her death would cause.

"I can't imagine the galaxy without you, Rey," Kylo admitted. His voice was oddly small even to his own ears, muffled against her robes. "Everything was so hollow until you came along. I'd been fighting my whole life, consumed by a singular purpose, and then there you were— making me laugh, making me see red, making my heart race, making me feel at peace. Sometimes all of that in the span of five minutes." He shook his head in wonder. "When I was with you I felt like I could be more than just a weapon. I could be just a man who adored his wife. You were so good for me and I'll always regret that I— that I couldn't offer you the same courtesy of— of being good for you." He was shaking now, his teeth clenched in a grimace that he'd futilely hoped would rein in his sobs. He couldn't remember having wept like this before. Not for anything. Not for anyone else. "Let me make it up to you," he begged. "Let me build the world you wanted. I'll do everything right this time, I swear. Just, please, come back, Rey..."

And that was when her fingers twitched against his, and it felt like grace.

Luke shuffled into Leia's office on the Wroona Stardock, a former First Order space station that had been captured during the Resistance invasion and converted to a base of sorts. She nodded at him in greeting but was otherwise preoccupied studying the draft proposal that she'd been tirelessly working on ever since she left Coruscant, and she didn't protest when he went around her desk and began to read over her shoulder.

After a while, Luke took the chair across from Leia's and waited patiently until she set her datapad down on the table. The Skywalker twins regarded each other with somber contemplation for several long moments.

It was Luke who spoke first, raising an eyebrow at his sister. "A coalition government."

"The Resistance has sixteen capital ships left," Leia informed him by way of reply. "The Empire has a little more than twice that number, which still isn't a lot. Further conflict at this point would be madness."
"I don't disagree," said Luke, "but this isn't like you. The old Leia I know would have fought until her last breath."

"That was when I was fighting against tyrants. Now..." She gestured at the small pile of even more datapads that were arranged neatly on one end of her desk. "I've been studying the Empire's policies. It's easy to pick out which ideas were Snoke's, which ones were Hux's— or a member of High Command who thought like him. Regarding those, I will fight until my last breath to have them abolished."

"And the rest?"

"The rest..." Leia sighed, almost wistfully. "Some are things I used to tell a very attentive, very serious little boy that I would accomplish one day. Some are things that this same little boy told me he thought should be accomplished. Others are entirely new ideas, but most of them are rather good." She gazed off into the distance. "I should have ushered him into politics from the beginning. It would have saved a whole lot of trouble. I shouldn't have sent him to you. No offense."

"I'm sure you meant some offense, but that's okay," Luke told her genially. "Do you think Ben will agree to this proposal, then?"

Leia flashed a wan smile. "It was his suggestion in the first place."

"What do your other officers have to say about it?"

"They are all tired of war. I'm tired of war. I promised myself at the blockade that this would be it." Leia paused for a moment as she thought about all the old veterans who had survived the first rebellion only to perish in the second one, and about Kaydel who was too young to be speaking in terms of sacrifice. "Many of my officers are amenable. There's actually more of them than I expected there to be. As for those who are hesitating, they are certain to see reason once they've analyzed the numbers."

Luke blinked as comprehension dawned. "That boy is a man now," he said slowly, "and he is married to the woman who controls what is currently the most powerful navy in the entire galaxy."

"Everyone who was at the blockade saw what she did," Leia said. "They saw that she would do anything for him."
"Stars, Leia." Luke rubbed a weary hand over his face. "If this actually works, if an agreement is reached—yes, I do see that there will be a system of checks and balances in place, but to be so strong in the Force and to wield that much authority... I worry for them."

"They love each other," Leia said simply. "They bring out the best in each other. After all that has happened, we owe it to them to believe that it will be enough."

After surfacing from the coma, Rey's body seemed to have come to the conclusion that it hadn't quite caught up on enough lost sleep, thank you very much. She drifted in and out of consciousness over the next two standard day cycles; whenever she was lucid, she would be too tired to talk or, indeed, to keep her eyes open for very long, but Kylo was always in the room with her. Sometimes he would be holding her hand, massaging her fingers gently. Sometimes he would be asleep, folded over in the too-small chair beside her bed, his face buried in the mattress next to her stomach. Sometimes he would be speaking quietly with a physician or one of his officers, but her mind was invariably too fogged up to make much sense of the conversation.

Regardless, he was the first thing she saw when she woke up and the last thing she laid her eyes on before they inexorably drifted shut, and for that she was grateful.

Nine days after the Battle of Coruscant, the morning sun pierced through Rey's closed lids and she was roused from slumber feeling more or less up to taking on reality again. Kylo was standing by the window, turned to her in profile, his tall, black-clad frame etched in golden light. He wasn't wearing his gloves, and the apprehension in Rey's chest eased at the sight of the wedding band on his ring finger. It came back to her in fragments, everything that he had said while she'd been floating in the depths of that black sea. Those words of his that had pulled her up to the surface at long last.

All she wanted was to hear them once more.

"Hi," Rey said. Her voice was scratchy from disuse.

"Hello." Kylo's voice, meanwhile, was distressingly polite and just this side of aloof, but the line of his mouth softened and a little bit of the tension emanating from him faded away. "The physicians said you would be feeling better today, but I wasn't sure."

"I am," she hastened to confirm. "How... how are you?"
"I'm fine," came his distant reply. He was still looking out the window. Why, oh why, was the atmosphere so awkward? This was not the joyous reunion she'd been expecting. "Your friends are in orbit, eagerly awaiting updates on your recovery. Shall I have Mitaka comm them? They can be here within the hour."

When she didn't respond, Kylo glanced at her, noted her puzzled frown, and correctly deciphered the reason behind it. "The situation is still somewhat fraught, given that no formal peace treaty has been signed as of yet," he explained. "Half of the Citadel is in ruins, to say nothing of Galactic City itself. We can't have Resistance combatants wandering around. Thus, your friends are up in the black, on one of General Organa's remaining destroyers that is in Coruscant space on a... diplomatic mission."

The corners of Rey's lips tilted upwards. "Clever."

At the sight of her smile, Kylo drew a sharp intake of breath, his gaze darting back to whatever was so fascinating outside the window. "Shall I have Mitaka comm?" he repeated blandly. "I'm sure you wish to see them."

And the thing was, Rey did, but Kylo was acting strangely and she wanted to get to the bottom of things first. And have him hold her and ply her with all those sweet declarations from before, the ones that were starting to seem more and more like a dream with each second that ticked by. "Perhaps in a while," she said. "I want to talk to you first."

"As you wish." He cleared his throat. "The peace negotiations between the Empire and the Resistance will be held on Naboo next week. You are, of course, welcome to observe in your role as Queen Mother."

Rey froze. Over the last several months, she'd had to learn how to listen carefully to what was unspoken, and now there was a flicker of anxiety curling in her stomach. "Just—just that role?"

Kylo's hands balled into fists at his sides. "I don't expect you to have any desire to remain married to me after everything that I've put you through. Should you wish to seek an annulment, I will cooperate to the best of my ability. And afterwards, you have my word that the Empire will never encroach on Hapan space. Whatever amends you feel need to be made, I will do them. If there are any inter-governmental projects that you would like to implement, I will give my full support. If you just wish for the Consortium to be left alone, I will comply. You only have to ask, and I will endeavor to give it to you." His tone was achingly soft. "Anything you want, Rey. For the rest of my life."
Rey stared up at the ceiling. The happiness that swept through her was so immense—so very nearly frightening—that it took a while before she could speak. "In that case," she finally said, "I want a proper honeymoon. It will have to be after the peace talks—and we probably can't take more than a few days off before we have to return to business—but I don't mind, as long as it's somewhere nice and quiet and just the two of us."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kylo's broad frame all but collapse with relief. Encouraged, she continued, "I want that new hyperlane I discovered to be thoroughly charted so that travel between Coruscant and Hapes Prime will be safe and efficient and you and I can go back and forth without any problems and we don't have to be apart for too long." He tore away from the window and stalked over to her bed, his dark eyes glittering. "In a few years, I want us to have our daughter." Rey was already smiling as she said it. "Maybe we can give her a sibling, too. We'll see." Kylo clambered onto the mattress and wrapped his arms around her, careful not to jostle her IV drip as he scattered fierce kisses all over her face and her hair. "I want to always be honest with you from now on," Rey said into his shirtfront, "and I want us to always talk things through and never end the day mad at each other ever again." He nodded, seemingly too overcome to speak as he shuddered around her and as she wove her fingers through his hair.

"Lastly..." Rey swallowed, feeling oddly shy. "It would be great if you could tell me you love me. I've been waiting to hear you say it again ever since I woke up—"

Kylo cradled her face in one large palm, tipping her chin up so that their eyes met. He crushed his lips to hers, tender and possessive all at once. "I love you, I love you, I love you," he said hoarsely, over and over again, punctuating each fervent declaration with a blistering kiss. "Stars, Rey—how I love you."

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**Three standard weeks after the Battle of Coruscant**

It was fitting, Leia thought as she gazed out over Theed from a balcony in the Royal Palace, that the peace talks would take place on Naboo. It was the homeworld of Sheev Palpatine, who had destroyed the Old Republic and the Jedi and laid the foundations for the conflict between the First Order and the Resistance. And it was where Anakin Skywalker and Padme Amidala had gotten married, setting the stage for the downfall of a young man who had not been able to love without fear. The fear that he eventually succumbed to and spread throughout the entire galaxy.

Naboo was where everything had begun, and it would be where everything would come to an end.

But that was a matter for tomorrow, when the negotiations would formally begin. For now, Leia was
content to spend the rest of the afternoon luxuriating in the sunlight and having some tea with people whose company she cherished.

Hearing footsteps, she looked away from the cityscape of Theed and smiled at Luke and Isolder as they walked out onto the balcony. The three of them took their seats at a small table laden with refreshments, and Leia raised an inquiring eyebrow when it became apparent that her brother was regarding the Hapan prince with an air of both amusement and contemplation.

"Oh, don't look at me like that," Isolder finally huffed at Luke. "He had it coming."

"What happened?" Leia asked.

Luke took his sweet time formulating a response, sipping a cup of piping hot, fragrant tea to hide his smile. "His Highness over here has just finished putting the fear of the gods in your son."

"Leia, old friend, surely you must understand," Isolder protested. "I only have my daughter's best interests at heart. Naturally, that entails threatening her husband with an honor duel if he hurts her again."

"Naturally," Leia agreed with a straight face. "I don't think you have anything to worry about, however."

Isolder sighed. "I suppose I don't."

_Not an end_, Leia realized as she and Luke and Isolder fell into an easy, relaxed conversational rhythm as the sun began to set over Naboo. _A new beginning._

"That was... a time," Rose said to Finn after Rey and her ladies-in-waiting had disappeared into the palace, with rather more giggles than would have been expected from a group of such finely dressed aristocrats.

Finn grinned at Rose as they strolled deeper into the elegantly manicured royal gardens. "I could've
done without the small army of heavily armed escorts surrounding our table at the cantina, but Rey's ladies are a hoot when they're drunk."

"Were they even old enough to drink?"

"No idea, but they definitely held their liquor better than Poe."

Rose snorted. "The Resistance's most famous commander, hungover during the peace talks? The other side will have a field day. Although I suppose that, when all of this is over, they're not going to be the other side anymore."

"I guess not," said Finn.

They lapsed into a thoughtful, companionable silence as they walked through the gardens, breathing in the scent of the various flowers that bloomed therein.

"Were you able to talk to Rey?" Rose prompted after a while. "About rehabilitating the stormtroopers?"

Finn nodded. "Her Worshipness said she's going to make it a priority agenda, but it will hinge on whether a demilitarization agreement can successfully be reached."

"It's not the agreement I’m worried about, it's the follow through."

"Tell me about it."

"So we're going to make sure the coalition government follows through, right?" Rose demanded, passionate all of a sudden. "We're going to keep fighting, and we won't stop until this new era is as good as we can make it. For everyone."

He blinked at her, his heart beating just a little bit faster. There was a sense of something blossoming in the air along with the flowers. A bolt of adrenaline surged through him, the way it always did when a new adventure was about to begin.
"Let's raise hell, Rose Tico," Finn said, taking Rose's hand in his own, and her dark eyes sparkled and she bit her lip and smiled at him, like she had big plans for them both.

*

When it came to matters of interior design, the Naboo could give the Hapans a run for their money. The guest suite that had been prepared for the Emperor and the Empress at the Royal Palace was lavishly appointed in pristine creams and muted purples and the palest of silver grays; overlooking the vast emerald floodplains surrounding the cliffs of Theed was a marble balcony, the doors of which had been thrown open to let in a pleasant breeze and the fiery rays of sunset.

Stripped down to shirtsleeves and trousers, Kylo had just settled on the bed, leaning against the mountain of pillows propped up by the headboard, when his wife bounded in from the hallway, the bedroom doors gliding shut behind her. Rey was wearing her hair down today and it cascaded past her shoulders in rich chestnut waves, spangled with a multitude of tiny diamond stars strung on golden chains so thin they were practically invisible. There was gold in her cap-sleeved gown, too, fine strands of it, threaded through turquoise fabric that was almost sheer as it clung to every inch of her torso before flaring out into a gauzy full skirt.

She shot him a conspiratorial grin as she perched on a nearby armchair and removed her golden high heels, wiggling her toes in relief once they were free. "Guess who I saw kissing in the gardens. I was on my way up when I looked out over the railing and there they were."

"Who?"

"The Ducha Yliri and Lord Gray."

"Good for him. But she could do so much better."

Rey rolled her eyes. "If Aleson commits to staying at court now that he has a reason, the two of you will be seeing a lot more of each other. I suggest learning how to get along."

Kylo smirked. "Never."
She let out an exasperated puff of breath, then padded over to sit beside him, her bare feet hanging off the edge of the bed, the mattress dipping slightly under her weight. Taking advantage of the fact that they'd arrived on Naboo a full day before negotiations were set to begin, she'd gone to the cantina for a round of drinks with her ladies and some members of the Resistance; up close, Kylo could see that there was a pink flush to her cheeks and that her hazel eyes were even brighter than usual. He was struck once more by how young she actually was— barely in her twenties and already a war hero, the Hapan Queen Mother, the Empress...

His *wife*.

His beautiful, adorable, *tipsy* wife.

Kylo reached out, fingers curled, skimming his knuckles down the length of Rey's arm, partly because he needed to confirm for himself that she was real— that *this* was real— and partly because there were few things in the universe that were lovelier than the way she shivered at his touch.

"Do *you* want to get caught kissing in the gardens?" he teased her huskily.

Rey giggled. A light, airy sound that went straight to Kylo's head, as well as a little further south. "Sure, why not—" She shifted position, turning her body fully into his arms that were already held out to receive her— "but perhaps some other time. Right now, I'd much rather *not* get interrupted."

"I will strangle whoever even *attempts* to knock on our door over the next twelve hours," Kylo vowed, his hands settling on Rey's trim waist as she straddled him, her diaphanous blue skirts hiking up her thighs.

"You're sweet." Although Rey's tone dripped with sarcasm, her lips were twitching with a barely restrained smile when she pressed them to his.

Kissing was all they'd done in the past few days— kissing and talking and just quietly basking in each other's presence. He'd been too nervous to do anything but take it slow for fear that he would hurt her or jeopardize the gentle way that they were falling back together and letting the wounds that they'd inflicted on each other heal. Now, though, his brain registered that she was off bed rest and that her mouth was moving over his with a hint of urgency, and his body was quick to respond. She tasted like cherries— most likely from what she'd drunk at the cantina— and it wasn't long before he felt intoxicated, too. Drunk on Rey, and the sweet-smelling softness of her that surrounded him, and the way she hummed and sighed against his lips.
His hands drifted lower, one palming that glorious little derrière of hers that had always haunted his dreams while the other disappeared beneath the tangle of her skirts, at first stroking her bare thigh and then wandering higher when she deepened their kiss. What remained of his willpower took a severe beating as his fingertips grazed the scrap of lace at her center, and he allowed himself to fantasize that she'd picked it out this morning already planning that he would be the one to peel it down her legs...

_I did._ Her voice was hushed and mischievous in his head even as she was now full-on smiling into their kiss, squirming deliciously above him and canting her hips toward his touch. _It's white. I know you like me in white._

"Love you in white," he said out loud, transferring his mouth to the line of her jaw. "Love you in anything," he continued as he nibbled down her neck. "Or nothing." As if to prove his point, he tugged her panties—_white, lace, white lace_—to the side and dipped a finger into her entrance, testing her wetness. She was hot and ready for him but he happily decided that she could stand to be teased a little more, and soon she was clutching at his shoulders and whimpering against the side of his throat as he rocked his finger deeper into her, his own breath coming out in harsh pants by her ear.

It was when he added a second finger that she hissed at the stretch, and it was when both fingers started moving inside her in tandem that she yelped his name—"Ben!"—

— And then she froze.

"I'm sorry," she hurried to say, her hands reflexively fisting into his shirt as if begging him not to get up and leave. "We've talked about this—about how I keep forcing your old name and your old life on you—I know this isn't the first time I've slipped up since that talk—I'll do better—"

There was an undercurrent of real fear at her end of the bond, and Kylo felt as if he had never hated himself more than he did in that moment. Sliding his fingers out of her, he rolled them both over so that he was on top, pinning her to the mattress. Rey looked stone-cold sober and, _oh_, so vulnerable, her starry hair fanned out on the pillow and her wide eyes reflecting the light of the setting sun.

"To the rest of the galaxy, I am Kylo Ren," he ground out. "I don't think I can ever fully go back to my old name, to who that person was. I need to always remember what I turned into so that I don't end up making the same mistakes. But—" And here his voice shook slightly—"I also need you to remind me that I am capable of goodness. That there is still light in me, no matter what anyone else believes. I would cherish nothing more than to be your Ben."
"My Ben," she echoed, reaching up to touch his face. Her thumb traced the jagged line of his scar. "Just as I am your Rey."

He turned his head so that he could smile into her palm. "You have to admit that Kira Ka Djo is a bit of a mouthful. Particularly given all the ways in which I plan to say your name in the very near future."

This startled a laugh out of her— one that he stifled with another kiss, rolling his tongue beneath the roof of her mouth until her mirth had tapered off into a soft, dreamy sigh. *I am sorry for everything I ever did that has hurt you, every word I said while I was angry,* he told her through the bond. *Let me make it up to you. Let me show you how sorry I am. Please.*

"Only if you let me do the same," she breathed against his lips, looping her arms around his neck.

He was blessed.

Although Rey would have been all too glad to never let go of her husband ever again, she eventually had to concede that their clothes needed to be dealt with if they wanted to go any further, to slake the burning desire that had built up between them in this quiet, sunlit room. Kylo reluctantly untangled himself from her embrace and climbed out of bed, shucking off his shirt and trousers and underwear at lightning speed. She didn't bother to conceal the impatience that flickered through her Force signature as he did so, eliciting a hoarse laugh from him as soon as he picked up on it. The years fell away from his face, and she resolved to dedicate the rest of her life to making him laugh as often as she could.

"You could always take up baking again," he suggested, and then she was laughing, too, and he was joining her on the bed once more, strewing kisses all over her face and neck as he fiddled with her zipper, and then he was peeling her gown off of her shoulders and down her body, pressing his lips to every inch of skin as it was revealed, paying particular attention to her breasts once her bra had been discarded.

And it was— oh, it was all so slow and careful, and so very tender, that Rey's eyes began to prickle with tears, as if happiness had filled her to bursting and it had nowhere else to go. Kylo had kissed his way down to her navel when he heard her sniffle, when he felt her actively refrain from outright crying due to her lingering anxiety over what he had said in that first shared dream after her betrayal.
"Save your tears. We both know you don't mean them."

He stilled, and the wave of guilt that came crashing in from his end of the bond took her by surprise.

"I know they were real," he said quietly, his lips tracing every syllable on the delicate skin of her stomach. "You never once lied to me about your feelings. I know that now. It couldn't have been easy for you. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," Rey whispered. "Let's— please, let's just start over— start again, from the beginning —" Although she couldn't help herself from sending that plea out into the universe, she knew she was speaking nonsense. They couldn't turn back time.

"We can't," Kylo agreed in a low, almost meditative rumble. "But we don't have to let the past define us, either. At least— I won't if you won't. Deal?"

She laughed again— a short-lived yet relieved, grateful sound. "Deal."

His lips continued to trail after the bunched-up gown as it was dragged past her knees and then her ankles, his movements so languid and deliberate that, by the time he tossed the dress aside followed by her panties, all of Rey's nerve endings thrummed heavily with want. *Stars,* but Kylo was magnificent as he knelt between her spread thighs, his broad, powerful torso gleaming like finely carved marble, the ends of his dark hair burnished in the red-gold glow of a dying sun. His eyes were soft when he bent down to slant his mouth over hers again; she arched her body up into his, shameless and eager, and they were kissing when the tip of his erection nudged at her entrance, and they both groaned against each other's lips when he sheathed himself inside her, at last, *at last.*

Part of her had been expecting that they would fall into a frantic pace, that they would be exultant and raw as they rejoiced in surviving the war and finding their way back to each other. Instead, it was achingly gentle, and she didn't mind one bit. Kylo's hips rolled against hers like the ocean meeting the shore on a tranquil day, his tongue adopting the same unhurried rhythm as it delved into her mouth, every stroke of his fingers reverent as he played with her breasts.

Rey's own hands were far from idle. They roved greedily over his form, relearning the constellation of moles and muscles and scars that she had missed so much as she savored every moment of being skin to skin. Naboo's sun dipped lower into the horizon and Kylo murmured her name over and over again, a prayer written in breath on her lips and then at the base of her throat. Everything was awash in light, *higher* and *more* and *always* and *mine.* The bond wove around them like notes of gold spun by violins.
No one else can ever make me feel this way, Rey thought fiercely, throwing her head back in a soft cry as he bit down on her neck at the same time that he hit that spot inside her. And I'll never love anyone else the way I love you.

Kylo's pace stuttered as if she'd completely thrown him for a loop. Her heart, so newly healed, broke a little at the fact that he was so unused to someone telling him that they loved him, and she decided then and there that she would tell him every single day for as long as she lived.

That was the last shred of coherent thought that was left to her for a while, because Kylo chose that moment to kiss her again—to kiss her breathless—before he buried his face in the crook of her neck and his hand slipped between their bodies to slick trembling fingers over her clit, his thrusts growing more and more erratic.

"Come for me." Muffled against her skin, his deep voice was torn between a growled command and a ragged plea. "Need you to come—please, cyar'ika."

And she did, and he followed, and the Force bond sang.

It was just as well, in Lieutenant Dopheld Mitaka's humble opinion, that the Emperor and the Empress had decided to break their fast on a private veranda instead of partaking in the communal meal at the Royal Palace's main dining room. Perhaps this way they would have time to adequately compose themselves so that they wouldn't make an absolute mess out of the peace negotiations.

The knights echoed Mitaka's sentiments, although they were far less charitable about it.

"I want to knock that stupid smirk off of Lord Ren's face," Boethiah grumbled under her breath as she stood guard just beyond the threshold of the veranda with Hircine, Jyggalag, and the Empress' Chume'doro.

"It's utterly disgusting," Hircine agreed in a long-suffering tone of voice.

"For what it's worth, you could probably take him," Jyggalag ventured. "Did you see the dark circles
under his eyes? I don't think he got much sleep last night."

Mitaka's comlink buzzed with a message from Admiral Daala; breakfast had wrapped up and they were ready to begin the talks. With the air of a man about to face the firing squad, the lieutenant gingerly shuffled out onto the veranda. Kylo Ren and Kira Ka Djo had just finished eating and they were on their feet, standing by the railing with his hand on her hip and very obviously on the verge of locking lips, although they froze when Mitaka cleared his throat.

"Your Majesties, they're waiting for you," he announced.

Frustration bloomed like a dark cloud on the Emperor's face, but the Empress simply latched her fingers onto his collar, tugging him towards her. "Two minutes, Lieutenant," she told Mitaka without taking her gaze off her husband.

Mitaka couldn't duck out of that veranda fast enough. As it was, the imperial couple was already kissing before he'd even made it past the threshold.

*Maker,* Mitaka thought, shaking his head in abject chagrin.

"Okay—" Rey pulled away from Kylo with a giggle after considerably more than two minutes had passed— "I think we really have to go. Before I demolish His Majesty's coiffure any further."

Kylo flashed her a crooked grin. He was aware that his hair was sticking up in odd places due to Rey enthusiastically carding her fingers through it, but he couldn't have cared less. He curved an arm at the small of her back and drew her close once more, nuzzling in as he breathed the words of old Alderaan against her temple. "The sun rises in your eyes."

It was a promise. It was the truth. And Rey was the loveliest thing he'd ever seen as she beamed at him in the early morning light and grabbed his hand, leading him out of the veranda and into the dawn of their new empire.
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